

2015

Postsouthern Melancholia: Revising the Region in the Twenty-First Century

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POSTSOUTHERN MELANCHOLIA:
REVISING THE REGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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
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August 2015

For Marybeth

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been the grateful recipient of the LSU Graduate School's Dissertation Fellowship this year, without which the completion of this project would have been much more difficult. Thank you, too, to *Virginia Quarterly Review* for allowing me to include my interview with Percival Everett in these pages.

This project is indebted to the scholarly contributions of many brilliant scholars, and I owe just as great a debt to a community of people at LSU and beyond. I could not have finished without the constant help and guidance of my co-directors, Pallavi Rastogi and Brannon Costello. You each have given a considerable amount of time every step of the way, and your friendship and support has made me eternally thankful. It has been a privilege to learn from you as mentors and friends. I am grateful to Rick Moreland, my third committee member, who has always been available to help me through the particularly rough patches of thinking and writing as well as meet me for lunch—at Inga's, of course.

I would also like to thank many friends and colleagues from LSU for help of all types: Conor Picken, Kevin Casper, Adam Atkinson, Ben Pelhan, Sean Green, Alyson Pomerantz, Ryan Gibbs, Jordan Stone, Emily Frank, and Will and Liz Torrey. Many members of the faculty offered all measures of help without hesitation, but Chris Barrett, Michael Bibler, Elsie Michie, Phil Maciak, Bill Boelhower, and Dan Novak have each done more than I could have ever hoped for or expected. This project would have likely never progressed without the help of my writing group: Josef Horáček, Monica Miller, and Madoka Kishi. Your careful attention and elegant critiques gave me many necessary nudges—five pages at a time.

My family has offered unwavering support throughout. To my parents, Portia and Charles Dischinger, as well as my brother, Josh: thank you. Most importantly, my work at LSU would have felt solitary without the love and support of my partner and best friend, Marybeth. You have stood with me through the highs and lows of graduate school and made the last few years the best of my life. I love you.

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ABSTRACT

Postsouthern Melancholia offers a new way of conceptualizing the elusive concept of melancholia through contemporary fiction, particularly fiction of or about the American South. Critics have long discussed national literature through the lens of melancholia: an unceasing attachment to a lost object or ideal that a subject or culture internalizes. My project positions melancholia as a literary strategy—one that contemporary southern fiction frequently contests and critiques. I read fiction that has been called “postsouthern,” a term applied to texts that reassess the bedrock concepts of southern literature such as community, storytelling, and sense of place. While much scholarship has focused on a set of texts notable for lamenting the turn from a seemingly essential South to a simulated post-South—from real to fake—my project argues that this once typical lament is a cover story for familiar reactionary politics situating the region against global modernity at large. I examine melancholic responses to globalization in the stories of Alabama writer Brad Vice (*The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*, 2007) as well as Cynthia Shearer’s transnational take on the Mississippi novel, *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005). I then examine fiction thought of as American rather than southern—Percival Everett’s absurdist comedy, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), and Colson Whitehead’s encyclopedic historiography, *John Henry Days* (2001)—to demonstrate the ways merely setting fiction in the South activates discourses about melancholia in wider American fiction. I conclude by positioning optimism as an emerging affective strategy within contemporary postsouthern poetics. It is precisely because twenty-first century literature traces a genealogy of melancholia, I argue, that it is uniquely capable of offering optimism as a counterweight to melancholia in the present.

INTRODUCTION

So I dont imagine you will ever come back here and settle down as a country lawyer in a little town like Jefferson since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man. So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it.

— William Faulkner / *Absalom, Absalom!* / 1936

She meant to stand on that platform in August with the General sitting in his wheel chair on the stage behind her and she meant to hold her head very high as if she were saying, “See him! See him! My kin, all you upstarts! Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions! Dignity! Honor! Courage! See him!”

— Flannery O’Connor / “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” / 1955

His suit, an old-fashioned seersucker with a broad stripe, gave off a fresh cotton-and-ironing-board smell that pierced the engineer’s memory. ... The iron-washpot smell. No machine in the world had ever put it there and nobody either but a colored washwoman working in her own backyard and sprinkling starch with a pine switch.

— Walker Percy / *The Last Gentleman* / 1966

This project began in earnest when I read Paul Gilroy’s *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) on a train, of all nostalgic places. Gilroy focuses on the dismantling of political initiatives ushered in by twentieth-century multiculturalism in the early twenty-first century European political landscape. Much of this dismantling occurred amid resurgent xenophobia and nationalism necessary for the “war on terror” underway in virtually all Western nations. Gilroy writes that the twenty-first century deemed multiculturalism an abject failure while emphasizing that the conflict between monolithic nationalism and dynamic multiculturalism might better be understood “to exist firmly in the context supplied by imperial and colonial history” (2). In his home nation of England, furthermore, Gilroy argues that the rejection of long-in-the-works efforts to come to terms with colonial history are directly undercut by melancholic attachments to cultures of imperialism, of which he finds evidence in the

renewed interest in heavy militarization and chants at football matches that try to recapture the boyish charm of World War II films.¹

Although much of Gilroy's book seemed to correspond to the way I have long thought about the South of my youth—which, if T-shirts and bumper stickers are to be believed, is on the verge of rising again—his call for a complete reckoning with colonial history was particularly familiar:

[B]efore the British people can adjust to the horrors of their own modern history and start to build a new national identity from the debris of their broken narcissism, they will have to learn to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit, to understand the damage it did to the political culture at home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country's complex investments in the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it. The multilayered trauma—economic and cultural as well as political and psychological—involved in accepting the loss of the empire would therefore be compounded by a number of additional shocks. Among them are the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness. (99)

Even without insisting on a perfect one-to-one comparison between British colonialism and southern history, which, of course, participated in the global violence of colonialism,² I was

¹ Gilroy describes the crowds at England football matches “humming the theme tune from ... *The Dam Busters* [1954], a definitive World War II film ... that reemerged at the century's end as a postmodern enconium to British pluck, steel, and eccentricity” that features Richard Todd playing “Wing Commander Guy Gibson,” owner of a “faithful dog ‘Nigger’” (xii). He also excavates a popular chant at British sporting events—“Two world wars and one World Cup, doo dah, doo dah”—to make it clear that the relationship between sports and imperial nostalgia is an important one: “All the latent violence, all the embittered machismo, all the introjected class warfare articulated by defeated victors (mostly men and boys who were baffled and bewildered by a new postwar world that refused to recognize their historic manly qualities) is coded here in a dynamic and still explosive form” (107).

² Besides the obvious relationship between the transatlantic slave trade and the economy of the South that I am alluding to here, recent scholarship suggests that the Civil War was waged to reverse the global trend away from slavery and expand the peculiar institution southward—outside of the United States. Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (2013) situates the Civil War as one of the first in a move to reinstall and expand slavery on the global marketplace, where it had been steadily declining in the nineteenth century. Johnson equates “pro-slavery globalism” with “imperialist military action” on the part of the U.S. South, recasting the region through political economy rather than exclusively identity politics; that is, he repeatedly insists that slaves were an economic necessity to a greater extent than they were an ideological

struck by how Gilroy's sentiment in that passage might sound if applied to the American South. Making use of national or regional shame, in particular, is acutely familiar insofar as southern writers have often attempted to do something similar but often failed, and the result of that failure has typically been cultural melancholia. This project represents my own attempt to analyze a new literature ready to make sense of "the mixed feelings of attachment, despair, and hope" that has for so long typified southern letters (Gilroy xiv). This easy comparison makes clear that the conditions of the twenty-first century South are not limited to the region or even the nation. What is less defined but more exciting, however, is where attachments that resist the paralysis of melancholia in favor of new affective modes, such as optimism, might take southern literature.

Postsouthern Melancholia: Revising the Region in the Twenty-First Century is an effort to bring into critical focus the elusive concept of melancholia, which I argue is being taken apart, critiqued, and perhaps redirected by contemporary southern fiction. Critics have long discussed national literature through the lens of Freudian melancholia: an unceasing attachment to a lost object or ideal that a subject or culture internalizes.³ I will examine the

one, emphasizing the ways the Confederacy attempted to keep the flows of slave capital moving South to recover from the economic stagnation caused by the overproduction of cotton (14). On the other hand, one might, as Harilaus Stecopoulos has, frame the Reconstruction South as something of a paradigmatic test case for America's burgeoning imperial strategy, which developed in the late nineteenth century before properly taking shape in twentieth century. In *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898 – 1976* (2008), Stecopoulos reads the "long shadow of an incomplete Reconstruction" as one that guided a broader American tendency: "to impose its compromised, if not hollow, promises of freedom and modernization on a host of subaltern peoples" (3). Placed side-by-side, Johnson and Stecopoulos situate the South as being first colonizer and colonized, creating a historically hybrid space to which contemporary literature concerned with southern history responds.

³ Freud explains that "[m]ourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). The pathological response to "a loss of a more ideal kind" is called melancholia, a state in which "one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost" (245). In the melancholic subject experiencing a loss, the person or thing that has been lost distracts from the ideal object that lies beneath that person or thing: the "object-loss ... is withdrawn from consciousness" (245). For recent contributions to the long conversation about melancholia and national literatures, see Mitchell Breitwieser's *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (2007), Seth Moglen's *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (2007), Greg

representation of melancholia in fiction that has been called “postsouthern,” a term applied to texts that reassess the bedrock concepts of southern literature such as authenticity, sense of place, community, and storytelling. Since Lewis P. Simpson coined the term postsouthern in 1980, literary scholarship has proliferated a set of texts notable for lamenting the turn from a seemingly essential South to a simulated post-South—from the presumed real to the obviously fake. This once typical lament is actually a cover story that extends familiar reactionary politics situating the region in opposition to both national and increasingly geopolitical modernities at large. Melancholia, then, is not merely a response to a presumed loss; it is an affective literary strategy used to mark a text as southern. Furthermore, affective melancholia became particularly vexing as the region moved beyond national dichotomies and began to understand itself in relation to global networks, a trend that has been underway for some time. Against the backdrop of what James L. Peacock calls “grounded globalism,” my project examines literature that contests and critiques the literary strategy of melancholia that has persisted across southern literature. In section one, “The South in the World,” I examine the stories of Alabama writer Brad Vice (*The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*, 2007) and Cynthia Shearer’s transnational take on the Mississippi novel, *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005). I read the way global forces—economic, demographic, and political—enable both writers reconsider the politics of recursive melancholia in the twenty-first century South. Section two, “The Nation in the South,” explores fiction not necessarily thought of as southern—Percival Everett’s absurdist comedy, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), and Colson Whitehead’s encyclopedic historiography, *John Henry Days* (2001)—to demonstrate the

Forster’s *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* (2011), Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008), Margaret Ronda’s “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene,” and Éva Tettenborn’s “Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature.”

ways merely setting fiction in the South activates discourses about melancholia in wider American fiction. In my conclusion, I position optimism as an emerging postsouthern mode. It is precisely because twenty-first century fiction traces a genealogy of melancholia, I argue, that it is uniquely capable of offering optimism as a counterweight to melancholia in the present. Read in this context, optimism emerges as an alternative affective mode for identifying a text as southern.

The four writers I consider use differing literary techniques to better understand, critique, and move away from the aesthetic modes of melancholic southernness. Brad Vice's short stories sample lines from Carl Carmer's memoir, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (1934), to create an intertextual relationship between his text and Carmer's. The relationship between the two texts helps us understand the ways in which contemporary postsouthern texts must reckon with southern literary history in order to clarify the reactionary politics of melancholic attachments in the present. While Vice relies on this technique of sampling, Shearer interrogates postsouthern melancholia by questioning the position from which the South is understood to be a simulated fake. That is, Shearer places a Mauritanian immigrant at the center of her novel to focus on the dynamic postsouthern worlds that we often overlook when thinking about the South through the lens of white, southern literary history. Percival Everett's absurdist novel, on the other hand, explores the efficacy of literary techniques like parody and revision, each of which purports to bring us closer to an authentic real underneath mediated fakes. Everett takes these familiar postsouthern (and postmodern) aesthetic modes apart, revealing the melancholic foundations of searching for the real behind prevailing representations of the South. Finally, Colson Whitehead uses the literary technique of historiography to trace the contours of one specific mythology tied to the South—the tall tale

of John Henry. Whitehead's encyclopedic novel combines the frameworks of ethnography, history, and postmodern metafiction to forge its historiographic present, which emerges as a time in which our attachments to myth, storytelling, and melancholia can be understood and moved away from. Each writer I examine employs a unique strategy to access and deconstruct melancholic attachments. In the process, they offer postsouthern optimism as a counterweight to longstanding melancholia, organizing new aesthetic signatures of postsouthern fiction around optimistic modes of attachment that read the present not as a time of irrevocable loss but, instead, heterogeneity, dynamism, and social consciousness.

Twenty-first century postsouthern literature acknowledges, then, that southern letters are famously a function of lost causes and wistful, melancholic moments. My epigraphs point to a few of these moments, each of which reveals an attachment to a bygone version of the South, a version of tied both implicitly and explicitly to the Old South. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), through its relentlessly recursive narrative structure, explores how white gentility was a made thing—an idea that storytelling extends as well as reflects—but the unavoidable fact of the novel is that southerners must aspire to antebellum notions of gentility. O'Connor's Sally Poker, the speaker in the epigraph from "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" (1953), brings her 104-year-old grandfather, a veteran of the Civil War, to her graduation, hoping to send a message to her fellow students and teachers. She "wanted to show what she stood for" regardless of what she had been taught to stand for in the mid-twentieth century South, which was of course rapidly expanding notions of citizenship and civil rights (252). Even the seemingly unrooted Will Barrett of Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* (1966) cannot help but wax nostalgic about the pre-washing-machine South when

he smells Chandler Vaught's seersucker suit. These melancholic attachments act like weather vanes, showing the consistent direction of the wind against various encroaching modernities.

Crucially, however, we must acknowledge that southern texts *produce* melancholic attachments just as frequently as they *reflect* melancholia. Rosa Coldfield's plea in the first few pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) reveals just that: she tasks the southern writer with memorializing the lost region while reconstructing it, which is much of what *Absalom, Absalom!* does. Significantly, Faulkner's (and possibly the region's) presumed magnum opus is a novel about the compulsion to keep telling stories about a series of deaths. These are often the deaths of characters, such as Charles Bon and Thomas Sutpen, but the novel also eulogizes the planter as a southern ideal. The tension that the novel makes clear in its final lines, in which Quentin pivots from the horror he has felt throughout the novel's fractured storytelling to anxiously defending the cultures and places that produce that horror, reveal an ambivalence about the ways southern literature textualizes melancholia. The fact that *Absalom, Absalom!* might be said to properly end with Quentin's suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) only further illustrates that Quentin cannot feel southern from his Harvard dormitory without also feeling overcome by melancholy. The novels illustrate a problem in which southern literature has often been stuck: to continue to write through an idea of southern distinctiveness requires an allegiance to cultural ideals that have been at best restrictive and more frequently oppressive. To borrow Gilroy's phrasing, southern literature has been unable to work through the grim details of the region's history without succumbing to what often appears to be paralyzing melancholia or, even worse, unproductive pride.

This project argues that melancholia is not only a pathological response to loss, but also a literary strategy historically employed by southern literature. Like the structures of

feeling Raymond Williams found at play in the pastoral, melancholia is an affective sensibility that has attached to southern literary forms so frequently that the two begin to feel not historically linked but inextricably bound to one another. That is, southern literature often figures history in all its contingent variation as a metaphysically predetermined thing and the future in all its possibility as an extension of melancholia unless the prelapsarian South, an abstract object-ideal that southern literature invents and imagines, is recovered in full. But rather than thinking about this always-already lost object as a sincerely felt loss, it also needs to be understood as an attachment recursively performed and produced through literature that has seen no alternative to melancholic attachments in attempting to maintain a body of literature known as “southern literature.” Twenty-first century postsouthern literature resists attempts to circumscribe the features of southern attachments to these familiar, melancholic modes.

Perhaps no southern text reveals the politics and goals of literary melancholia more clearly than the Nashville Agrarians infamous manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930).⁴ The collection occupies a vexing position in southern studies, where critics routinely turn to it (as I am now) while asking whether we should (as I am about to). *I'll Take My Stand* is most important for this project for how it connects the aesthetic strategies of art to the politics of southern antipathy to American capitalism. A less generous reading than Martyn Bone's generous one would assess that the Agrarians reified melancholia by calling for more representations of the South that refused American capitalism without reckoning too

⁴ The authors of *I'll Take My Stand* were John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Owsley, John Fletcher, Lyle H. Lanier, Allen Tate, H.C. Nixon, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, John Wade, Henry Kline, and Stark Young.

seriously with the South's place in global capital.⁵ This sort of logical pirouette is common to southern literature, as well; many southern writers seem comfortable with “an ambivalent desire to both recuperate and renounce the contaminated social codes of plantation slavery, while bitterly critiquing the advent of a capitalist order that offers little better or different” (Benson 56). In other words, the convenient move that does not acknowledge or disturb melancholic attachments is to avoid answering questions about the position from which cultural change registers regional loss and wonder what political affiliations that felt loss reveals. For the Nashville Agrarians, turning melancholia into an essential literary strategy for southern literature sidesteps any sort of itemized reckoning with so-called losses. Furthermore, defining the project of southern literature through agrarian ethics almost entirely overlooks women and non-white men writing at the same time, perhaps most notably as a part of the New Negro Renaissance and the alternate narrative of southern agrarianism it proffered.⁶

When I use the term “postsouthern melancholia,” I name a new condition of southern literature that deeply troubles the melancholic logic that is a hallmark quality of *I'll Take My Stand*. *Postsouthern Melancholia* relies on and builds from recent critical work about contemporary southern literature, which has been alternatively called southern, late southern, contemporary southern, and postsouthern. Rather than excavating the genealogies of each term, I will focus on the way the term postsouthern is particularly useful for my own project because of how it unsettles the field's one-time dogmatic notions of the South. Simpson

⁵ Bone attempts to recover a productive Agrarian ethic by applauding *I'll Take My Stand's* critique of neoliberal economic models that would dominate the twentieth century, doing damage to the nation, the region, and the world.

⁶ Patricia Yaeger makes this point clearly, arguing that while the New Negro Renaissance is often tethered to Harlem, Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* (1932), Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and Zora Neal Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) are all set on southern soil and should be understood as an important alternative to the agrarian ethics of *I'll Take My Stand* (45).

claims that the postsouthern turn in America marked the end of the Southern Renaissance as he says with finality: “[W]e are beginning to live in a postsouthern America, as in the final part of the last century people ... began living in a post-New England America. The epiphany of the southern literary artist will not be repeated” (269). Maintaining a fruitless search for order amid the “literary disorders of our age” would be the task of postsouthern art (268). Simpson extends and repositions claims made eight years prior by Walter Sullivan, who writes of the lost places that would serve as moral frames from which to “work out plots” (123). Sullivan’s phrase is apt, for it calls to mind the agrarian ethics found in the pages of *I’ll Take My Stand* even as it makes a more general point about narrative structures of the novel in postmodernity; that double entendre is neither surprising nor coincidental.

At its inception, notions of postsouthern literature were tethered to loss. In fact, the very term “postsouthern” initiates a relationship based on an economy of loss. It positions the present time-space as regional only insofar as the anterior region—the real South—has disappeared. To adopt a set of postsouthern aesthetic strategies, then, is to write into being an epoch that comes after the real.⁷ Scott Romine avoids the term postsouthern entirely to avoid this sort of eschatology, choosing instead to use “late South” to simultaneously invoke “late capitalism” and the demise of the so-called real South, which he convincingly argues was never as real as many critics and artists would like to have thought (*The Real South* 2). While Romine might have sidestepped the term postsouthern to avoid setting up the notion of a firm break of “eschatological grandeur” that the prefix “post” often connotes,⁸ postsouthern art

⁷ The positions by Simpson and Sullivan espouse a melancholic notion of history that frames postmodernity as an era incapable of decoupling history from narrative. These characterizations situate both “postsouthern” and “postmodern” as arriving too late—after real histories have been evacuated by excessive mediation and all that is left is a simulation of representations.

⁸ In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson writes that “the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is never the same” (ix). The post- in postsouthern functions similarly in southern studies.

has responded to the notion of a void, an unsettling of southern order, in a variety of differing ways (2). *Postsouthern Melancholia* reads fiction that fits within the confines of the postsouthern insofar as it no longer relies on an organic, autochthonous foundation of southern distinctiveness. I track the way this fiction has responded to the void that critics discuss without resorting to eschatological panic.

Such panic was common to early versions of postsouthern literature. Take the example of Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* (1966), a text that from its front cover announces an interest in southern culture's decomposition. The novel centers on the travels and travails of Will Barrett, a native Alabamian who begins the novel "thinking in Central Park" (1). In the first few pages, the narrator describes Will's mental paralysis as indicative of a condition of southern young men, who have become "overly subtle and had trouble ruling out the possible" (6). The primary struggle Will experiences is in regard to the system of racial paternalism in which he grew up; he occupies a hybrid position that contradictorily threatens and reinscribes "the figure of an aristocratic white man who allegedly possesses a truer understanding of the relationship between white and black cultures as our savior" (Costello 150). The novel repeatedly attempts to establish a form of white masculinity that resists the paternalistic instincts of earlier generations of white southern men only to end with Will describing in somewhat banal platitudes his plan to go about doing "one's best to promote tolerance and understanding between the races" while intending to get married and return to Birmingham (Percy 303).

Read against Will's desires at the beginning of the novel, the ending seems to embrace a circular, recursive melancholia. As Will thinks about his job as a "maintenance engineer" for Macy's, he imagines what his life would be like if he saw the job through to the

end and earned his retirement benefits: “After twenty-three years he could retire and go home, where, if the ranks of old ladies had thinned out, he could let out rooms and live like a king. The dream even came to him as the subway trains thundered along close by that he might restore Hampton plantation to its former splendor” (13). As Costello points out, Will’s phrasing—“former splendor”—allies itself with the plantation’s “glorious aristocratic past” that Will learns, over the course of the novel, to be “fundamentally flawed” and “dependent upon an essentialist binary distinction between black and white that inevitably breaks down” (Costello 134, 150). On the novel’s own terms, then, Will’s desires to return to the Old South are deemed inescapable by his seemingly inevitable return to Alabama. If Will’s melancholic attachments to the planter class are vexing and layered, his father’s are a little on the nose. Ed Barrett stays in the South and grows increasingly distressed over shifting conceptions of race and class, and eventually he commits suicide—fulfilling Freud’s diagnosis for melancholia. So the novel offers two paths for the white southerner: suicide or melancholic circling.

To blunt the force of Will’s melancholic attachments, the narrator presents the world in which he lives as a hall of mirrors: a mediated, fake version of the Old South that packages virtues into consumer goods. For example, the house of the Vaught’s, a similar family to Will’s with whom he spends much of the novel, is described as “a castle” standing in front of a new golf course (Percy 147). The contrast between the timeless morality of a castle and the encroaching modernity of suburban country clubs is not meant to be lost, and Will in particular sees the contradiction. He thinks that, for southerners, “[n]othing was wrong” with this artificial South while continuing to feel “worse anyway”: “The happiness of the South drove him wild with despair” (145). The narrator explains that the neighborhood homes “were built in the 1920’s, a time when rich men still sought to recall heroic ages” (147). The

word recall provides a near perfect amount of slippage for the impulses guiding the implementation of melancholic architecture, the construction of which is driven by a hardly perceptible, unconscious attachment to older conceptions of virtue. The novel describes the resulting condition for Will as a paralyzing form of melancholia that gives the illusion of many choices—the illusion of endless possibility—while preventing radical cultural changes.

Without finger wagging too much at Percy, I want to distinguish twenty-first century postsouthernism from this sort of lament. Percy initiates a process of working through melancholia that later writers take on in more hopeful ways. The texts I examine describe similarly artificial worlds to that of *The Last Gentleman* without resorting to the banality of that novel's concluding pages, which cannot find a pathway for southern identification outside of melancholia. These texts do not always find that pathway, but they also disallow the resigned fatalism of Will Barrett.⁹ The point here, again, is not that earlier fiction was less enlightened about melancholic attachments, but that southern literature has long defined itself on the basis of these types of resignations. Twenty-first century postsouthern fiction interrogates the narrative arcs that give the illusion of inevitably recurring losses presented time and again as a prescribed condition of southern literature. As such, the literature under

⁹ *Postsouthern Melancholia* investigates contemporary southern writing that reckons with “the ghosts of southern history and memory” rather than fatalistically crumbling under their weight (*Reconstructing Dixie* 205). Like Tara McPherson, who finds potential in Randall Kenan's reversals in *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), I read fiction that writes back to concepts like memory and history. In *The South That Wasn't There: Postsouthern Memory and History* (2010), Michael Kreyling circles back to the inevitability of memory functioning as an essential component for both the South and southern studies. He writes that southern history-and-memory is “an engine of both trauma and guilt” that would be free floating even without a South (6). Kreyling has trouble imagining a South without a tendency to over-remember, so instead he predicts a future in which memory outpaces history and eventually completely displaces it. Like McPherson, Kreyling wants to point out the way southern histories and memories function in the present; unlike McPherson, he ends up saying that the rivalry between the two is often won by the ghosts of southern memory. Both McPherson and Kreyling name a free-floating condition that operates in the contemporary South: for McPherson it is nostalgia and for Kreyling it is memory. This project, however, looks at the melancholic impulse that undergirds both nostalgia, which looks fondly (and unfairly) on history, and unrelenting memory, which personalizes and naturalizes the recurring presence of the past without addressing how it's working on us now.

my consideration is behaving historically by responding to a specific through-line in southern literary history.

Postsouthern fiction, in other words, turns the naturalized condition of southern literature on its head. What once seemed to be a natural part of southern reality¹⁰ is shown to be a construct with a political unconscious. Rather than getting weighed down in questions about the reality of southern narratives, I will focus on what has happened after the term “reality” began requiring qualifying quotations. That is to say, *Postsouthern Melancholia* takes it as a given that assessing the *nature* of the authentic South is a lost cause. I am more interested in how twenty-first century postsouthern literature interrogates the South’s narrative realities not *because* they are constructed but because of what the components of their construction reveal. As such, I read the connective tissue between contemporary writers and earlier writers not through an anxiety of influence but as crucial to the identification of the melancholic components of southern literature’s underlying structures.¹¹

¹⁰ Scott Romine’s *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (2008) argues that “the fake South ... becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative” (9). Romine’s point is an important one for me: rapid changes in the South have caused the consistent recuperation of southern traditions and motifs to maintain the illusion of a continuous (and real) regional community. *The Real South* does wonders in delineating the production of reality and the way southern literature has flexed its narrative muscles to make this production appear seamless.

¹¹ In this way, my work both builds and departs from Bone’s examination of “sense of place” in fiction from the 1930s onward in his landmark study, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005). Bone argues that postsouthern fiction reconfigures the longstanding category “sense of place” and reads fiction largely about the process by which capitalist land speculation and the real-estate market reproduces agrarian notions of place (42). Bone’s narrative of southern place is ultimately hopeful. He points out that place slowly became unmoored from the agrarian ideal of subsistence farming, which he directly identifies as a type of fantasy early on, saying “[i]t is highly debatable whether such images of a traditional agrarian South ... had any historical basis” (8). While *Postsouthern Melancholia* will not construct another sense of place, it will trouble Bone’s claim that the success or failure of postsouthernism resides in its ability to sever its ties from southern literary giants like Faulkner and O’Connor in his discussion of Richard Ford’s use of parody. As I will argue in Chapter Three, parody affords Percival Everett the space to unpack and understand the melancholia inherent to the southern novel about the search for the lost real that was popularized, ironically, by Ford and Walker Percy. I will also attempt to avoid Bone’s occasional strategic essentialism about the reality of the agrarian South. For instance, Bone writes that Eudora Welty’s fiction returns to the subsistence farming communities of Mississippi where “a more familiar sense of place *remained intact*” (216, my emphasis). In so doing, Bone builds a bridge between the textual notion of place his project convincingly disauthenticates and an actual, real place that has been forever altered by American real-estate markets.

The year 2000 might seem a bit arbitrary as a starting point, but I selected it to mark an era of postsouthern writing that, like much contemporary fiction outside the region, is increasingly geopolitical.¹² In many ways, my work attempts to answer an urgent question that grows out of Bone's discussion of the global forces at work in urban southern settings. Bone calls for criticism that accounts for an examination of burgeoning transnationalism in contemporary postsouthern fiction:

It will be intriguing to see how these transnational geographies and demographics develop as the twenty-first century proceeds apace, and how they are depicted in the narrative cartographies of contemporary (post)southern fiction. . . . And though predictions are perilous, it does not seem entirely foolhardy to conclude by venturing a premise for future debate: that nearly a quarter-century after Lewis P. Simpson coined the term, to tell about the postsouthern, and to map postsouthern geographies, is increasingly and necessarily also to take the transnational turn. One then can develop a sufficiently critical, global "sense of place." (252-253)

If Bone's concluding remarks start to phase out the postsouthern as a category through the half-erasure of parentheses, I will argue that the dismantling of southern literary motifs and shibboleths has continued into the twenty-first century in part because, as Bone predicted, contemporary postsouthern fiction has taken the transnational turn. I will consider this turn most pointedly in Chapters One and Two, which read the globalized spaces of Tuscaloosa, Alabama and the Mississippi Delta through the lens of melancholia. Melancholic attachments

¹² The transnational turn is underway in scholarship about American literature, as well. One specific debate between Mark McGurl and Caren Irr regarding periodization illustrates this point quite well. McGurl's seminal study of what he calls "program era writing" asserts that the emergence of creative writing programs affected postwar American literature more than any other event (ix). McGurl paints with a broad brush, but his argument that American program era writing produced "signature genres" such as "the campus novel" is well-taken (49). That is, McGurl's program era writing is primarily concerned with domestic issues tied to the pressures of an increasingly "programmatically society," and the issue of how to make a place for the artist in *American* culture takes precedence in this writing (xi). However, Caren Irr's resuscitation of the early-twentieth century political novel through what she terms "the geopolitical novel" in the twenty-first century provides a sharp alteration to McGurl's narrative. Irr argues that contemporary American geopolitical novels are "explicitly political" rather than primarily politically unconscious and that they often make a global political problem fundamental to the conditions of the story being told: the geopolitical novel "shatters isolationist myths, updates national narratives, provides points of access for global identifications, and, perhaps most important, allows reflection on the emerging subjects of consensus (for better or worse) in the United States" (3, 4). In Irr's estimation, the globe is inescapable for the twenty-first century writer of a political American novel.

appear out of place in twenty-first century texts that decenter traditional notions of southern identity in what appear to be traditional southern locales.

Thus, *Postsouthern Melancholia* treats literature published after 2000 not because that date is significantly different than other possible alternatives, but because this project examines emerging postsouthern aesthetics that often revise the inward-looking nature of melancholia in favor of a literature with its eyes on the world. The emerging sensibility I examine might be read as a response to rapid changes in the region itself. James L. Peacock points out that the contemporary South is in the process of “shifting its frame of reference from nation to world,” partially as a result of shifting demographics (17). Hispanics made up close to 14 percent of the population in 2003 as compared to 1.4 percent in 1970, Peacock notes, arguing that the contemporary South is best understood as “a patchwork of subcultures—Native American, African American, Anglo American, now Asian American and Latino American” (23, 249). The question of whether this patchwork leads to a politically diverse region is yet to be seen. If the white South’s near complete rejection of Barack Obama is any indication, the early returns are not all that encouraging.¹³ I embarked upon this project, in part, thinking about the way texts initially pushed the South into an idea of itself that seems to me to be ultimately melancholic. If the South has been spinning around an idea of loss forged through southern literature, I turn to twenty-first century postsouthern literature with an eye for the way it might point out a new path for identifying oneself as southern in a shifting demographic southern landscape in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

¹³ While voting records should hardly be reduced to race, Obama carried 37 percent of the white vote nationwide in 2012 while only carrying 16 percent of the white vote in Alabama and 10 percent of the white vote in Mississippi (Smith 124). As Smith points out, “The gap between symbolic politics and real politics, between how we like to feel and what we like to do, remains rather wide” (125).

¹⁴ It’s also curious that many book-length studies of contemporary southern fiction end near the beginning of the twenty-first century. Romine’s last work under lengthy consideration is Barry Hannah’s *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), Bone’s is Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), and Benson’s is Tayari

I should offer a few words on critical methods, as my project has limbs that extend in many directions. The primary method of this analysis in this study is close reading of a few representative texts instead of a distant reading of more texts—a practice that has served critics embarking upon categorization projects quite well. Caren Irr, most notably, writes in her defense of distant reading that critics should resist “the hagiographic tendencies of close reading” that privilege the idea of “exceptional masterworks” (13). I make no claims that the works I investigate here should occupy the new canon, and I will add that distant reading does not itself categorically sidestep the idea of masterworks: it simply ascribes that value to more texts.¹⁵ Rather than functioning on the logic of great books, *Postsouthern Melancholia* reads four primary sources in dialogue with many others to offer something of a beginning narrative of twenty-first century postsouthernism. The project is not intended to be an exhaustive evaluation of twenty-first century postsouthernism.

Where Benedict Anderson (and many of his interlocutors) articulated a somewhat ambiguous relationship between newspapers, novels, and ideology—what Kreyling has called a cooperation between text and history—I use the discourse of postsouthern melancholia to speculate about the way literature has made the South with the end goal of speculating about how it might remake it. In other words, if Ernest Gellner is right to say that “nationalism engenders nations, and not the other way round,” then I hope to give critical voice to texts that engender a South that rejects melancholia as a way of being in the world (54). While my study builds from work about the relationship between text and nation, I do

Jones’s *Leaving Atlanta* (2002). The single seeming outlier is Kreyling’s reading of Madison Smartt Bell’s *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004), and even that was the conclusion of Bell’s trilogy on the Haitian Revolution that he began in 1995 with the publication of *All Souls’ Rising*.

¹⁵ Irr’s project demonstrates impressive agility in its distant reading of more than 125 works of fiction. Nonetheless, those works are included at the behest of others, and one might reasonably wonder about the texts that get overlooked.

not mean to suggest that twenty-first century postsouthern literature attempts to build a wall around the borders of the region—however ironic this point feels in light of frequent calls to build a literal wall along the southern border of the United States. This is not a small point. Often, literary criticism defamiliarizes national and regional spaces by pointing out the fluidity of their borders and the interconnectivity of spaces that are positioned in opposition to one another even as the world outside of academic study literalizes borders and reifies oppositional political frameworks. Texts of all types shape our interactions with spaces. This project is driven by the ethic that texts might alter the way the South is understood within and outside its borders, wherever they may be.¹⁶

Postsouthern Melancholia describes the beginning of a new southern sensibility that might be described as a type of ideology critique, but I will not spend a lot of time engaging in presentist scolding of old southern literature for a few reasons. First, I want to be careful not to suggest that twenty-first century postsouthern texts are the first to recognize and trouble melancholic attachments. Southern writers from Charles Chesnutt to Bobbie Ann Mason have written about the economies of melancholic desire in the South. However, my claims about twenty-first century postsouthern fiction track an emerging set of aesthetics that are primarily textual: the authors I examine write in an era in which our conception of the real has been done away with, so their texts must be read as a particular response to a long literary history.

For that reason, I begin with examinations of literature that alternates between hand-wringing frustration over melancholic attachments and arriving at a destination that posits

¹⁶ Gellner argues that nationalism can and does radically transform national spaces. The texts I examine occasionally turn inward, but they do so in order to ultimately better understand the region's role in geopolitical networks that might dissolve the idea of a bifurcated nation and region that has long dominated southern literature.

optimism as a literary strategy. Chapter One investigates Brad Vice's often-neglected collection of short stories, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*. I argue that the collection's central figure—famed Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant—can be read as a sounding board for contemporary melancholic attachments. The collection maps the shifting landscape of Tuscaloosa as it transforms from a provincial land where Ku Klux Klan rallies appear unremarkable to the cosmopolitan and economically global home of a multinational car company.¹⁷ In Vice's fiction, Bryant becomes a vessel into which characters in the present can deposit longing for Tuscaloosa's one-time provincialism that preceded its economic globalism. I suggest that *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* identifies an economy of melancholic desire for previous versions of the South while at once revealing how earlier representations of the region are no more authentic or real—and often profoundly problematic. By channeling these attachments through seemingly apolitical figures, such as Bryant, the politics of melancholic longing is obscured. Thus, Vice's fiction helps us uncover the otherwise hidden politics of melancholic nostalgia. Vice's point of access for his methodology is literary sampling, as it uses exact lines and phrases from Carmer's *Stars Fell on Alabama* to interact with other literary worlds. My chapter argues that Vice's sampling should be understood as essential to its effect, and not, as a plagiarism controversy around the text's original publication denotes, a mark of a concealed literary theft.

Chapter Two turns to Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*, a novel set in a Mississippi Delta farming community at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I argue that the familiarity of the novel's postsouthern spaces—such as casinos that are made to look like ante-bellum plantations—is thrown into question by one of the novel's central

¹⁷ This local shift corresponds to Peacock's “grounded globalism” with an emphasis on not only an influx of immigrants but also the global economic forces that have gained a foothold in the postwar South.

characters: a Mauritanian immigrant to whom the post-South is simply the South. The novel sets up an inquiry into melancholic attachments only to question the position from which those attachments are perceived and analyzed. The resulting setting is a globalized South that is both tragically familiar and hopefully unfamiliar. Chapter Two responds most pointedly to Bone's plea that writers and critics might think about the way immigrants move in and through the twenty-first century South. Shearer uses the South as a site of grounded globalism in the twenty-first century to critique by contrast those clinging to the idea of a South cordoned off on a map: separated from global modernities rather than part and parcel of globalization.

My project's first two chapters examine writers from the Deep South writing about familiar Southern spaces. In Chapters Three and Four, I shift my focus to two writers associated with American literature rather than southern literature. Chapter Three examines *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Percival Everett's absurdist novel about the excessive mediation of identity in postmodernity. The novel's protagonist, Not Sidney Poitier, searches for an unmediated version of himself even as his life loosely follows the plots of various Sidney Poitier films—many of which are set in the South. I argue that the novel ingeniously demonstrates that parody, a narrative style critics have often equated with the postsouthern, succeeds in critiquing the structure of earlier postsouthern fiction even as it fails to clear a space for the novel's characters to self-realize in the present. The novel ends with Not Sidney succumbing to mounting pressure to be properly interpolated: he pretends to be Sidney Poitier. Thus, a novel about parody ends with a type of suicide, exposing the melancholic underpinnings of postsouthern literary strategies carried out in the service of recovering an unmediated, real South underneath the mediated simulations found in contemporary

postsouthern fiction. That is, if the search for the real has sometimes been a hallmark quality of postsouthern fiction, the novel helps us see the impossibility of that project and suggests that such searches are a symptom of melancholic attachments to an idea of the real.

Vice, Shearer, and Everett each throw the politics of postsouthern melancholia into sharp relief, but none posits as clear path toward postsouthern optimism as Colson Whitehead's deep investigation into the John Henry myth, *John Henry Days* (2001). Through the novel's historiographic approach, which employs a fractured narrative structure that defines and describes the John Henry myth from many angles, readers are left with a narrative of John Henry that accumulates a coherent meaning without relying on a linear historical narrative. Whitehead's novel uses historiography as a literary strategy for evading melancholic attachments. The novel explores the various reconstructions of the John Henry myth across the twentieth century, particularly a few versions of the "Ballad of John Henry." I focus on the novel's open ending, which preserves choice rather than melancholically foreclosing it. Thus, I find that postsouthern historiographic fiction, or fiction that offers an encyclopedic look back at that way an idea gets recorded and reconstructed, is uniquely capable of understanding both the allure of melancholic attachments and the problems they manifest in the present.

In my conclusion, "Postsouthern Optimism," I cast the aesthetic signatures I trace in *Postsouthern Melancholia* through the register of affective optimism that does not passively reproduce melancholia.¹⁸ I locate moments of optimism as a counterweight to ubiquitous,

¹⁸ Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) is foundational for my own formulation of "postsouthern optimism." Berlant argues that we might read the neoliberal present through the machinations of "cruel optimism," or a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Berlant arrives at passivity through the idea of "the impasse," or "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things" (4). The present becomes a confounding time in which an obstacle might be an epiphany; "living in an impasse," then,

melancholic moments common to southern literature. While the end of Whitehead's historiographic novel offers the most concrete version of optimism, clarifying the political unconscious of affective melancholia is itself a generative move that clears a space for new types of attachments that might be otherwise. With that in mind, I consider the inherent optimism of new modes of attachment that the works by Vice, Shearer, and Everett gesture toward. Since each chapter catalogs twenty-first century postsouthern fiction critiquing melancholic attachments, the project as a whole is united around an optimistic view of contemporary southern fiction, which points the way for southern affiliations that are not organized around loss.

In many ways, *Postsouthern Melancholia* is indebted to the most thoroughgoing critique of melancholic attachments: Jon Smith's *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* (2013). Smith analyzes disciplinary structures of feeling, writing that southern studies has sustained an inquiry into "whether, as a result of modernity's instability, we have not Lost Something Very Important" in an effort to identify the narcissistic pleasure of circling around the idea of loss (*Finding Purple America* 6). Smith claims that the South, as a concept, names "nothing but fantasies" for American studies and southern studies critics alike (22). For southern studies, he identifies "white southern melancholy" as an iterative drive that critics must understand fully in order to change directions. To understand this drive, however, Smith avoids contemporary literature entirely. Smith may reveal his motivations for this avoidance in an interview with David A.

transforms life in a world in crisis into "impassivity," or the "temporary housing" provided by reckoning with the dissolution of "the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life" (5). In other words, the idea of crisis might provide a vantage point from which to understand the conditions—esthetic and material—that have manufactured crisis. For *Postsouthern Melancholia*, what was originally described as the crisis of postsouthernism, then, in reality offers the space and time to understand the esthetic conditions of southern literature.

Davis in the Society for the Study of Southern Literature's Spring 2013 newsletter: "I moved to cultural studies precisely because most contemporary 'southern lit' strikes me as shtick. The fakeness that Scott Romine has such fun with in *The Real South*, I just find unbearable" (interview). While Smith finds contemporary southern literature iterative of old southern narcissisms, *Postsouthern Melancholia* will risk thinking about loss a bit more to point out that twenty-first century postsouthernism is not always invested in extending melancholic laments. Quite on the contrary, the literature I examine seeks to understand similar drives to those that Smith calls our attention to. Importantly, however, I see literature attempting to intervene in conversations about melancholic drives and pointing the way to alternative ways to feel southern.

I am not alone in thinking that the ways we attach to literature—and the ways literature encourages certain kinds of attachments—represent important aspects of literary studies that often go overlooked. In the chorus of manifestos about the current crises in the humanities, Rita Felski's injunction in *Uses of Literature* (2008) is among the most helpful and timely for those of us looking back to literature. Felski cautions against a default hermeneutics of suspicion and wonders what is overlooked "when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis" of literature as merely ideological or symptomatic of the culture in which it is read (1). Felski outlines a differing and (she admits) "one-sided" account of literature that is, nonetheless, bracing: in identifying several differing affective modes through which we connect to texts, she attempts to sketch out "the shape of a positive aesthetics" that accounts for the many different ways we read and react to texts (22).

Postsouthern Melancholia is of course highly suspicious of the affective modes of southern literature. In many ways, I am calling attention to an unutterable but simultaneously

baseline structure of understanding southern literature. Yet, my hope is that this project identifies new ways that we might listen to the positive aesthetics of twenty-first century postsouthern literature. In proposing an examination of postsouthern aesthetics shifting toward optimism, I hope to arrive at a new outline of southern literature that not only accounts for new spaces around the globe, a direction that American and southern studies has been headed for some time, but also accounts for a new way of telling about the South, wherever it may be. Unlike what Fred Hobson describes as “eloquent rage,” produced by the imperative of the southern apologist to meet the outside world’s expectations with defense or self-condemnation, I trace the contours of a postsouthern literature that resists the urge to identify itself as southern through rage or self-hatred (10). Instead, I look for and find narratives that may answer McPherson’s call for stories in which familiar tropes such as “white supremacy and racism are not inevitable and impenetrable” (*Reconstructing Dixie* 31). Without necessarily knowing whether these new aesthetic attachments will lead, I’ll call them optimistic rather than positive. My goal in *Postsouthern Melancholia*, however, is to listen to the way twenty-first century postsouthern literature writes back to both an academic discipline and a culture at large that has long been overshadowed by loss.

SECTION ONE THE SOUTH IN THE WORLD

The essential character of the old definition, the force that bound its elements together, was its powerful association of locale and behavior. The locales still exist, though they are now dotted with satellite dishes and traversed by small Japanese or Korean four-wheel-drive pickups. The behavior still hovers recognizably near the old locales, and in recognizable relation to the old behaviors. Nobody in a shotgun shack in the Delta, the day after we took a giant leap for mankind, woke up suddenly free of old habits, old presumptions. If there is such a thing as history, it doesn't work that way. The future doesn't erase the past; it colonizes it.

– Jack Butler / “Still Southern after All These Years” / 1996

If certain strands of southern writing were once concerned with demonstrating a cosmopolitan sensibility in spite of obviously provincial roots, contemporary strands struggle to figure out how to represent southern roots in the face of the region's geopolitical involvement.¹⁹ James L. Peacock describes this twenty-first century era through the term “grounded globalism,” a term he uses to describe the South's changing demographics, economic globalism, and, possibly, its shifting affiliations. I will examine two writers whose work investigates, as well as grapples with representing, the nagging provinciality of the now globalized South and, in the process, explores the potential openings and pitfalls that writing about the South in the world presents. In this section, I examine two texts: Brad Vice's short story collection *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* (2007) and Cynthia Shearer's novel *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005). Against the backdrop of shifting southern demographics that

¹⁹ In her chapter entitled “Provincial Cosmopolitanism,” Leigh Anne Duck examines the work of Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers, and James Agee, arguing that southern modernism demonstrates a sort of regional cosmopolitanism in the face of what she refers to there and elsewhere as the “temporal seclusion” of the region (*The Nation's Region* 178). Duck argues that these novelists portrayed the region as a comparable analog to other cultures despite “perceptions of backwardness” (178). Very often, this conflict played out in fiction with “characters [questioning] whether their cosmopolitan impulses might demonstrate their own temporal divergence from their local peers” (178). In other words, these mid-century southern writers dramatized the conflict between feeling oneself to be a part of the South and feeling oneself to be a part of the world. It should not be surprising, in light of these stated goals, that the form of Duck's chosen idiom—provincial cosmopolitanism—reflects the emphasis of regional parochialisms working upon espoused internationalism. Modernism's hallmark internationalism functions as a constant from which southern Modernism deviates vis-à-vis its provincialism.

Peacock cites as the key to situating the South in relationship to the globe rather than the nation,²⁰ I will examine two texts that query the essential components of southern roots. Both texts ask the question: what does it look like to hold onto affectively nostalgic modes of being southern in the globalized twenty-first century? Furthermore, what does holding onto these modes mean in an era when we think about the South in relation to global networks as much as national dichotomies?

In the fiction I examine, vague modes of self-definition are governed by melancholic impulses that appear anachronistic in the globalized South and fall under sharp critique. The interrogation of these melancholic attachments reveals the always-already reactionary politics of the prevailing modes of self-definition common to the long history of southern letters. The melancholic attachments under critique in this section may not immediately feel political, in part because they are rendered through institutions that may seem removed from the politically charged histories of segregation or voting rights. Vice explores attachments to football and heroism and Shearer explores attachments to yeoman farming²¹; in both cases, melancholic attachments to these institutions manifest via reactionary regional politics. I argue that each text helps us understand the melancholic underpinnings that work against the “wider horizon” of affiliations, which might appear to take the South someplace new but do not necessarily shift the dynamics of how the South relates to that new place (Peacock 7).

²⁰ Given that the South has long been thought about in a dichotomous relationship with the American North, Peacock finds potential in global affiliations: “When the national framework is replaced, relations within the nation, including long-standing intranational conflicts, become less central in one’s cognitive map. On a global cognitive map, regions such as the South and the North appear smaller—no longer *the* elements of a dualistic division but *some* elements among many within a much wider horizon” (7).

²¹ Perhaps no southern institution is more politically charged than farming. Despite its foundations in slavery, however, the Nashville Agrarians attempted to recover farming as an institution that might offer a counterpoint to finance capitalism in the twentieth-century and in the process played a role in cementing the institution of farming as an authentic rejection of the exploitative mechanics of American capitalism, perplexing as that relationship seems. The continual presentation of farming as a regional disavowal of national economic frameworks cannot be untied from farming’s exploitative legacy in the region.

Both Vice and Shearer write out of the context of grounded globalism, but both suggest that situating the South in the globe does not immediately erase what I categorize as the bedrock concept of melancholia that has long defined southern modes of affective attachment. Vice's stories use legendary University of Alabama football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant as a sounding board for the ways these melancholic attachments resurface in the twenty-first century while helping to reveal the overtly reactionary nature of melancholia. The collection interprets the realities that southern literature has made, self-consciously critiquing melancholia as a seemingly essential line cutting through southern (literary) history. Shearer, however, explores the politics of representing the South through attachments to farming in a global novel about immigrant labor, blues music, and the aesthetics of southern casinos. In both cases, these texts trouble a contemporary melancholic refusal to react to global forces in the region—a disavowal that reproduces the South's longstanding relationship to the nation.

It should be said, however, that the two texts take strikingly different paths to arrive at their respective critiques of melancholia. Vice's characters seem unable to approach a diagnosis of their condition. While the collection doesn't proceed chronologically, the first and last stories represent its temporal extremes. That framework gives the collection a sense of forward movement, but all the while the stories undercut a narrative of progress, showing unrelated characters retracing the steps of their temporal predecessors. In other words, the ordering of the stories creates the illusion of progress, and it serves as the foundation for its critique of melancholic attachments. While Vice's characters resort to melancholia in their desperate search for a psychic foothold in the shifting present, Shearer's characters seem to find potential in postsouthern dislocation. If Michael Kreyling is correct in saying the "turn of southern literature into ... postsouthernness" is either "an emergency of the highest

seriousness” or “a relief,” then perhaps Vice falls into the former category and Shearer falls into the latter (*Inventing Southern Literature* 148). For Vice and Shearer, however, this categorization feels a bit too tidy. Both texts appear suspicious of nostalgically memorializing the South before postmodernity while simultaneously showing characters furiously trying to do so.

CHAPTER 1
DIXIECRATS AND DISNEYCRATS:
MELANCHOLIC MOVEMENTS AROUND BRAD VICE'S
THE BEAR BRYANT FUNERAL TRAIN

In September 2005, the University of Georgia Press published Brad Vice's collection of short stories, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*, winner of the press's prestigious Flannery O'Connor Prize for Short Fiction. Shortly thereafter, a reader in Vice's hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama recognized similarities between one of Vice's stories and Carl Carmer's famed memoir, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (1934). Margaret Butler, a librarian at the Tuscaloosa Public Library, first noticed passages from Carmer's memoir that one of Vice's stories reproduced, in some cases word for word. Butler told reporters, "On the first page, I said to myself, I've read this before," eventually bringing her concerns to the attention of UGA Press (Cobb). Vice's accusers read his subtle changes—turning "distant high blasts of a bugle" into "distant notes, high blasts on a bugle," for example—not as a type of sampling used to establish a relationship with Carmer's memoir, but as outright theft (Carmer 28, Vice 99). Vice maintained that he wrote the collection in the spirit of recent historical speculative fiction, such as Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), which fictionalizes the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, and Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which takes place in the off-stage world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Introduction" 16). In an effort to make his book seem less like academic fiction, Vice removed a Carmer epigraph that appeared alongside the story "Tuscaloosa Knights" in his dissertation (17). Nonetheless, by the end of October 2005, UGA Press recalled Vice's collection, revoked the O'Connor prize, and pulped all its remaining copies of *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*.

Despite UGA Press's acknowledgement of the plagiarism charges, Vice's seemingly obvious references to Carmer appear to establish, not conceal, a discourse between his fiction

and Carmer's non-fiction. More importantly, the collection gives rise to theoretical questions about generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction that have been taken up by a wide range of critics and artists alike.²² Many of those questions relate to the rights of literature in the era of digitization, which decreases the value of the single copy and creates a literary marketplace based on creative collage. Should literature redeploy parts of earlier texts for the purposes of reinterpretation and critique? The pulping of Vice's collection suggests that many of these theoretical questions meet their practical limit in the realm of legal copyright. However, I argue that Vice's literary sampling functions in inseparable service of its interrogation of melancholic attachments.

Vice's return to Carmer's 1934 memoir from a contemporary vantage point should be understood as a literary technique that avoids what Scott Romine calls "the pretense of reality," by which he means the notion of a singular, basic reality of southernness that exists outside the text ("Where is Southern Literature?" 42). Vice's fiction reveals a condition of postsouthern literature through melancholia, a concept describing a sense of loss so abstractly felt that it is difficult to understand and nearly impossible to move past. The self accommodates the structure of loss until it no longer can. Like Freud's melancholic subject, who operates through the logic of internalized loss until the self is permanently displaced,²³

²² David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) engages these questions directly, but of course Shields takes up old questions about originality and authorship. Nikhil Bilwakesh argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry anthology, *Parnassus* (1874), offers a theory of "decomposition" as an artistic act that brings together theoretical formulations of authorship and anthologizing (521). Defending Ian McEwan's use of an autobiography by Lucilla Andrews in his novel, *Atonement* (2001), Thomas Pynchon writes: "For Mr. McEwan to have put details from [a memoir] to further creative use, acknowledging this openly and often, and then explaining it clearly and honorably, surely merits not our scolding, but our gratitude" (Dent 40).

²³ Freud explains the difference between the processes of mourning and melancholia: "An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming-about various conditions seem to be necessary. . . . [T]he shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object" (49).

Vice's postsouthern fiction both emplots and critiques the last gasp of singular, southern reality that appears hopelessly tethered to antiquated notions of regional identity.

As Romine points out, southern texts offering a singular reality have felt anachronistic for some time, particularly as southern literature became more diverse and inclusive. The ways in which "individuals and groups *use* [the concept of reality] in a region and age compelled by them," however, are always timely (*Real South* 10). It is impossible to think or write about the South and the post-South without reference to the ways that both have used textual realities. Every enunciation of the postsouthern invokes a specific relation between the contemporary and the historical. Vice's fiction is important, then, not because it continues a hermeneutic of postsouthern lament, but because it explores and clarifies the melancholic underpinnings of reality-based criticism and literature in the South and beyond. What I hope to add to these accounts of reality-based literature and criticism is an examination of burgeoning potential literary frameworks. Vice's fiction offers one such framework, as it makes visible the ways in which melancholic nostalgia is and has always been a cover story for reactionary politics that situate the region against global modernities at large.

While Vice's collection helps redirect critical conversations about the postsouthern, it also fits into a much broader conversation about copyright in an era of easy global dissemination of texts. David Shields claims that "[a]rt is a conversation, not a patent office" and that therefore the reality it depicts "can't be copyrighted"—particularly in an era when texts are endlessly reproducible and available electronically (Shields 29).²⁴ Unfortunately for

²⁴ The questions surrounding plagiarism charges against Vice arose before the publication of Shields's *Reality Hunger*. Shields's ars poetica on literature in the era of not just reproducibility but also seemingly endless availability via the Internet has much to say about the ethical and generic contours of art-as-theft. Among topics like mimesis, reality television, and autobiography, *Reality Hunger* frequently returns to the topic of plagiarism,

Vice, his play between the realities of his text and Carmer's was not read in that spirit. Vice explains that he wove passages from Carmer's text into his own "because my story is meant to look and feel like Carmer's world" while remaining "an alternate universe, a virtual re-creation, a postmodern commentary on the primary text" ("Introduction" 17). Where Carmer's memoir wonders about the local present, Vice's speculates about deeper historical contexts of the cultural practices that Carmer wants to objectively present rather than actively represent.²⁵ Vice's collection not only crystallizes many of the social meanings that Carmer merely points at, but it also allows us to return to Carmer's text anew. The similarities between Shields's project and Vice's, pulped on claims of plagiarism that the text undermines, should be recognized as a part of a contemporary poetics that stretch beyond genre and inform a broad catalog of work interrogating so-called present and past realities.²⁶ Postsouthern texts take the narrative reality of the forms and contents of southern history as

which often amounts to what Shields calls "the narcissism of minor differences" that belies the formulas of genre (38). Shields's text, in fact, collects quotes from writers across space, time, and subject that go uncited for most of the book. While Shields does reveal midway through his book that many of its passages "are taken from other sources," it is not until readers arrive at the appendix that they read a disclaimer one might usually find in the front matter of a text like *Reality Hunger* (103). In the appendix, Shields writes that a "major focus of *Reality Hunger* is appropriation and plagiarism and what those terms mean," justifying his own lifting by saying he "can hardly treat the topic deeply without engaging in it" (209). Through his encyclopedic collage, Shields offers a defense of repurposing the words of others, arguing that the digital overabundance of copies devalues the copy, creating a system that values "the many ways to recall, annotate, personalize, edit, authenticate, display, mark, transfer, and engage a work" (29).

²⁵ Philip D. Beidler argues that Carmer positions himself "first and foremost [as] an observer and recorder: "Carmer is always a stranger in a strange land, fascinated, bemused, and ... more than occasionally horrified. Carmer is markedly inside the text as he experiences the various regions he visits and their inhabitants; but he is also decidedly outside, not so much reflecting on what he sees as colorfully registering it, the poet as traveling ethnologist, scribbling on his pad, reporting from the field" (24).

²⁶ Works of literary revision are notable within this contemporary canon. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) stand as two high profile examples of direct revision. The former reinterprets the world of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the latter offers an alternate take on Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and both novels work with an eye toward the politics of recuperating characters and identities their parent texts ignored. Postsouthern literary revisions such as Alice Randall's novel *The Wind Done Gone* (2001)—a novel that retells one of the most famous depictions of the South in literature, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936)—aptly demonstrate a negotiation between the specific concerns of postsouthern fiction and the strategies of contemporary literature more broadly.

their primary target.²⁷ The project of postsouthern writing, at the risk of stating the obvious, is a literary one: contemporary texts clarify the processes through which textual realities have shaped our understanding of the world outside the text. Thus, acknowledging and understanding the relationship between *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* and *Stars Fell On Alabama* is essential to understanding Vice's collection as a contemporary text that brings into focus the shifting forms and functions of historical narrative realities. Furthermore, the relation that this comparison makes clear is critical of the urge to hold onto the idea of reality underpinning decline narratives—or, those that situate contemporary southern literature as less authentic than earlier literature. These decline narratives idealize literary history: a melancholic gesture that Vice's literary sampling exposes and discredits.

Yet, despite a wide understanding of contemporary literature's common practices in regard to postmodern play, Vice's collection was judged to be hiding its relationship to Carmer's memoir. In the wake of UGA Press's decision, many writers rushed to Vice's defense on the grounds that it was taking up the tasks of contemporary writing. Jake Adam York called the connections between Vice and Carmer "a clear case of allusion," claiming Vice's use of Carmer's memoir was a tried-and-true literary trope (York). John Dufresne also placed Vice's appropriation into a literary tradition, citing a Raymond Carver story that relies upon non-fiction accounts of Anton Chekhov's final hours without acknowledging its sources. Don Noble called Vice the unwarranted victim of a "perfect literary storm," connecting his harsh treatment to other simultaneous cases and ultimately categorizing

²⁷ In fact, Martyn Bone establishes the standard for the success or failure of postsouthern fiction in its ability to interrogate rather than reproduce the geographic and cultural South of juggernauts like Faulkner, writing that Richard Ford's fiction uses parody to create distance between his fiction and Faulkner's. Bone writes that Ford's text shows that "the tropes of southern (literary) history and place legitimized and naturalized by 'the Faulkner-Quentin model' are no longer tenable" in the late twentieth century (86). This chapter will not directly discuss the uses of parody as a trope of postsouthernness, although Chapter Three will.

Vice's work as homage (Noble 217). Jason Sanford called for Vice's supporters to write letters on his behalf to UGA Press and Mississippi State University, where Vice was an Assistant Professor at the time the scandal broke.²⁸ Each defense of *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* argues, from various angles, that Vice's stories rely on their relationship to Carmer's memoir. This point is especially important: reading Vice's stories outside of the context of the text's literary history shifts the meaning of Vice's work dramatically. Ignoring the collection's discourse with Carmer's memoir misses the ways in which Vice's stories specifically critique the *intertextuality* of melancholic attachments in southern literary history.

Given the controversy of the charges, the collection never regained the momentum of its original publication, even after the Montgomery-based press River City Publishers re-released it in 2007.²⁹ Vice claims his stories—particularly “Tuscaloosa Knights,” the story said to have plagiarized from Carmer's “Flaming Cross”—sample lines from Carmer's memoir to show a conception of history-as-text.³⁰ That formulation resonates with Kreyling's claims that postsouthern history and memory form two sides of a Moebius strip that merge through intertextuality, a framework that seriously complicates literary copyright (Kreyling 15-17). That is, if southern textual history can be said to move into the realm of intertextual

²⁸ Sanford's essay veers into sensationalism, as he calls Vice's treatment a “literary lynching,” adding that Vice “should not be strung up for ... forgetting to add that one acknowledgement” (Sanford). If anything constructive can be drawn from the analogy, perhaps we can gain a sense for the attitudes regarding the collection: it inspired vitriolic rhetoric from all sides.

²⁹ The re-released version, in fact, includes an introduction section with three sections: “Brad Vice — Aims and Acknowledgements,” “Acknowledgment of Sources,” and “A Note on the Text.” The material gives Vice a platform from which to explain his mission in the 2005 version of the text and create distance between himself and charges of plagiarism. The “Note on the Text,” in particular, explains that the 2007 edition “has been edited from an earlier version of the author's manuscript, using both the 2005 edition and copies of prior journal and magazine printings of stories as reference points” while also restoring the epigraphs, which “relate to extra-textual materials that are important” to Vice's collection. Without leveling any direct accusations at the University of Georgia Press, the note suggests that earlier versions of the stories made Vice's intentions plain and that, in part, the editing process for the 2005 collection was to blame for the plagiarism controversy.

³⁰ “Flaming Cross” is a chapter in a section entitled “Tuscaloosa Nights,” with which Vice's story “Tuscaloosa Knights” acknowledges a fairly obvious kinship.

memory, that would seem to present problems to those claiming that Carmer has complete ownership over the stories Vice's return to. Vice's repurposing of Carmer's ostensibly true account of a Ku Klux Klan rally indeed reveals the way in which one must wrestle with texts if one is attempting to wrestle with history. In the end, Vice's collection presents intertextuality as a valid point of access from which to understand and critique melancholic attachments to both specific southern texts and, generally, the affective sensibilities of southern literary history.

To offer this critique, the collection throws the validity of its parent text into question by calling attention to ways textual histories can slowly shift into the realm of so-called real history. Indeed, "Tuscaloosa Knights" blurs real histories with textual histories. For example, Marla, the protagonist in "Tuscaloosa Knights," works on "a tawdry novel ... that would out-Scarlett *Gone with the Wind*," a text that wasn't released until 1936—a year after Vice's story is set ("Tuscaloosa Knights" 99). What might seem like an error could just as easily be a commentary on the legacy of *Gone With the Wind*. Focusing on the way Mitchell's novel constructs a racially unified South at the shift from ante- to post-bellum, Tara McPherson persuasively argues that *Gone With the Wind* demonstrates "a desire for union" that reveals a reimagining of southern history that took on the feeling of reality (59). The fact that Marla is attempting to outdo Mitchell's novel a year before its historical release signifies that, to the writer in the contemporary South, *Gone With the Wind* helps constitute regional identity still. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to *imagine* the South without *Gone with the Wind*.

To Vice, the textual South is so overpresent as to suggest its eternal presence. Even if Carmer's memoir does not gesture out toward other texts intentionally, Vice's fiction suggests that it became a part of the textual ground that southern writers continually till and

was, thus, open to contemporary reinterpretation. In fact, *Stars Fell on Alabama* did inspire reworkings before Vice's. Countless musicians immediately appropriated the memoir's title in recordings of the song "Stars Fell on Alabama." In fact, so many notable musicians³¹ recorded versions of the song that it became a ubiquitous phrase, appropriated and etched onto Alabama license plates until 2009.³² Carmer's memoir was adapted and readapted, at some point becoming a state slogan divorced from its original context. Vice's seventeen-page "Tuscaloosa Knights" returns to the text, reinventing plots that Carmer's five-page vignette leaves unexplored, creating new tensions, and highlighting the absurdity of the matter-of-fact prose Carmer uses when describing a Ku Klux Klan rally.³³ Vice's reinterpretation asserts that, when reading the history of the South, we cannot ignore the way texts produce and proliferate realities of their own. Not to do so would be to buy into the melancholic decline narrative that *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* troubles through its very design.

UGA Press's decision takes the position that contemporary writing cannot—or, *should not be allowed to*—pull from previous texts for the purposes of revision without heavy-handed statements of intent. From a legal standpoint, the press's position is slightly unorthodox. The 2001 case of *SunTrust Bank vs. Houghton Mifflin Company* explored the issue of postmodern revision, ultimately allowing for the publishing of Alice Randall's *The*

³¹ Perhaps the most famous version of "Stars Fell on Alabama" was a duet by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, but I also found versions by Billie Holiday, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Dean Martin, Jimmy Buffett, and Vera Lynn.

³² The "Stars Fell on Alabama" license plate was tellingly replaced with a line from another Alabama anthem: Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" (Clines). The switch marked a move from a jazz standard sung the world over to provincial southern rock anthem at one point infamous for its reactionary response to desegregation. One could write an essay about this shift alone, but suffice it to say that it should be understood as part and parcel with melancholia's resurfacing.

³³ Even Carmer's sparse yet sensational subtitle "Flaming Cross" adds to this effect insofar as it creates a somewhat literal tableau vivant while maintaining a critical, objective distance.

Wind Done Gone (2001).³⁴ The case serves as a particularly relevant precursor for a few reasons. Arguing for the violation of *Gone With the Wind*'s copyright, SunTrust Bank's attorneys claimed that the novel's historical plot points, such as the burning of Atlanta, were facts that Randall's novel could legally interpret, but that the plot of the novel's fictional characters was "a creation of Margaret Mitchell" (Transcript 8). Houghton Mifflin's attorneys successfully claimed that Randall was performing the work of "comment and criticism," providing an overtly parodic, political corrective to the portrait of Atlanta found in the pages of *Gone With the Wind* (Transcript 38).

In that old debate about literature-as-history, the court decided Mitchell's text had slipped from one position to the other and allowed Randall's novel to be published. While Carmer's *Stars Fell on Alabama* does not occupy an identical position either historically or presently to Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, it's important to remember that the events of Carmer's text are purportedly true. According to Carmer's "Author's Note," "[a]ll of the events related in this book happened substantially as I recorded them" (Carmer xii). His recording may be artful, but he claims historical authority. Furthermore, the song's nearly continuous presence since suggests that its source material had already been repeatedly mined, becoming an artifact rather than a text being violated.³⁵ One could indeed make the case that Carmer's memoir began to occupy a space of cultural myth similar to that of *Gone With the Wind*. Vice revisits Carmer's text, then, both to examine the gaps of Carmer's text

³⁴ For a cogent explanation of the case as it relates to postmodern narrative revision, see Thomas Haddox, "Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* and the Ludic in African American Historical Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.1 (2007).

³⁵ Following the legal precedent of *SunTrust Bank vs. Houghton Mifflin Company*, it's possible that UGA Press's decision to remove the text from its publishing record might not have stood up in court. York explores this very issue in his essay cited here. He connects Vice's use of Carmer to other comparable copyright issues, chiefly the Supreme Court's *Campbell v. Acuff Rose Music, Inc.* (1994), the case that established parody as a fair-use appropriation of another text.

and, more importantly, understand its ability to engender melancholy as an iconic southern text.

If the effect of what David Shields calls “appropriation art” is to “steal but make a point of stealing,” and if Vice’s fiction is granted the legal right to pursue this focus, then Vice’s postsouthern aesthetics begin to come into sharper focus (90). Principally, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* speaks back to a shared melancholic sensibility that critics of the postsouthern have long discussed. The lineage of the postsouthern that I trace in my introduction highlights the relationship between history and narrative that Lewis Simpson and Walter Sullivan interpret melancholically. Simpson writes that postsouthern fiction is incapable of restoring “the epiphany of the southern literary artist”—or, the epiphanic moment in which southern order is understood to be both real and valuable—in what amounts to an understanding of the present as an era of repeated infinite and inescapable losses (269). *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* stages the very problem of thinking about the present melancholically even and especially through its evocation of Carmer’s memoir. In the refusal to acknowledge the validity of Vice’s appropriation—which borrows from and updates Carmer’s memoir through a postsouthern, global sensibility—a notion of the authentic South that Simpson and Sullivan lament is preserved.

It is precisely the act of melancholic preservation that Vice’s stories critique at the level of content, as well. The collection’s title story is one of nostalgic memorialization: the protagonist, Sonny, makes a computer-generated film, a digital prototype for a theme park ride based on the funeral of legendary Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. The story displays what may at first seem like an attachment to recursive southern loss, an introduction

to the South through a funeral played on a loop.³⁶ It might initially appear to perform this very gesture, that is, because it shows contemporary reconstructions to be hardly more than melancholic movements around what Sonny calls “the very instant that everything changes” for Tuscaloosa—Bear to post-Bear; South to post-South (“Funeral Train” 191). However, I want to suggest that Vice’s fiction clarifies the politics of melancholia. In so doing, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* deeply troubles the idea that melancholia, a nostalgic drive for a lost moment that occurs only in one’s imagination, works as a mode of being in the contemporary world. In this formulation, Bryant ceases to be a hero with a singular meaning and instead functions as a vessel into which melancholic longing for an idea of the era he represents can be deposited and stored.

But before turning to Vice’s final story, which stages these melancholic movements most clearly, we need to look back. The first story in Part Two of Vice’s re-released collection drops us into Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1935. “Tuscaloosa Knights” not only demonstrates Vice’s formal interest in revision, but also changes the way readers understand the final story in the section. “Tuscaloosa Knights” follows a self-proclaimed “Yankee carpetbagger” and Vassar-trained writer, Marla, as she attempts to gain some understanding of her new locale (“Tuscaloosa Knights” 100). Marla has moved to Tuscaloosa with her husband, John, a recently hired physician at Bryce Hospital, a psychiatric facility on the University of Alabama’s campus.³⁷ These details establish Marla as an outsider like Carmer,

³⁶ Such memorializations demonstrate what Jon Smith calls a “fear of passive indifference, of losing loss itself” within the body of southern literature and criticism (38). Smith rightly critiques the academic project of reading the South only through loss, saying that we are finding loss in things because we are looking for it in what amounts to an act of narcissistic pleasure (34).

³⁷ Bryce Hospital is, in fact, a real institution that opened in 1861 and had a reputation as a holding ground for the mentally ill where they often went without treatment, a reputation that a class-action lawsuit in 1971 confirmed. The plaintiffs in the class-action case *Wyatt vs. Stickney* sought for Bryce Hospital to adopt minimum federal standards for treatment after Ricky Wyatt, a fifteen year-old, was sent to Bryce for juvenile misconduct and delinquency. While the District Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, the state of Alabama did

whose memoir was published in a time when the South was a site ripe for national consumption.³⁸ *Stars Fell On Alabama* was published during a time when the nation was taking an interest in the shifting landscape of the South, and Carmer's memoir should be read as part and parcel of that trend.

Carmer's memoir functions as less an outsider's expose than a voyeuristic ethnography of Alabama, with chapter titles like "Black Rituals" and "Flaming Cross." Its first section, "Tuscaloosa Nights," begins with an illustration of a Ku Klux Klan rally being held around a flaming cross that Carmer eventually describes: "I was spellbound by the scene—hooded army, white-robed central figure, burning cross, dark crowd—all against the soft green of the drooping willow branches or the black cavern beyond it where the yellow water of the river fitfully caught light from the flames" (30). Vice returns to this scene through Marla using similar phrasing: "I have to admit, for a moment I was spellbound: the hooded army, the ghostly speaker, the murmuring crowd, the burning cross silhouetted by the soft green branches of the bent willow and the black sheen of the river reflecting the firelight" (109). Moments like these led to accusations of plagiarism, but, once again, that charge relies on the idea that Vice is trying to conceal his indebtedness to Carmer.

In fact, "Tuscaloosa Knights" fills in the narrative gaps of Carmer's memoir, attempting to reckon with the horrors that Carmer left unexamined. Unlike Carmer's

not finish paying settlements until 1999 (Encyclopedia of Alabama). Bryce functions as a significant part of the backdrop for not only "Tuscaloosa Knights" but also the surrounding collection, which introduces Tuscaloosa to a wide audience. It should not surprise us that Vice uses Walker Percy's famous pronouncement in *The Moviegoer* (1961) about Tuscaloosa as an epigraph for the whole collection: "Lordy, lord, the crazy talks we have. If people could hear us they would carry us straight to Tuscaloosa" (124). The collection draws a contrast between local insanities and the wider setting that many stories use as an imaginative site of conflict. It should be said that the collection shares *The Moviegoer's* interests in both mediation and what Bone calls a "debilitating existential disease that [*The Moviegoer's* Binx Bolling] associates, however imprecisely, with the specter of capitalist land speculation" (69). As in *The Moviegoer*, disappearing real estate (emphasis on real) coincides with a retreat to mediated versions of the old.

³⁸ Tara McPherson notes that Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, which was published in 1936 and won the Pulitzer Prize, was immediately a best-seller and has sold upwards of 30 million copies since (47). The novel and the film introduced the nation to Atlanta, which was "challenging rural areas as the center of the region" (48).

“Flaming Cross,” which ends with Carmer and his “old friend” Pinion Knox riding away from the Klan rally planning their next southern adventure, “Tuscaloosa Knights” alters that ending dramatically (Carmer 5). In the immediate aftermath of the Ku Klux Klan rally, Marla is unable to forget an earlier moment when she and Pinion Knox, her friend and local tour guide, find Pinion’s black servant, Puddin, “cramped and afraid under the steering wheel of Pinion’s car” (109). Even this brief moment reveals a more inclusive scope that offers a fuller account of the way the Ku Klux Klan affects Tuscaloosa’s black residents, a facet of the rally that Carmer fails to acknowledge.³⁹ In this moment, “Tuscaloosa Knights” invokes Carmer’s scene before departing from it and identifying its narrative absences. In so doing, it critiques the so-called reality of Carmer’s memoir. The postsouthern present, rather than preventing the realization of what Simpson calls “order,” gives a full picture of the southern cultural order that Carmer’s text actually conceals.

The most dramatic alteration to Carmer’s memoir occurs moments later when Pinion forces himself on Marla in the back seat of his car. While struggling to escape, Marla sees a “flash of white” out of the window and assumes “it was a Klansman with a horsewhip come to punish” them for what they would understand not as rape, but as a sexual transgression (“Tuscaloosa Knights” 114).⁴⁰ The two then sit up and watch as escaped inmates from Bryce Hospital run “toward the orange light on the horizon, toward the burning cross, leaving us alone in the terrible silence” (115). Vice recasts Pinion, a benevolent friend in Carmer’s memoir, as a violent opportunist who is very much a part of the same white, patriarchal

³⁹ “Black Rituals,” the preceding chapter in Carmer’s memoir, narrates in ethnographic detail Carmer’s discovery of Tuscaloosa’s non-white citizens: “The seventh hole of the Tuscaloosa Country Club golf course is at the top of a steep little hill. . . . Less than twenty yards to the left of the fairway on the hillside is a negro cabin. It is partially concealed by the high sedge grass, by underbrush, by a few long-leaf pines. . . . As I approached my ball which lay in the rough I heard a soft rhythmic beating, regular and insistent, hardly more than a pulsing of the dusk” (18).

⁴⁰ Marla explains earlier in the story that the Klan reportedly beat up “some poor college boy for being alone with a girl in the backseat of a car” (107).

culture of the Klan. Far from losing its bearings amid literary and historical disorder, “Tuscaloosa Knights” uses its postsouthern vantage point to reexamine the horrifying facets of southern order that Carmer either glosses or omits.

But Vice’s collection also moves decidedly beyond its parent text’s purview. Rather than simply celebrate the present as an era of political enlightenment, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* also links its postsouthern present to the world of “Tuscaloosa Knights” through the figure of Paul “Bear” Bryant. “Tuscaloosa Knights” introduces Bryant as a University of Alabama standout football player whose life becomes akin to a tall tale. Bryant, who was said to have once wrestled a bear,⁴¹ rose to notoriety for playing through a broken fibula in the Crimson Tide’s 25-0 win over Tennessee in 1935, a detail that forms the backdrop of “Tuscaloosa Knights.”⁴² Bryant is never a character in a story, but he appears as a significant figure in “Tuscaloosa Knights,” “Report from Junction,” and, most pointedly, “The Bear Bryant Funeral Train.” By the end of the collection, the stories have circled around Bryant several times, examining the icon from various angles. The collection reproduces Bryant time and again, emptying him out and turning him into a vessel into which later characters can deposit meanings. The first mention of Bryant in “Tuscaloosa Knights” performs this very function: it calls upon a figure with which many readers are familiar before immediately destabilizing that figure through Bryant’s possible involvement in the Klan. In later stories, Vice picks up Bryant’s legend to see how its meaning has shifted in the interim. I am less interested here in understanding the real Bryant outside of Vice’s fiction, a

⁴¹ Vice’s protagonist in his final story, “The Bear Bryant Funeral Train,” tells the tale by which Bryant earned the nickname, “Bear”: “Bryant earned his name in 1925 at the Lyric Theater. He agreed to wrestle a carnival bear for his hometown’s entertainment. . . . When it looked like the boy was going to beat the old, frazzled bear, the owner jerked off its muzzle and it mauled him” (“Funeral Train” 187-188).

⁴² Marla and Pinion briefly speculate that one of the Klan marchers, whose “right shoe dragged behind [him] in a dead limp,” could have been Bryant, and that it was “just the kind of stunt those muckrakers would pull, pandering to the fans” (“Tuscaloosa Knights” 103, 105).

history that would ground the narratives in something seemingly real, and more interested in way the stories work together to examine the political residue that clings to the figure of Bryant. By the time we arrive in the near future of the collection's title story, Bryant ceases to function as a specific historical figure and instead surfaces as a cipher for melancholic attachments, or unceasing attachments to a lost ideal that a subject or culture internalizes. It is through the process of decoupling southern mythological figures from the violence of their attendant histories and reconstructing them through nostalgia that both erases thick history and unconsciously restores an idealized image of history. That is, in the absence of a specific reckoning with the southern histories these mythical figures fleetingly signify, disturbing histories get repurposed through recursive, melancholic fantasy. Vice's collection locates Bryant at the middle of these melancholic movements.

After introducing Bryant the player in "Tuscaloosa Knights," Vice's story "Report from Junction" revisits Bryant as a coach somewhat obliquely. The story is about the young Kurt Schaffer the year before he reports to Texas A&M University to play football for Bryant in his early coaching years. The story takes place in Johnson City, Texas, far outside of the territory of "Tuscaloosa Knights." The narrator describes in detail Bryant's summer training camp, comparing the participants to "soldiers on the Bataan Death March" and

"concentration-camp victims" ("Junction" 117):

Nine days ago Bryant drove his new team deep into the desert, to a place called Junction, where the team has been housed in abandoned military barracks. The players practice all day in a field of sand and clay drawn off in chalk lines, and they tackle one another atop jagged rocks and prickly pears. Denied water for hours at a time, the team continues to run and block and tackle no matter what. The boys carry on with sprained knees, dislocated shoulders, broken noses, broken ribs. According to the newspaper, hardly a man among them is still whole. (116)

Junction becomes a legendary place where men learn “an extreme brand of Spartan military discipline” (116). The narrator casts Junction as primal scene for masculinity in deep time—the same principles that created the once feared Spartan army will be put to use for the Aggies.⁴³

The story of Junction, in other words, has been told and retold, allowing Junction to function as an origin site for Bryant’s coaching legend. Vice introduces the space of Junction, the “jagged rocks and prickly pears,” the “sand and clay drawn off in chalk lines,” the “abandoned military barracks,” the “place called Junction,” before re-territorializing the geographic space in the service of the Bryant ideal.⁴⁴ In “Report from Junction,” the notion of a real space is abstracted so immediately and permanently that both the landscape and Bryant cease to function as material places or real people but only as recoded ideas in the service of the abstract heroism both spaces signify.

That landscape of Junction is important because of the way it works in the story’s other site, Johnson City, Texas. Slippery as this statement may seem, Johnson City *feels more real* in its mundane banality. Jon Smith describes the rural South as a site of imagined authenticity and fantasy that, when lived in, is hardly the ideal space it is often imagined to be by those seeking an alternative to American modernity: “Consumer culture in such places is hard to describe if you haven’t lived in one of them. There is no Starbucks to complain about, nor any independent, more ‘authentic’ coffeeshop at which to exert one’s

⁴³ By 1954, Bryant had worked his way up to head football coach and Athletic Director at Texas A&M on the way to later taking over the football team at Alabama. The surviving participants of his camp in Junction became known as “the Junction Boys” in the story as well as Jim Dent’s 2001 book of the same title and a made-for-ESPN movie in 2002.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that reproduction in late capitalism “institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities” (34). The act of re-territorializing the real turns the physical landscape of Junction into an architecture of signs and symbols within the hypermasculine panorama of the Bear. Romine rightly points out that nothing really southern exists outside of the narratives that reproduce the geographic spaces of the region.

consumption-as-protest. ... In the less densely populated parts of the country, how ‘alternative’ your modernity is, is not at all unrelated to the narrowness of your consumer options” (*Purple America* 89). If rural spaces like Junction activate a sort of melancholic fantasy of authentic experiences, Johnson City is rendered much differently. Unlike Junction, it is not the stuff of legend. The town is in the midst of a four-year drought causing the failure of Kurt’s father’s farm, and the young Kurt must spend his mornings “riding fence,” a gruesome task that involves putting “water-starved cattle out of their misery” with a .45 caliber revolver (“Junction” 118). He’s killed “dozens since the beginning of the long, cruel summer” (118). Aside from his morning executions, Kurt and his father discuss college not as an opportunity to join the legendary Bryant, but as his only escape from a literally dying farm that both men are slowly putting out of its misery.⁴⁵

The contrast between Junction and Johnson City gains critical import because of the story’s dramatic turn at its midway point. An out-of-towner speeds into the parking lot of the Schaffer feed store with a dying calf in the bed of his truck. The man steps out of his truck “wearing an expensive Stetson” cowboy hat and “a denim work shirt that is altogether too clean” (122). Kurt’s lived reality on his father’s farm, by comparison, is dirty and bloody. His fingers are broken from a run in with his horse. He has a scar under his left eye from falling off a horse and landing on a barbed wire fence. The traveler, an oil executive from Houston named Cougan, co-opts the authenticity of “the farmer” through his shiny Ford,

⁴⁵ Joining the legendary Bryant seems to have more to do with Kurt’s bleak life in Johnson City than any sort of hero narrative. In fact, Kurt chooses Texas A&M over Rice University because the latter’s livery, “the ties and jackets that Rice students have to wear to class” would not be covered by his scholarship and Texas A&M provides students with military uniforms (121). Bryant’s mythical reputation is an afterthought for Kurt, who thinks of his choice materially. As Kurt imagines his future trials at Junction, he thinks that “[h]e will never have the luxury of backing down from a fight” and that he “must positively shine with hustle and aggression if he hopes to win a position” and keep his scholarship long enough to earn a degree (121). While the stories of Bryant’s trips to Junction ostensibly focus on the boys who transform into soldiers of the wishbone offense, the future trip to Junction feels to Kurt like an inevitable battle royal.

expensive hat, and firmly pressed shirt. Cougan's sartorial choices seem to reinforce Romine's equation of cultural reproduction, whereby access to the real is limited to what might otherwise seem artificially branded; Cougan is a real person moving through the "artificial territorialities" of the farmer (Romine 12). For Cougan, the rural site of Johnson City, even as it harkens back to a type of southern modernity he longs for, is unquestionably divorced from that ideal in the story.

Kurt is a true Aggie. In fact, that's part of the problem, as Kurt does not live up to the cultural ideal that Cougan must confront in its falsity. That confrontation occurs when Cougan brings a calf to the feed store in the hopes of saving it with powdered milk. Before noticing that the calf has screwworms, Kurt prepares milk and starts to feed it. In a brief moment of nostalgia, Kurt thinks back to his youth, when his grandfather showed him how to prepare makeshift bottles for abandoned calves:

When Kurt was a kid, before powdered milk and baby bottles were made for livestock, if a momma cow ever abandoned her calf, Kurt's grandfather would milk another cow, mix that milk with a raw egg, and use a kitchen funnel to pour the enriched liquid into a drenching bottle. ... It makes Kurt feel good to think about the days when his grandfather was still around, and everything was glistening and green as far as the eye could see. (127)

But Kurt's fantasy quickly ends. Kurt feels something move on his hand before finding screwworms "working their way through the caked-up corner of the calf's right eye" (128). The image of a dying cow startles Cougan, but, to Kurt, the scene is ubiquitous, and he bluntly explains that the calf will not survive (129). Allowing Kurt to kill the calf—or, killing the calf himself—would lift Cougan out of his imagined ideal. In a moment that might have drawn Cougan and Kurt closer together, Cougan cannot suspend his idea of "the farm," a fantasy wrapped up in artificially branded authenticity. Cougan demonstrates the definitive quality of melancholia: he cannot come to terms with his lost ideal. As a representative of

global capital through his job as an oil executive, Cougan is framed as an outsider who arrives in Johnson City expecting the pastoral South.

Meanwhile, Kurt cannot lose sight of Cougan's "crisp, clean shirt," calling him a "silly son of a bitch" for being unable or unwilling to recognize his own dependence on the idea of the farm (129). As Cougan charges at Kurt in retaliation, Kurt sends him speeding away by pointing his revolver first at Cougan and then at his daughter. Kurt imagines shooting Cougan, watching "all that good food and smugness spill onto the dirt" (130). He thinks about killing Cougan and killing the calf as similar acts, in fact, wondering "[h]ow much different could it be from easing the dumb suffering of a steer mad for water or a fevered calf with worms itching through its brain" (130). Like the calf, Cougan is described as a creature with a brain sickness. The comparison tellingly connects Cougan's inability to accept the melancholic fantasy of the southern farm with Freudian melancholia, itself a condition of the brain.

As "Report from Junction" ends, Kurt is left with a feeling of vague regret for confronting Cougan, which seems like a pointless effort in light of the story's concluding lines: "... Kurt feels sorry for himself, because he knows that for all his trouble, his life hasn't changed a bit, and in the morning he will have to get up out of bed and put on his work clothes and saddle the roan, and the whole thing will start over again" (132). Making his life either on the farm or on the football field is, for Kurt, horrifying and unceasing.⁴⁶ After all,

⁴⁶ It should be said that Kurt's sense of loss departs from Freud's model. After all, could we say that Kurt has properly lost some abstracted form of the Agrarian ideal? It's unclear whether Kurt ever thought about farming as an abstraction. Even Kurt's memory of his grandfather and "the days when ... everything was glistening and green" is rendered more like an individual memory than a cultural ideal ("Junction" 127). However, as Kreyling points out, "[m]emories that seem to begin as individual, mental acts of recovering one's historical past flow so seamlessly into the collective that, at any point along the strip, it is difficult to say which memories are individual and which collective" (*Wasn't There* 2). The Schaffer family farm could be said to fit within the Agrarian proprietary ideal, to be sure, and Kreyling's model of history and memory is instructive. Kurt's experience of loss as multilayered—first the farm, but, by story's end, his unceasing, daily loss of self in

Texas A&M is a land grant institution with a mascot named after Texas farmers such as the Schaffers. Even his escape from the world of agriculture requires him to adopt an identity that is a hollowed out mascot of his former occupation. In both cases, Kurt is an Aggie. The collapsing of the Aggie mascot on top of Kurt's one-time life in agriculture connects the two, revealing the longstanding Agrarian ideal to be nothing more than an empty signifier: a mascot for the region that Cougan melancholically performs and Kurt longs to escape. The figure of Bryant unifies these threads in the story. Bryant stands at the center of the Aggie legend that Cougan buys wholesale while at the same time representing merely another imaginary ideal in which Kurt knows better than to believe.

Vice's final story revisits the myth of Bear Bryant long after his death. If "Tuscaloosa Knights" shows the formation of the collection's motifs, such as the origins of Bear Bryant and the prominence of the Ku Klux Klan, then "Report From Junction" shows those motifs dissolve and unravel in the mid-twentieth century South. "The Bear Bryant Funeral Train" might appear to explode these motifs through its setting—a Tuscaloosa of the near future that hardly resembles the setting of "Tuscaloosa Knights"—but it also shows them congeal again. In this future Tuscaloosa, global capital is a greater concern than Agrarian ethics or the Ku Klux Klan: Chrysler-Benz buys Anheuser-Busch, which already owns Busch Gardens and Six Flags, in an effort to compete with Disney in the realm of mega-theme parks (180). Sonny, a University of Alabama-educated engineer who is trained in a German "inter-disciplinary architecture" program is tasked with creating a prototype for the company's first theme park ride (178). The story investigates Sonny's last project, in some ways his life's

anticipation of his inglorious future—might be read as ceaseless, but not culturally melancholic. While this project focuses on melancholia at the expense of trauma, Kurt's experience of loss might better be understood through trauma theory.

work, at the Vance Mercedes factory just outside of Tuscaloosa⁴⁷ in the days leading up to his retirement. His training, however, is in automobile design. In the first few pages of the story, Sonny shares “a secret about the future” of cars:

One day we will live in our cars. One set of keys for both home and automobile. I know because I design them: cars, buses, the shadowy tractor-trailers that hover for a mile or two in and out of the blind spot of your rear view mirror and inexplicably disappear forever. I design them to run not only on electricity and polonium, but on whims, dreams, states of mind. I pay special attention to spatial relations, ergonomics, the marriage of mood and structure. (176)

Sonny designs cars to be a replacement for home. The idea of a home in constant (forward) motion diverges importantly from other contemporary definitions of place.⁴⁸ Rather than locating place as a stable set of cultural practices or social conditions, driving implies a simultaneous sense of the present place and a vague, abstracted sense of old places as seen in the rear view mirror. The past becomes an abstract time-place, a blind spot where objects used to be but, mysteriously, are not anymore. Despite the fact that cars seem to open up a more fluid notion of place, Sonny’s descriptions of his automobile design functions through the logic of melancholia. He shifts the functional act of looking into a rear view mirror into a search for things that “inexplicably” disappear (176).

In some of Sonny’s formulations, even driving forward can represent moving in reverse. Unsurprisingly, Sonny plans to build this future upon the region’s “forgotten lore and arcana in hopes of *recovering* something useful or important to the collective spiritual imagination of my people—Alabamians, Southerners, Americans, in that order or reverse—

⁴⁷ The Vance Mercedes plant is a real auto plant that has been producing cars since 1997.

⁴⁸ Bone takes a historical-geographical materialist approach to notions of place rather than focusing on place as a symptom of affective attachments, declaring that we must wonder “whether literary postsouthernism, in all its ingenious intertextuality, ever refers to the real, and highly capitalist, geography of the *post*-South” (44). I hope to have made it clear that one cannot separate materialist concerns from affective attachments. In the case of Vice’s fiction, the machinations of global capital are intimately connected to, even often a product of, melancholic attachments to a notion of a pre-globalized South—what Sonny calls the “pre-merger era” (“Funeral Train” 184).

good consumers, one and all” (176; emphasis added). The rhetoric of melancholia runs through Sonny’s descriptions of his work, here seeming like an archivist searching for a lost object that only needs the right hands to revive it. Sonny ascribes talismanic significance to his recovery project, which turns on making his consumers experience a melancholic transcendence: “my cars make it feel like you’re driving a cathedral” (176). Driving occupies a central position in not only modern American life, but also in Sonny’s professional life; however, he only considers his work successful if it can make the act of moving forward feel like a metaphysical move backward.

Sonny’s work on the Funeral Train Project provides the connective tissue between the collection’s interests in melancholic attachments and collage. The project is a filmic model for a theme park ride based on Paul “Bear” Bryant’s funeral. For Sonny, Bryant’s death in 1983 comes to symbolize a permanent shift in the city and region. Even as a child-prop in Bryant’s funeral proceedings, Sonny understands that he bore witness to the end of an era, feeling his loss allegorically and reading it onto the changing landscape of Tuscaloosa (“Funeral Train” 182). The Super 8 film relies upon both footage of Bryant’s real funeral and recordings of other world leaders from the same era. Sonny splices them into Bryant’s dirge, declaring that “the truth is not enough” to capture the cultural significance of his funeral: “*The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* is not a real document. It is a computer generated film made to look like a document. I have given the film the grainy look and feel of celluloid to make the events that are to follow more or less plausible. Even though my movie is based on a true story, the truth is not enough” (177). Sonny’s statement shows kinship with Shields’s own views on literal truth, which the contemporary writer abandons in favor of imagination, fabrication, and stylization on the way to “poetic truth” (Shields 66).

Indeed, the film is kaleidoscopic (and hardly literal) in its scope and imagery, beginning with local highlights like former football players and the University's Million Dollar Band, both of which were a part of the real funeral train, and slowly swallowing up cultural images from across the globe: "parliamentarians from the Hague, senators from the Knesset, Politburo members," and eventually "a caravan of oil sheiks from the Yemen," a drunk and "choleric Soviet prime minister Andropov," and "Idi Amin ... in a sky-blue Eldorado convertible" ("Funeral Train" 188-189). Sonny even includes images of "John Lennon and Johnny Weismuller" waving to the caravan (189). The second-to-last float carries "[t]he eldest son of Ho Chi Min, Ben Pheu," who "has come to America to research Civil War reenactments" (189). Within Sonny's film, Bryant becomes a case study for the revered and deposed dictators of the world and icons of mid-century pop culture alike—a coupling that acknowledges the politics of global pop culture and the celebrity of political figures. When Sonny claims that Bryant's death marked the end of "the premerger era"—a time when "no one in Tuscaloosa drove a Mercedes"—he frames Tuscaloosa's shift in terms of global capitalism (185). Bryant was a pre-merger "demagogue," Sonny says, adding that "he carried a cult-of-personality aura similar to that of Hitler and Gandhi": "He was our patriarch, and we revered him as a sort of superlative invention of the South. He was our Nietzsche in houndstooth, wielding his gridiron will-to-power like an ax handle. Walking-tall, redneck *ubermensch*" (184). Sonny compares Bryant to figures of blind aggression and passive resistance, those who crusade and those who protest. The consistent thread amid these contradictions is Bryant's insularity: Tuscaloosa helps make him and he protects it, but he also takes it to Pasadena to win the Rose Bowl. This contradictory framing situates the South as both already lost and rising again, under siege and on the warpath—colonized and

colonizing. As a symbol of what Sonny calls the “pre-merger” South, Bryant was an icon that rivaled these various figures of celebrity; in his death, Sonny’s narrative ushers them in to both pay their respects and welcome the South to the global stage.

But the film serves another purpose. Sonny’s boss, Hans, assigned him the Funeral Train project to smoke out a corporate spy from Disney planning to steal the Super 8 film and use it to design their next theme-park ride. While such a ride may not seem a plausibly profitable venture, it is perhaps important to remember that many southern tourist economies are big business.⁴⁹ Tourist economies continue to make and remake history and, as McPherson rightly points out, shift “our collective understanding of nineteenth-century trauma away from the horrors of slavery and the postwar emergence of other racial terrors toward a deracinated fascination with the brutalities, intricacies, and nobility of warfare” (97). Likewise, Sonny’s film fits into the worlds of theme park rides and corporate espionage—both of which divorce the Super 8 film from its political history. Yet, he seems oblivious to the way he might reinscribe such histories, saying “it ... served its true purpose” by “[drawing] out the mole, [killing] the mouse, [keeping] Tuscaloosa safe from the encroaching tendrils of the Magic Kingdom for another day” (“Funeral Train” 191). By failing to understand the underlying “structures of feeling” through which the film seems like an unmitigated success, Sonny displays an unconscious, melancholic attachment to Bear Bryant as a mythological stand in for what he calls the pre-merger South. The text presents Sonny’s attachment as itself textual; he uses the Funeral Train Project to reify his structure of

⁴⁹ McPherson’s work on plantation tourism and Civil War reenactments in *Reconstructing Dixie* is over a decade old, and the industry has only been growing in the interim. Anne Hartnell’s 2009 essay “Katrina Tourism and a Tale of Two Cities: Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans” in *American Quarterly* explores disaster tourism in post-Katrina New Orleans as a late installment in a long series of southern Black culture being commodified for a largely white, national audience.

feeling southern, which is tied to keeping Disney from stealing his ride and releasing it to the world. Sonny protects the South, in other words, only insofar as he reifies its borders.

That impulse to protect Tuscaloosa by closing it off from the outside resonates quite clearly with the rhetoric from the speaker at the Ku Klux Klan rally in “Tuscaloosa Knights.” The speaker in 1935 declares that Alabamians, “in whom flows the purest Anglo-Saxon blood” will not allow the “humiliation” of a Catholic U.S. President (“Tuscaloosa Knights” 109). Sonny brags to Hans that he included “a little ‘fuck you’” to Uva who, by this point in the film, realizes that he’s been found out as he’s dragged away (191). The film’s final scene is a shot-for-shot reenactment of the Kennedy assassination, but John and Jackie Kennedy have been replaced by Disney’s Mickey and Minnie Mouse: “The third slug from the bolt-action is the head shot. This is the part that becomes more unbelievable each time I watch it. The massive mouse skull splits apart like a plaster cast, leaving exactly one half of the unwavering smile” (190). This harrowing image collapses Kennedy’s assassination, Bryant’s funeral, and the need to keep the South “safe from the encroaching tendrils of the Magic Kingdom” (191). Sonny’s vague impulse to keep Disney out of the South registers its relationship with Klan rhetoric quite specifically, demonstrating an unconscious desire to preserve the Protestant South—an idea that Peacock reveals to be spectacularly outdated in the twenty-first century South.⁵⁰

We should not understand Sonny’s film to be religiously driven, for he never demonstrates any sort of actual faith. Yet, what Charles Reagan Wilson calls “the Protestant

⁵⁰ Even as Peacock describes the long legacy of Protestant Christianity in the South, he describes the more recent religious landscape as multitudinous: “Catholics are prominent in such places as New Orleans, Savannah (with its large population of Catholic African Americans), Mobile, and Memphis and are increasing rapidly throughout the South. Jews have settled throughout the South, though in small numbers. (Some of the oldest Jewish synagogues in the New World are in Charleston and Savannah.) The late twentieth century and the early twenty-first have witnessed increasing religious vitality in the South, with the influx of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Baha’is, and smaller sects such as Zoroastrians” (142).

orientation of the Lost Cause,” a concept that the Ku Klux Klan embraced, seeps into Sonny’s film (34). It is not Sonny’s Protestant orientation that drives the film; rather, a melancholic attachment to lost causes unites the two seemingly disparate parties. The parallel between Sonny’s film and the first story’s Klan rally is further emphasized when we remember that Pinion and Marla briefly wondered whether Bryant had marched with the Klan. The connection between the two moments not only shows how we can use Bryant as a lens to read both settings, past and present, but also it brings into sharp relief the way Bryant’s funeral procession functions as a protest not altogether different than those performed by the KKK. Sonny’s film has a political unconscious to echo Jameson’s famous term, a preceding procession the text identifies but the character cannot see. In both cases, it is the unconscious allegiance to a lost cause, a melancholic fantasy of a bygone South returning to power, that drives the two stories’ reactionary responses to change.

In collaboration with Carmer’s original vision, Vice’s stories suggest that clinging to pre-merger heroes cannot be divorced from violent histories. We might wonder whether Vice’s collection may itself repeat the idyllic backward gaze that leads to Sonny’s film, given that the collection centralizes Bryant time and again. This question becomes more vexed when we consider the layering effect that the final story presents to the collection. The collection piles stories on top of stories and each forms its own reality. This layering is a facet of postsouthern literature that many others have discussed, but the condition of the postsouthern text that *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* troubles most is the continual urge to grasp at some whittled down, depoliticized form of nostalgia. Sonny tries to perform such a maneuver, but his film’s chilling conclusion reveals its melancholic allegiances to a cause that is always-already lost.

Of course, Sonny is an active agent in Tuscaloosa's transformation from a city in which "no one . . . drove a Mercedes" into a city that is home to a Mercedes production plant ("Funeral Train" 185). Even in the story and collection's closing lines, as Hans and Sonny watch the film, we must be reminded of the mystifying allure of melancholic attachments:

I hit *play* as the security guards drag Uva's limp body into the elevator. I am hoping to pinpoint the very instant that everything changes. Everything that came before this moment must be reconfigured in our imagination as leading up to this event. Everything that happens after can only be perceived as a result of this taking place. . . . We watch as the mouse's skull splits apart again. Even though we both know the Bear Bryant Funeral Train is merely a dream-like hoax, neither Hans nor I can turn away. ("Funeral Train" 191; emphasis added)

Sonny literally pushes play, signifying the beginning of his simulation, itself an attempt to freely associate between the death of Bryant and the Kennedy assassination: to play in a postmodern sense. The multiple layers of signification make it difficult to know which moment Sonny and Hans are even thinking about. Bryant's funeral is the subject of the film and has already been described as the day the "pre-merger era" ended, but the refiguring of Kennedy's 1963 assassination centralizes that moment, as well (185). Of course, as Sonny admits, "*The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* is not a real document" but a reconstruction that he gave a "grainy look and feel of celluloid to make its content more plausible" (177). Sonny identifies his own hand in the film before looking at his manipulated creation for evidence of a historical shift, revealing the artifice of searching for a singular moment of rupture that precipitated his melancholic state.

This nearly invisible tension between history and memory exemplifies Kreyling's theorization of postsouthern memory—that it "twists Moebius-like to reveal its historical side"—while also calling attention to the problems with valuing memory and history on equal footing, as Kreyling often does (Kreyling 3). That is, the final scene of the film betrays

Sonny, showing readers there was never a moment when Tuscaloosa permanently shifted but rather a series of moments when the meaning of Bryant shifts depending on the view. At first, in “Tuscaloosa Knights,” Bryant is a promising hero-in-training for Pinion, Marla, and, possibly, the Klan. By the collection’s final story, the Bear proves to be “a dream-like hoax” that eludes Sonny even as he tries to understand and control him (“The Bear Bryant Funeral Train” 191). The implications of Sonny’s construction seem clear: his narrative of Tuscaloosa’s presumed shift causes his identification with specific memories, and those memories have a political unconscious tied to their attendant histories. The collection repositions what has become a familiar problem in southern and American studies—what Barbara Ladd once called a “national project of forgetting”—as a problem with attempting to remember (“Literary Studies” 1637). Sonny is doomed to relive this reconstruction in the present in an effort to retain some sense of “the collective spiritual imagination” of the nation and region, and that abstract, imagined memory remains tethered to its morbid heritage (“Funeral Train” 176).

The inability of either Hans or Sonny to turn away from the final imagery of Sonny’s film seems to acknowledge Vice’s inability to completely turn away from the melancholic sensibility that has proven so persistently alluring for critics and artists of the contemporary South. An important component of the collection’s aesthetic sensibility, then, is Vice’s two-step process of observing a clear melancholic logic while at once pointing readers in another direction, albeit a direction that the text does not specifically articulate. Vice’s postsouthern aesthetic reveals the ways in which melancholic attachments morph over time in southern texts; even without necessarily providing a path of southern identification outside of these attachments, the collection offers a chilling interpretation of recursive southern futures in

which melancholic attachments continue to go unacknowledged. It performs the acknowledging, a process that Rita Felski describes as “redescription”: interpreting reality rather than providing an imitative reflection (84). Instead of hopelessly redeploying melancholic attachments, the collection contests and critiques those attachments by showing their continued familiarity in a collection of interrelated but separate stories. It is telling that Vice calls his final story “a Rosetta Stone placed at the end of the text that calls into question the coherence, reliability, and dangers of *all* stories” (“Introduction” 19). Without gesturing quite so broadly, we could certainly say it questions the coherence and reliability of the story Sonny has told himself and also the coherence and reliability of the melancholia with which the South has anchored itself.

If we understand Vice’s description of storytelling in relation to his own compositional practices, Vice’s reframing of Carmer’s memoir appears essential to his project. In fact, the Carmer epigraph Vice removed from the first publication of *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* offered not a safeguard against plagiarism but a “literary rubric for the reader” (“Introduction” 17). The intertextual dialogue between Vice and Carmer creates a new sort of knowledge in the reader about both. That knowledge emerges from the reality the postsouthern text communicates. As Sonny explains, “the truth is not enough” to make the contemporary theme park attendee understand the Bear: Sonny’s collage is “more real,” more true (“Funeral Train” 177). The knowledge that Sonny hopes to provide through his film is not different in kind to what I have assigned to Vice’s collection, although I hope to have shown that the specific knowledge *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* imparts is of a different ethic. Regardless, the collagist, as a creative editor of textual knowledge, clearly occupies a precarious position in contemporary literary culture, which Mark McGurl describes as an era

of writing that essentially demonstrates a yearning to carve out a place for the writer in an increasingly programmatic society (xi).⁵¹ The place the text made was, for Vice, temporary: he lost the first run of his collection and his position at Mississippi State University. As critical accounts of contemporary literature mark a geopolitical turn,⁵² and a turn back to the radical and urgent politics of social realism,⁵³ the injection of a sharp critical edge into the compositional process of creative writing seems likely to remain.

Without losing that edge, *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* also demonstrates an ambivalence toward the contemporary South that we find in Gilroy's description of his Black British subjecthood: "this book ... represents the flowering of my ambivalent love of England, something that I accept as a peculiar generational and historical affliction. [*Postcolonial Melancholia*] addresses the mixed feelings of attachment, despair, and hope" (Gilroy xiv). Vice documents the inability of his characters to make sense of the simultaneity of feelings like attachment and despair, sentencing them to a sort of perpetual melancholic repetition of southern history. I want to position *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* in a similar posture to that of Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005), to which I will turn next. Shearer's second novel, published the same year as the first run of *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*, investigates similar conceptual terrain, examining the way global capital is focalized in the seemingly unlikely locale of the Mississippi Delta. Where Vice troubles unconscious reconstructions, Shearer's themed spaces are often noticed as such by her characters. Like

⁵¹ McGurl describes the "campus novel and the portrait of the artist" novel as the "signature genres of the Program Era," arguing that both "stage the autobiographical drama of heroic self-authorization that accounts for their own existence" (49). In other words, the fiction of McGurl's program era is ultimately interested in institutional justifications for the continued existence of the writer.

⁵² See Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, Columbia University Press, 2014.

⁵³ See Ramón Saldivar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21.1 (2013), and "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction," *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011).

Sonny, many of Shearer's characters search for something to be nostalgic about. Shearer, unlike Vice, tells much of her story through a character moving about the South unaware of its histories and not entirely interested in finding out about them, let alone preserving them.

CHAPTER 2
WE HAVE NEVER BEEN SOUTHERN:
GLOBAL NETWORKS IN CYNTHIA SHEARER'S (UN)FAMILIAR SOUTH

No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world. The use of the past perfect tense is important here, for it is a matter of a retrospective sentiment of a rereading of our history. I am not saying that we are entering a new era; on the contrary we no longer have to continue the headlong flight of the post-post-postmodernists; we are no longer obliged to cling to the avant-garde of the avant-garde; we no longer seek to be even cleverer, even more critical, even deeper into the 'era of suspicion'. No, instead we discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era. Hence the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has not even started!

— Bruno Latour / *We Have Never Been Modern* / 1993

In the epilogue to *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, Martyn Bone calls for a critique of postsouthern literature that neither replicates the city-centric biases of postmodern spatial theory nor revives Agrarian ethics. In an effort to, then, both allow for southern urbanism and account for the transnationalism of the rural South, Bone calls for more analysis of literature by or about “the region’s new transnational populations” (253).⁵⁴ If “The Bear Bryant Funeral Train” can be said to explore these populations through the German engineers working for a multinational corporation in Tuscaloosa, staging global pressures on local spaces, it might also turn transnational populations into the melancholic scenery in Sonny’s postsouthern panorama. That is, the German characters slide into Sonny’s melancholic panorama, rarely emerging to tell about the South they inhabit. *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* troubles a specific type of melancholia that Sonny embodies through his abstract attachment to an authentic South before globalization, a South personified by Paul “Bear” Bryant. The “mute rhetoric of [Sonny’s] Super 8” film reveals the project’s “absolute despair” to be circular, arising out of a desire to turn the present into a vehicle to return to the

⁵⁴ According to Bone, this literature has the potential “to rewrite ‘the South’ again in unexpected and exciting ways” that the title of his epilogue, “Against the Agrarian Grain, Taking the Transnational Turn,” foretells (253).

past—a metaphor Sonny’s work on cars literalizes—rather than a time in which to explore global affiliations that might take the South some place new (“Funeral Train” 176). Sonny’s melancholia becomes the collection’s subject matter. His victory is always already a defeat; he cannot preserve an authentic South without recreating an insular, violent, racist southern community. This feeling of loss, however, is not a loss that we should understand to be caused by personal trauma, war, or Sonny’s shifting modernity. It is instead an old preoccupation with continued, abstract losses that drive his attempts to recover something that would make him psychologically whole. The collection deconstructs Sonny’s melancholic urges and critiques a regional preoccupation with remembering and recovering the past. Rather than offering possibility, the contrast between the global networks in which he works and lives and his stoic melancholia emphasizes Sonny’s obstinate immobility.

Vice’s stories investigate the condition of traditional white southernness at a definite (and transnational) historical moment. Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005), like Vice’s fiction, uses the transnational present to both critique traditional southern affiliations and wonder about new ways we might associate southern identity with global networks. She explores the politics of representing the contemporary South as a space that is familiar to us all using familiar literary and critical tropes while also taking a step toward writing a truly global novel, one in which the South is not a body politic working in relation to geopolitics but, instead, deeply a part of contemporary geopolitics. As we will see, Shearer’s global take on the Mississippi novel identifies a frequent misstep among critics, who often assume that the “post” in “postsouthern” is always legible. Shearer shows us a Mississippi made new through the eyes of an immigrant to both the region and the nation, a story that comes closer

to reflecting the twenty-first century South, as well as the nation, in its shifting demographics.

In a novel that undercuts the notion of a purely postsouthern present, we can also trace the implications backward to the origins of what might now appear to be simulacra, depending on the view, but of course always were. As Scott Romine might point out, the implication of reading the contemporary landscape of southern fiction as an analysis of the way southern culture negotiates the past with the present—first continuity and then a break—is that we are reminded that “culture was never organic in the first place” (*The Real South 2*). The culture under negotiation in *The Celestial Jukebox* certainly is not organic: the novel presents the institution of farming, specifically, in seeming rupture and vexing continuity. The large scale corporate farm destroys its smaller antecedents while revealing the similar logics operating in both; rupture circles back to continuity. Thus, a novel about the global *present* transforms into a novel about the longstanding global *presence* in the region, rejecting the decline narrative that configures the present through its ability to reproduce the authentic past. That position, as Vice’s fiction clarifies, is inherently melancholic because it defines the region through a hopeless recovery project. Like Vice, Shearer makes that point clearly, using the novel’s globalizing South as a literary ethos—a strategy that enables the novel to critique melancholic attachments to the idea of an isolated South that likely never existed. As we shall see in a moment, *The Celestial Jukebox* differs from Vice’s collection in that it portrays the South through somewhat typically inward-looking stories that are, however, atypical in their undeniable connections to the rest of the world. The result of examining the novel’s constant pirouetting between the global present and the so-called provincial past, then, is a vexing admission: if the South has been a place only insofar as it

has existed apart from geopolitical modernities, then that premise is inherently flawed. If the South is a space removed from the world, then we have never been southern.⁵⁵

* * *

The Celestial Jukebox is set in the Mississippi Delta, extending to Memphis in the north and Oxford to the east. However, it also extends beyond these geographic borders. The novel investigates movement at the level of character and culture. It begins with a story that provides the background for Bebe Marie Abide, an enigmatic artist roaming throughout the novel, linking her to both an old plantation in the novel's imagined setting of Madagascar, Mississippi as well as Paris, where her mother studies under Henri Matisse. Marie is one among many characters linked to faraway places: a local grocer, Angus, is a Chinese immigrant, and the novel's arguable protagonist is a young Mauritanian immigrant named Boubacar. But the novel also examines contemporary cultural migration through two migrant work forces: a Honduran population that works the fields of local farms and a Mauritanian population largely employed in a local casino.

The novel's chapters offer titles rather than numbers. This small narrative gesture speaks to the way the text feels like a collection of interrelated stories rather than a clear narrative of forward progress, an ethos that the novel's frame story evinces. The first and last chapters are linked: both "Introit," the title of the first story and a word denoting the beginning of a Christian liturgy, and "Benedictus," the title of the last story and itself an

⁵⁵ I will deal with my association with Bruno Latour's seminal book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), a bit more in the chapter, but I will say at the outset that this chapter on global networks at play in *The Celestial Jukebox* is in league with Latour's use of "the network" to account for the act of translating ideas among seemingly separate discourses (3). Latour performs the mainly ecocritical work of breaking down the borders between nature and society; I will argue that Shearer's novel helps us break down the borders between the naturalized version of the South apart from modernity and the notion of global modernity.

invocation said before communion, offer the back story for Bebe Marie Abide.⁵⁶ Importantly, the stories are told in reverse; the first is set as Marie is about to give birth to a child, and the last is set in her childhood and Paris and in the years leading up to her pregnancy in Mississippi. The first words—“Once upon a time”—begin a narrative that will clearly be about storytelling (Shearer 1). Southern literary history can lay no special claims to metafiction, but beginning a Mississippi novel with a clear nod to the performance of telling stories immediately invokes southern literary forebears—most notably Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). However, Shearer also relocates the novel:

Once upon a time in that part of Mississippi where every town’s name reads like a memory of some better place, a girl with a honey-colored braid down her back stood by the side of the road and stared at a hand-painted sign. PROPHECY GARDEN OF KING LOUIS NARCISSE, it said. She had come from Madagascar, through Dublin and Dundee, then Como, then Little Texas, to Hollywood, Mississippi. (1)

The names of these Mississippi towns, as the narrator states, call to mind places from across the globe, the South, and even out west to Hollywood—a locus of stories. With the exception of Madagascar, these are all real places in Mississippi that reach outward and backward, “like a memory” (1). King Louis Narcisse, too, was a notable religious leader who ran a church and recorded gospel music from Oakland, California. These first few lines place the novel both in the Mississippi of the map and of the imagination, and they link the novel’s setting to the surrounding nation and world. The passage begins a discourse with storytelling and memory, motifs that are not particular to southern literature but have nonetheless been central in southern literary history. The first few lines locate the novel in a familiar southern place

⁵⁶ “Benedictus,” the final of the novel’s 37 chapters, tells the story of Marie’s childhood in Paris, a story that may appear to bear little relation to much of the novel. It begins with the line, “This is the way she remembered it,” another admission that the book we have read is not meant to offer a factual narrative but instead a collection of stories, related and remembered (421). While I will spend more space discussing “Introit,” it’s important to note that “Benedictus” connects the global novel readers have just digested to an origin story set in Paris. That is, the novel reminds readers at its conclusion that it is a story with roots all over the world.

while simultaneously reaching outward, relocating the familiar local in the unfamiliar global. By comparison, the first few lines of *Absalom, Absalom!* describe the “long still hot weary dead September afternoon” on which Rosa Coldfield begins telling Quentin the story of Thomas Sutpen (3). Faulkner’s setting is not only globally isolated, it is dying; the first paragraph uses the word “dead” three times, describing Sutpen as “the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration” (3). Shearer uses the motif of southern storytelling while stripping it of the melancholic isolation to which readers might be accustomed. This quick contrast is indicative of the novel’s wider investigation of southern literary modes that it takes apart and reassembles in an effort to understand the prevailing modes of southern literature and use them to connect the region to the nation and world.

The novel’s frame uses familiar southern motifs with a difference, suggesting that the global alterations to rural Mississippi might, as Peacock suggests, offer an alternative to the South’s dichotomous modes of identification within the nation. *The Celestial Jukebox* reaches outward from its opening lines—a trend that continues as the book progresses—while at once acknowledging the difficulty in halting the inertia of the South apart from the world. The novel acknowledges this problem first through Marie’s story, which reads like a religious fable. Marie is not named in “Introit”; she is only “the girl”—her story is not important for its particularity but rather for its regional allegory. Without the resources to take care of her soon-to-be-born child, Marie moves in with a black family that has links to the Abide plantation that in all likelihood reach back to slavery.⁵⁷ There, she lives with Litany, a black woman with whom Marie grew up, and Prophet, a Muslim man who Litany

⁵⁷ The novel never reveals this directly, partially because the literal signs for the Abide plantation are all that remain. When Angus Chien and his father, Solomon, first arrive in the Mississippi, they paint over a sign hanging above their recently purchased store that reads “ABIDE PLANTATION” (284). The scene suggests a familiar narrative from plantation to sharecropping farm.

likely met when she was singing in King Louise Narcisse's choir. Even the names Litany and Prophet, like Introit and Benedictus, invoke the religious significance. But perhaps the most important figure in the narrative frame, and the most enigmatic, is Litany's grandmother, Ariadne. In Greek mythology, Ariadne is the daughter of Minos. In some versions of Ariadne's story, she provides Theseus with a ball of thread as he embarks to kill an Athenian Minotaur and must enter its labyrinthine lair. The thread, then, is a link out of the Minotaur's tomb, back to the world. In Shearer's novel, Ariadne is "an old black woman" who "seemed to be everywhere" (426). When Marie is a child, Ariadne teaches her how to make bottle-trees; she uses once venomous rattlesnake fangs to make earrings (428). Ariadne's art, then, is a type of assemblage, a two-dimensional collection of objects used to create a new art object, that Marie spends her life mimicking through her own assemblage projects, such as her birdhouses made out of books jackets and Coca-Cola bottle caps. Just as Shearer invokes southern literary tropes in her first few lines and repurposes them to fit her global postsouthernism, assemblage denotes an interest in understanding literal and metaphoric object attachments at the level of plot.

Marie's projects occupy very little space or consideration in much of Shearer's sprawling novel—she hovers in the background of many characters' lives—but it is important that *The Celestial Jukebox* offers up artistic assemblage in the same breath that it locates Mississippi as a part of the always-already globalized South. This early fable tips the novel's hand, showing readers a path for holding onto a notion of southern history that is also a complex cultural production constantly being remade and revised. Ariadne provides a thread to the past that avoids the melancholic recovery of lost objects that typifies Sonny's Super 8 film. She literalizes Freud's objects of desire, furthermore, showing objects not to be

static things but rather constantly evolving, culturally produced objects that break down the ontological distinctions between things and humanity as they move through what global networks. Bruno Latour insists that things and human politics are inextricably linked, arguing that a full account of the social lives of people or things must take into consideration both. To do so, he introduces the concept of the network, which is astonishingly relevant to Shearer's novel: "More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne's thread of these interwoven stories" (3). The line could nearly be applied to Shearer's novel without my intervention. The fact that both Shearer and Latour use the metaphor of Ariadne's thread must not be overlooked: it reveals a shared sensibility about the importance of placing humans and objects in a side-by-side discourse rather than a top down discourse in which humans make things, which then lose their power to communicate anything further. In Shearer's novel, Ariadne's work functions in the novel's plot; she teaches a character how to make use of her past through old objects, and that lesson proves crucial once Marie is faced with the trauma of losing her child to an adoption she did not agree to. However, the specifics of Ariadne and Marie's stories are less important than their narrative function. These framing chapters—each of which tie together real settings in Mississippi with settings real and imagined the world over—teach us how to read the global networks at play amid Shearer's interrelated stories. That is, rather than succumbing to melancholy because of the presumed loss of an authentic, provincial conception of the region, the global networks offer a thread that links backward and forward. Marie's overcoming her personal trauma, then, should be read as an allegorically significant act within the wider contexts of not only the

novel's primary narrative threads, but also Shearer's twenty-first century postsouthern aesthetics.

At the center of many of the novel's stories is The Celestial Grocery, a country store in Madagascar that Angus inherited from his father. The store features the all-important jukebox, which beats on as "the unacknowledged heart of the little dying town" (32). Madagascar's death becomes one of the many subjects about which the novel seems both assured and ambivalent. On the one hand, Madagascar's southern community operates in the mode that Cleanth Brooks puts forth, as a group "held together by manners and morals deriving from a commonly held view of reality" (339). This type of community, with its all but utopian undercurrent, has often been met with criticism.⁵⁸ So readers of *The Celestial Jukebox* would be right to feel a tinge of anxiety about the way the novel frames Madagascar as a community on the verge of extinction.

On the other hand, even as the novel offers a familiar eschatological fear—the end of a real, small-town South—it also contradicts such thinking. Angus Chien's family fled Nanking because of the massacres of 1937. He owns and operates the Celestial Grocery, opting to paint "the Chinese character that represents *long life*" over a Coca-Cola sign he was required to hang (287). Angus's reinscription creates "a new emblem that is neither American nor Chinese," but an appropriate transnational amalgam of both (Anderson 205). The sign on the Celestial demonstrates variegation as the store functions as a site of community coherence. Even the name of the town—Madagascar—performs this function, as the text reaches toward the familiar Mississippi with the added twist of feeling unfamiliar.

⁵⁸ Romine thoroughly unpacks the consequences of Brooks's southern community as well as community writ large. In that book's first few paragraphs, in fact, Romine incisively notes the central problem with a group bound by a commonly held view of reality: "insofar as it is cohesive, a community will tend to be coercive" (*Narrative Forms* 2).

Indeed, while the novel is set in the Delta, it explodes that boundary, connecting the Delta to the world. The novel sidesteps eschatology, a fear that the southern spaces of the novel are vanishing under the pressure of globalizing forces, and instead acknowledges the continuous cultural updating happening in seemingly isolated southern spaces. The South of Shearer's novel is not being lost and should not be the object of melancholic longing; instead, it enters into networks that are both recognizably southern and decidedly global.

The increasingly globalized South transforms traditional modes of southern identity that rely on an idea of provincial communities separated from the outside world.⁵⁹ Such a reversal has the potential, to Peacock's thinking, to drastically alter the contemporary southern mind. The novel explores these alterations by weaving together stories that very often involve the effects of bringing a foreign body into a southern space. One of the novel's central characters, a 16-year-old Mauritanian immigrant named Boubacar, arrives in his new home in Mississippi—a trailer park that houses African immigrants who work at the local casino. Boubacar notices a bottle-tree next door: "The boy knew instantly what he was seeing: the bottles would detain whatever spirits meant harm to the household. He theorized that the neighbors could be from Senegal, and this reassured him. No village should be without its *sorcière*" (28-9). The scene focuses on the transnationality of bottle-trees, forcing readers to remember that these artifacts, common to the region, arrived through the

⁵⁹ Peacock clearly states his book's thesis in its preface: "Globalization has the capacity to fundamentally transform the South—not only economically, demographically, and, perhaps, politically, but also culturally and psychologically—to create an identity at once global and regional. Among other things, grounding openness and global outreach in human-scale traditions and other regional norms can transform a crippling oppositional identity that has led the South or, at least, some southerners, to feel different from, opposed to, even scorned by the rest of the nation" (Peacock x). Peacock argues that globalization, which he positions as all kinds of connectivity ("commerce, cyberspace, migration, and cultural exchange, for example"), can be "a momentous force" generating outward, global thinking rather than inward thinking (33, 32).

institution of slavery.⁶⁰ The presence of a bottle-tree might often pass by readers of southern literature without much emphasis. But Boubacar reads the bottle-tree as a marker of African presence in his new hometown. While Anderson focuses on Boubacar's appreciation of "physical and cultural interconnections that have contributed to the development of the US South," we should not impose a sort of historical understanding to Boubacar's experience (Anderson 205). That is, rather than causing Boubacar to recall the transnational history of Mississippi, the bottle-tree throws into sharp relief the transnational *present*. To Boubacar, the bottle-tree signifies the presence of African immigrants in Madagascar. In fact, the only thing tying it to the South is its physical presence in Mississippi in that moment. Instead of using a bottle-tree to illustrate a melancholic attachment to the past, the novel emphasizes how what might be seen as a southern artistic object is actually a part of the region's global present.

This is not to say that *The Celestial Jukebox* obfuscates southern history. The South is full of bottle-trees in large part because of slavery, whatever the case may be with the bottle-tree Boubacar sees. The novel emphasizes the presence of the past in Madagascar, all but saying that it is neither dead nor past. The historical repercussion in Boubacar's migration from Africa to Mississippi to work at the Lucky Leaf casino is clear: it partially recreates the journey of many slaves through the Middle Passage. Boubacar flies to Memphis with only a postcard with a picture of the casino where he was supposed to find work in Madagascar, having only slightly more information or understanding about his destination than a captured slave. After he makes it through customs with the help of an American soldier, the man offers to drive Boubacar to Madagascar and, on the way, teach him a few English phrases so

⁶⁰ Even Boubacar's word for witch—the French "sorcière"—highlights transnationality, denoting the history of French occupation of Mauritania, which gained independence in 1960.

he can avoid sounding like he's "straight off the boat" (Shearer 24). The phrase immediately sticks with Boubacar, who repeatedly uses it to introduce himself to others as the novel progresses (26, 136, 254). The soldier's idiom further evokes the slave ships of the Middle Passage. The moment in which Boubacar steps off the plane and onto southern soil emphasizes his disorientation:

He hesitated just a few feet past the plane's door. He could smell lingering perfumes and smoke, the dreams and errands of a thousand others. A river of bodies bumped him from behind, eddied around him, whorled off in a long stream. He was not tall, but he stooped in the accordionlike exit tunnel, as if he were stepping off a spaceship into an invisible headwind, *America*. (16)

His vision obstructed by bodies and the rush of fresh air, Boubacar's emergence from the plane's cabin feels desperate. He describes the plane as an alien ship that has taken him to America: a new world. The novel goes to great lengths to make its description between Boubacar's journey from Mauritania to Mississippi feel like an familiar journey. That is, to a critic in southern studies, the scene seems to unmistakably invoke the Middle Passage and, consequently, it seems to suggest that twenty-first century globalization has not displaced the antebellum logic of human capital.

However, we must not ignore Boubacar's own understanding of his journey. He leaves Mauritania to work at the Lucky Leaf casino, where many other Mauritanian immigrants have found work. Even though he never actually works there, his family sends him to Mississippi because his earning power at the casino is greater there than in Mauritania. Furthermore, despite the way Boubacar's journey mimics the path of many Africans in the Middle Passage, the novel puts forth a compelling complication for that comparison: at the time of *The Celestial Jukebox's* publication, slavery was legal in

Mauritania.⁶¹ Kevin Bales estimates that approximately 20 percent of the Mauritanian population was enslaved in 2005 (Bales 116).⁶² In fact, when the soldier asks Boubacar what his family does in Mauritania, Boubacar stalls, thinking “[t]here was no word for it, *harutine*, in English ... In Mauritania, people had gone to jail for trying to explain it to French television crews” (22). The word “haratine” can mean either freed slaves or people who are still in slavery, but it nearly always refers to those “who belong to the former slave class of Black Moors” rather than the “lighter-skinned Berber people” who were traditionally slave owners (Sutter). Boubacar recalls a French television crew paying his grandmother “to lower her veil and look into their cameras,” saying ““Look into the eyes of the Western world ... Let them see the face of slavery”” (Shearer 22). But the system of slavery so pervades Mauritania that, when a Harvard missionary finances Boubacar’s trip to Mississippi, Boubacar’s mother pockets the difference and uses it “to purchase a little Sudanese refugee girl to fetch the water every day” (22). Boubacar escapes a system that could make him a slave, yes, but he also escapes a system that would allow him to enslave others, as well.⁶³

Thus, strange as it might seem, the eerie echo of Boubacar’s journey from Mauritania to Mississippi uncannily represents migration *away* from a system of slavery. The novel sucker punches its American readers: drawing them in with a clear metaphor for the mid-Atlantic slave trade only to remind us that slavery is, in fact, still a part of the global

⁶¹ Slavery was not officially outlawed in Mauritania until 2007 (Hirsch).

⁶² Bales notes that the Mauritanian government says there is “no slavery at all” due in large part to the establishment of a National Committee for the Struggle against the Vestiges of Slavery in the late 1980s. Bales finds the “cleverly named” committee to be more of a public relations stunt than a legitimate attempt to end slavery in Mauritania (116).

⁶³ It should be noted that his guardian in Mississippi is known as “the Wastrel, the Sufi master whose father had owned [Boubacar’s] family” (113). The Wastrel’s family owned Boubacar’s for generations. The Wastrel is *bizan*, a term Boubacar uses to refer to the ruling class in Mauritania and those who seem free in America. The Wastrel guards the term, often quizzing Boubacar with the question ““Bizan or *harutine*?”” about people in the Madagascar community (371). While Boubacar says those who ““can go if they want to”” are *bizan* (371), the Wastrel says that Americans are owned by ““what they are driven to possess”” (372). Boubacar’s eventual rebellion against the Wastrel suggests that the power he would have held over Boubacar is all but gone in Mississippi.

economy. If we narrow our focus and only read the scene as a type of postsouthern play signifying on the Middle Passage, we risk overlooking the material possibilities the journey presents to Boubacar and contradictorily centralize a traditional interpretive perspective. For Shearer, the twenty-first century immigrant has the potential to both remind readers of the history of human capital moving into the region and identify a contemporary slave economy that Boubacar moves to Mississippi to escape. Boubacar functions as a contrast to the novel's many more provincially southern characters, who spend much of the text looking for ways to maintain and recover Souths. I am calling this particular type of social melancholia postsouthern precisely because one must perceive change as loss (and vice versa) for it to feel mysteriously catastrophic. It is the "indefinite incomprehensibility of the social process"—the absence of a clear narrative explaining a loss—that explains social melancholia (Moglen 20). Boubacar, it would seem, subverts this model, moving through the post-South as if it were the real South, which of course it also is. That is, to Boubacar, the contemporary South is not only the product of longstanding histories of migration, but it is also a site that is currently experiencing migration because of the availability of work—however problematic the conditions of that work might seem.

The Celestial Jukebox contrasts Boubacar's fresh perspective on the twenty-first century South with that of other characters and settings that feel overdetermined by history. One such setting is the Lucky Leaf casino, which exists in contrast with the farming community in Madagascar. Boubacar leaves Mauritania with plans to work at the Lucky Leaf, itself a layered recapitulation of the southern plantation. The Lucky Leaf, if by title only, connects gambling with agriculture, suggesting that the plantation and the craps table are both places where one could get rich quickly. Rather than insisting on the primacy of

agrarian decline narratives for the region, which starkly contrast southern farming with American capitalism, the novel locates similarities between the agriculture communities of Madagascar and the hypercapitalism of the Lucky Leaf casino.

The two farmers central to the novel are Dean Fondren, a small-time farmer who owns the land that was once a part of the Abide plantation, and Aubrey Ellerbee, the owner of a large corporate farm that trades on the S&P. Dean's farm exists somewhere between the yeoman model put forth by the Agrarians and the multi-million dollar operation that Aubrey runs, replete with an officially undocumented Honduran work force. Dean often insists on contrasting his yeoman capitalism with the Lucky Leaf's casino capitalism, but a close reading finds inconsistencies in the story Dean tells himself about himself. He buys farmland in an attempt to carry his family's patriarchal legacy, the only logical move for a man in his position. Dean recalls taking out a series of bank loans to keep his farm going. After returning home with his wife, Alexis, after one such trip to the bank, Alexis gazes over their land saying "I never thought I would die here. ... Where we will spend eternity, I guess" (Shearer 105). Dean retorts, "in exasperation," "Well, did you have some other place in mind?" (105). To Dean, farming offers an ideal root, a sense of place tied to Agrarian ethics. Farming is, to Dean, "the best and most sensitive of vocations."⁶⁴ His attachment to farming, then, arises out of a melancholic attachment to a South that he believes has disappeared under pressure from national and global modernities.

⁶⁴ This line appears in the Agrarians' "Statement of Principles": "The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers" (xlvi). The industrialized farm of the twentieth century surely fails this latter goal, but one might also point out, as J. Adam Johns does, that the plantation era South connected "automatism with racial oppression," turning people into machines via slavery (158). 'Workers' seems like a particularly troubling word there in light of the power dynamics at play in the plantation.

The novel contrasts Dean's melancholic, neo-Agrarian politics with the Lucky Leaf's reproduced, branded southernness. For instance, when Dean first sets foot in the Lucky Leaf casino, his "heart felt violated" as he remembers that the casino stands on "what once had been Israel Abide's main cotton field" and was now "covered in asphalt" (181). Thus, the Lucky Leaf not only signifies on the plantation as an ur-site of identity formation in the South, but also it grows out of the same soil. Dean's description once he walks in the door further establishes the confluences between the plantation and the casino. He thinks to himself that he should "Burn it down" in an act of protest as he looks over the "accouterments of legalized theft" such as the "mindless murals of the old moss-draped *trompe l'oeil* plantations on the walls," but he feels the eyes of the "uniformed overseers" all over the casino (183). At the risk of subtlety, Dean even thinks to himself, "Mississippi had not seen such tasteless excess since before the Civil War. Everybody knew the sad outcome of *that*. It was a bad sign, when people seemed to have more money at their disposal than common sense" (181).

As if the narrative did not take enough pains to demonstrate the connection between the plantation and the modern casino's forced perspective, the casino's "muscled overseers" descend on Dean when he tries to pull a friend out of the Lucky Leaf: "They wanted him gone from there. They made their presence known, and stood silently while the manager pulled something out of his pocket. He held out pseudo-money, something resembling old plantation scrip" (185). Even the Lucky Leaf's money furthers the plantation fetish the casino packages for its customers. These connections are made so explicit that they cannot be lost on Dean or, in all likelihood, the reader. We must wonder, however, whether the text requires us to read the connections between the Lucky Leaf and the antebellum South

melancholically—as only an artificial transformation of nostalgia into capital in the twenty-first century. While few scholars have published on *The Celestial Jukebox*, their work has assumed only an adversarial relationship between the farming community (and Madagascar more generally) and the Lucky Leaf casino. Anderson writes that the casino and Futuristics firm “threaten to disrupt the fabric of the region” (208). Bone discusses the Lucky Leaf’s historical resonances, noting that the novel’s “casino capitalism” brands and sells plantation nostalgia, a reconstruction that he and others rightly find troubling (“African Immigration” 71).⁶⁵ To be sure, the casino cashes in on melancholic nostalgia of its customers.

Without defending the casino capitalism of the Lucky Leaf, which itself thrives on abstract gain and loss, we might read the novel’s comparison between the Lucky Leaf and the farming communities against the grain. First of all, it is important that Dean purchased his farm through a Memphis real estate company—likely the very same company that procured part of the Abide plantation for the Lucky Leaf—when he purchased “the tract of land on which the old Abide house” stands (Shearer 14). If Dean situates the casino as both an alternative to the farming economy he finds appealing and an extension of the “tasteless excess” of the plantation South, surely his own property cannot be entirely divorced from such histories.

More importantly, the Lucky Leaf’s place in the Madagascar economy is more complex than Dean recognizes. If read through characters less concerned with southern nostalgia than Dean, such as Boubacar and the many other Mauritanian immigrants working

⁶⁵ Tara McPherson argues that Aaron Spelling’s soap opera, *Savannah*, “illustrates both the complex interweavings of the local and the global and the ways in which a region’s symbolic boundaries are not necessarily dependent on its physical contours,” citing the internationally financed “casino riverboats that now package local hospitality for global tourists” (*Reconstructing Dixie* 13). McPherson’s point, as I take it, is that concepts like hospitality and charm are financially lucrative but, ultimately, cover up much of the South they’re used to describe.

at the casino, one notices the Lucky Leaf's role in Madagascar's *present* economy. Its functions, at least partially, outside the push and pull between southern loss and American capitalism with which we are all so familiar. The Lucky Leaf represents an alternative to real slavery for Boubacar even while it recuperates the aesthetics of the plantation. Its packaging of melancholic attachments might either nauseate or intoxicate possible customers, but either way that understanding of the Lucky Leaf relies on a relatively privileged geopolitical position.

Even if we read the Lucky Leaf as capitalizing upon the melancholic attachments of its customers—in this case, the aesthetics of the plantation recast the casino as a site of capitalist opportunity at the expense of the violent reality those aesthetics accompanied, much to the relief of the consumers of those aesthetics—then we can still find contradictions in such a reading by examining Aubrey's position as a farmer. Aubrey remarks that he cannot convince African immigrants to work in his fields: "Can't get 'em ... They all want to wear them tuxedos over at the casino. ... Africans is good workers, but you don't catch them in the fields or on the side of the highway, no sir. They over in the Lucky Leaf for the air-conditioning" (35). Many in Aubrey's workforce are illegal Hondurans "who toiled in the fields" for their scant wages and "had to sleep wherever they fell" (35). Dean echoes this sentiment, saying the Honduran workers "were the hardest [he] had ever seen" while noting that they "had nowhere" to live: "So they lived anywhere they could fall at night. Some were bivouacked in the old empty church. He'd heard rumors of work camps so far back from the river roads that nobody knew what went on there, and nobody had the nerve to ask" (102-3).⁶⁶ Perhaps the African immigrants know slavery when they see it. The Lucky Leaf's

⁶⁶ The subject of migrant workforces from Central and South America has been a popular topic of investigation in recent years. Raymond A. Mohl notes that Hispanic migration to the South has even outpaced Hispanic

aesthetic problems seem preferable to the material conditions of working for Aubrey. At the very least, the Lucky Leaf does offer some measure of economic freedom for its immigrant population to which they might not otherwise have access; Boubacar's remark about his family's dependence on money earned in the casino is evidence of that fact.

So while the Lucky Leaf operates partially as a neo-plantation, it also provides a preferable alternative to laboring in Aubrey's fields. Furthermore, even as the casinos seem to represent the industrialism that the Agrarians condemn, the logic of farming and gambling are demonstrably similar for Aubrey. The casino is a site of capitalism-gone-wild. It is placed alongside a hospital and nursing home to paralyze the old and drain them of their value before their bodies are processed. The novel extends the contrast between the abstracted, alienating capitalist exchange the casino enables—money for money—and that of farming, often through the effect the Lucky Leaf has on the farmers in Madagascar. Most notably, Dean and Angus sense that the casinos are slowly ruining Aubrey, who suffers from a gambling addiction. Angus notes: "It wasn't the Hondurans that would break Aubrey, it was the casino, or the loneliness that drove him to spend his nights over there" (Shearer 36). The Lucky Leaf casino slowly drains Aubrey, taking his New Holland tractor to make up for the "several hundred thousand[s]" of dollars he owed (199). Not only do the casinos cripple him financially, but they also cripple his ability to farm.

migration to the nation as a whole. While the entire Hispanic population in America grew by 61.2 percent in the 1990s, the Hispanic population grew by as much as 394 percent in North Carolina and a still staggering 147 percent in Mississippi (36-38). Sandy Smith-Nonini explores legal migrant workers who enter the U.S. through the H2A guestworker program, writing that the program "imports about 40,000 Mexican workers to the United States each growing season" (63). Steve Striffler, on the other hand, points out that agribusinesses have largely either mechanized their labor or moved to transnational labor, much of which is composed of illegal migrants who hold no political voice and are both homogenized and economically exploited: "When [a man interviewed] looks around a cafeteria filled with people from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Vietnam, Laos, and the Marshall Islands and says that we are all Mexicans, he is making a statement about class. ... 'Mexican' does not simply mean 'worker'—any kind of worker—but one who is doing what is socially defined as the worst kind of work" (163-164).

But while the novel might seem to emphasize the conflict between the worlds of farming and gambling time and time again through Aubrey's experience at the Lucky Leaf and through the gambling company's attempts to buy the land out from under many of the landowners in the area, it also suggests that all farmers—a category that would apply to the yeoman farmer working toward the Agrarian proprietary ideal—are gambling.⁶⁷ Aubrey explains this concept to Angus early in the novel: “Hell, I’m already gambling everything I got, every day. I gamble that the rain will come. I gamble that the sun will shine. I could lose it all, kapow, just like that” (37). As if the Agrarian notion of the proprietary ideal was not vexed enough by the historical fact that yeoman farming did not succeed in the South—and, of course, that successful farms operate squarely within the capitalist system the Agrarians critiqued—*The Celestial Jukebox* seems to suggest that farming was always already a gamble that alienated the farmer from a clear understanding of gain and loss. Aubrey's gambling at the Lucky Leaf manifests his melancholia. He learns to farm from Dean, a traditionalist following an Agrarian legacy. While the casinos enable Aubrey's resulting paralysis, it has already been put into motion by the abstraction he faces every day as a farmer. As Angus points out, it is “the loneliness that drove [Aubrey] to spend his nights [at the Lucky Leaf]” that is to blame for his ruin (36). What Angus calls “loneliness” is better understood as melancholic emptiness, and it is a function of his attachment to farming.

Importantly, Aubrey's attachment to farming mimics Dean's, who taught Aubrey how to farm when he was a young boy. Dean remembers finding Aubrey burying his father, a casualty of the Vietnam War, in a field outside Celestial Grocery. Dean commits “treason” by bringing the driver of the Ibrahim Brothers hearse, a black man, a cup of coffee and

⁶⁷ Bone defines the proprietary ideal as “a rural, self-sufficient ... farm, operating largely outside the cash nexus” (5).

offering to help dig what a man in the store casually calls a “nigger grave” (190, 189). Dean rationalizes that helping Aubrey is acceptable because he “gave his life for America,” but the narrator notes that Dean would only later see that Aubrey’s father, Ray-ray, had not fought out of some sense of national pride, but “because it was the only way at the moment that America would give him the money to put food on his family’s table” (191). Dean’s seemingly progressive act—stepping outside the boundaries of southern race relations that his peers cling to—is undercut by his exceptionalist calculus that places national pride ahead of segregation without questioning the ideologies of either.

Dean’s incremental progress is also on display when he teaches Aubrey how to farm. After he finds Aubrey running away to Memphis to escape a beating from his mother, Dean feels his own whiteness, realizing that Aubrey would have “no other choice but to obey an older white man” if he told him to turn around (192). But he looks for Gramscian consent: “Dean wanted the boy to *choose* to go back” (192, my emphasis). Antonio Gramsci calls this consent “spontaneous,” noting that “the prestige ... which the dominant group enjoys because of its position” in the hegemonic order causes consent by “the great masses” looking for access to cultural prestige (Gramsci 12). Crucially for Dean, Aubrey concedes, working while attending school: “The hook set. The boy completed a year of school with almost perfect attendance, and Dean tilled over a half-acre for the boy to grow vegetables for his family. He explained the piece of paper to him: it meant that his mother could not sell it, nor could her boyfriends sell it. The land was Aubrey’s to keep until he was an old man” (197). Dean’s attachment to southern agrarian ethics activates this ideology transfer. That is, in an attempt to preserve a melancholic idea of southern community that Dean finds appealing, he requires Aubrey to willingly take up the occupation that is a central tenet of that community.

To preserve the South that Dean is attached to, Aubrey must also preserve Dean's melancholic affect.

And does he ever. Dean turns the young Aubrey into a yeoman farmer by giving him land to use for subsistence rather than profit, but Aubrey's green thumb leads to great profits as he grows into a corporate farmer. His original half-acre plot quickly eclipses Dean's while the "sons of white farmers ... left for Memphis desk jobs," consenting to more recent pressures (198). Aubrey willingly and completely buys into Dean's neo-Agrarian mythologies, but Aubrey's fate shows the yeoman farm to be untenable in modernity. After Aubrey's wife dies in her forties, Aubrey "came unmoored" and sought relief in the casinos, which even Dean seems to recognize as an extension of Aubrey's willingness to gamble on his agribusiness:

Each night he lay down to sleep having wagered every dime he owned on the next day, on the wayward variables of rainfall, the fluctuations of government subsidies, plus the migratory flights of Hondurans. It was on one such night that he first went to the casino. ... That was several hundred thousand dollars ago. When he got too nervous about it all at night, when the debts cuddled too close for comfort, he'd get up out of bed and get on the Internet and search for himself, look himself up on the NASDAQ as if to reassure himself he'd not yet been buried alive. (199)

Aubrey's gambling is freely transferrable from his business, which is publicly traded and subject to myriad fluctuations, to the Lucky Leaf. He's gambling on futures that he cannot predict. Aubrey's future was sealed by Dean, who seems to feel some vague regret, or at least delayed understanding, about pushing his ideologies onto Aubrey. For Aubrey, however, the melancholy worlds of his family, farm, and gambling collapse on top of one another. His life presents outward manifestations of the melancholia that underpins Dean's ideological southernness.

Reading Aubrey's farming and gambling through Dean's neo-Agrarian logic might situate Aubrey's predicament as a failure to understand farming. After all, he was handed a yeoman ideal and transformed it into a cash cow. But this logic of decline reifies the boundaries between agrarian economies and capitalist economies when in fact the novel insists that those worlds are bound to one another.⁶⁸ While Dean thinks about Aubrey as a failure—a cause lost to money and the Lucky Leaf—he spends much of the novel looking for something to be nostalgic about. He has no interest in selling his land to the aptly named “Futurisitics,” the Memphis business trying to buy most of the land in Madagascar (105). In fact, Dean tosses the letter under his tractor's harrow in a symbolic act of defiance; Dean plans to plow over the future. Given the state of Madagascar, Dean's plan is no plan at all. And Dean is not alone. Many of the novel's seemingly disconnected but ultimately unifying stories feature characters placed into relationships like the one between Dean and Aubrey, in which one character attempts to teach the other the old ways without success. While Ariadne teaches Marie how to understand and make use of loss, Dean's relationship with Aubrey is predicated on the latter consenting to an abstract, melancholic attachment to farming that neither character properly understands.

These conflicts often feel generational. Another such relationship is between Raine Semmes, a teacher in a failing marriage, and her son, Chance. The conflict between Raine and Chance turns on another southern export: music. Raine's tastes vary, from Slim Harpo to Bob Dylan to Laurie Anderson, but she notices Chance grimace “at the indignity of being

⁶⁸ Of course, there's evidence that the similarities between southern farming economies and capitalist economies is not limited to the present. Walter Johnson argues, in fact, that global cotton markets and imperial aspirations were the driving force behind Confederate secession, writing that even non-slave-owning, white southerners should not be thought of as “primitive rebels fighting for safety-first agriculture, yeoman-style republicanism, and a way back to a time before capitalism, if such a time could even be imagined by a white man in the Mississippi Valley” (56).

forced to listen to any music by anyone old enough to be his mother” (67). Chance opts for heavy metal and hip hop; he styles his hair into spikes that Raine calls “a toupee made of spiny sea urchins”; his shoes are “*shitkickers* ... vaguely reminiscent of grainy old photos of secret police in totalitarian states” (67). In short, Chance responds violently to Raine’s nostalgia. Chance takes guitar lessons and even shared Raine’s enthusiasm for blues; however, he “stopped playing it on the same afternoon his mother praised him for it” (52). Raine’s attempt to hold onto this earlier version of Chance seems particularly allegorical, given her aesthetic tastes, after Chance reminds his mother that he remembers “when you loved me for who I am and not for what I used to be” (241). Indeed, Raine is enamored by what used to be. Her idealized version of Chance is a young boy who listens to blues music; she calls his adolescent musical tastes “ugly”⁶⁹ (74), she feels “shame and embarrassment” about his appearance (67), and she finds him smiling “like a satiated porn star” while playing a violent video game. She sees him and utters the phrase: “violence [is] the new pornography” (79).

Raine’s old-fashioned sensibilities often contrast with Chance’s rebellion a la mode.⁷⁰ However, both enjoy the symptoms of melancholia through music. Delta Blues becomes a litmus test. For Raine, Blues is an anti-modern, authentic, southern art form. When Raine’s

⁶⁹ One has to read Raine’s choice of words here with suspicion. As Monica Miller points out in her discussion of the Welty archive, so-called ugly things “don’t fit our expectations” (2) and often signal “a challenge to idealized notions of ... virtue” often connected to physical beauty (Miller 2). Chance’s music and aesthetic accouterments are ugly to Raine precisely because they represent a challenge to a tradition that she finds comforting.

⁷⁰ Smith describes both Baby Boomer rebellion and Generation X rebellion as different sides of the same coin. What is deemed transgressive (read: hip) by the former generation must itself be subverted by the latter, producing a cyclical ethos of compensatory transgression that Smith himself connects to melancholia: “Everybody feels desire because of some kind of narcissistic lack; the problem with the melancholic is that she or he tries to fill that void (and winds up circling around it) by treating it not as a constitutive lack, but as a prior wholeness that has been lost, and, on top of that, fails to grasp the object-cause for which that particular lost loved object was selected by the melancholic” (*Purple America* 37). In Smith’s model, both types of rebellion aspire to recover a whole object that never was, forcing to the surface the “enjoyment of their symptom” as the reason for its presence (*Purple America* xi).

marriage fails, she connects with a man who fixes jukeboxes in his spare time. Importantly, the jukebox man, who is never named, works in risk management for the very company, Futuristics, which carves up land in Madagascar, building casinos on top of old plantations. Fixing jukeboxes is his penance to the southern real; the jukebox man wants to preserve arcana from a space that, in his day job, he sells to the highest bidder. For Chance, Blues is an approved tradition. He seems at least partially aware of the mystification that makes Delta Blues an appealing object for Raine's desire. That is, for Chance, knowing about Blues offers what Smith calls subcultural capital, a term borrowed from Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (1995).⁷¹ Chance's understanding and manipulation of subcultural capital is perhaps never clearer than it is in the case of the National Steel guitar, an object that has been passed down from his great-grandfather, to his mother, to him. Before the guitar is stolen while it sits in the back seat of a car, Chance thinks he "did not particularly enjoy ownership of the guitar" because of its "unwieldy heaviness" (Shearer 52).⁷² As a material object, Chance finds the National Steel nearly useless. However, he knows that it is "always useful for attracting a certain kind of girl," thinking about it as "more of a retro fashion accessory than an instrument" and fantasizing about his plan to someday "raise the National Steel over his head and smash it downward" listening to "the orgasmic dissonance it would create" (52). The National Steel is a part of Chance's retro brand that he imagines destroying in an act of sexual violence. The guitar proves convincing. As Chance sits, plucking chords from a Slipknot song in Memphis, a young couple stops him, asking where they might hear some

⁷¹ To Thornton, subcultural capital works much in the same way as cultural capital—the objects of high culture (books, paintings, etc.) have been replaced with low art objects (trendy haircuts, collected vinyls, etc.).

⁷² Somewhat ironically, the guitar is stolen and pawned by a drug-addicted son of a famous Blues artist in the novel. The young man, Rashad, "had no respect for musical instruments," seeing them as objects that could help him settle debts (60). The difference between the way Chance and Raine think about the National Steel and the way Rashad does should be instructive. It highlights the artificiality of the National Steel's imagined value, which is channeled through its ability to mark one as authentically retro, while at the same time demonstrating that value to exist firmly within a capitalist marketplace.

“Real blues” (53). Unlike Ariadne and Marie, both of whom use the meaning of old objects to make new objects in the present, Chance simply relies on the nostalgic import of the National Steel guitar to feel hip. Fantasizing about destroying the guitar, then, is an act of destructive defiance that nonetheless fails to change the terms that establish its value.

Conversely, Raine appears less conscious of the National Steel guitar’s signification to her. As she looks for it, unaware it has been stolen, she recalls that she’d been told it was a collector’s item before claiming it when she left home for college. She remembers the faux-alligator case, which kept the guitar as well as an “old ad her grandfather had clipped from a 1937 movie magazine” (82). The ad was for sheet music that would teach guitarists to “PLAY THE HAWAIIAN GUITAR JUST LIKE THE HAWAIIANS” (82), which Raine remembers as a marketing “craze” (83). Raine thinks about the guitar and sheet music nostalgically, thinking “[s]he wanted to see these old things again” (83). Her object of desire is a guitar kept in a case made of *artificial* leather, a case that also contains sheet music meant to teach guitarists how to play *real* Hawaiian music—a concept that commodifies another so-called authenticity. After searching for the guitar and not finding it, Raine wonders where it and “all the old Bob Dylan records” had gone (83). It’s no surprise that Raine’s objects of desire all romanticize bygone times; through Raine’s own praxis, romanticizing the past is an unceasing, repetitive, melancholic act.

The National Steel guitar may produce a nostalgic twang in the hands of Raine or Chance, but it looks and sounds different to Boubacar. The first time Boubacar sees the National Steel, he looks on in awe as it hangs in a pawnshop. He calls it “a cinema spaceship with strings,” comparing the guitar to “a dream someone had had of the future” and thinking “[i]t was the most beautiful thing he had seen in all America” (50). For Boubacar, the

National Steel is neither a retro fashion accessory nor an authentic relic from a simpler time; instead, the National Steel is of the past and the future, lifted out of the formula that allows it to function as an object of nostalgic desire for Raine and, to a lesser extent, Chance.

Importantly, the National Steel seems to offer Boubacar a future. He thinks, without realizing the way such thoughts contrast with Chance's, "[h]e would never smash the silver guitar, if Allah blessed him enough to own it"; "[h]e would never part with it" (51). The possibility of owning the guitar activates Boubacar's memory of a song by The Louvin Brothers that he heard on the Celestial Grocery's jukebox. The line is a question—"Are you ready for the great atomic power?" (51). Given that Boubacar thinks that his "old ancestors [are] refraining from comment," the National Steel seems to offer Boubacar a new path (51). The Louvin Brothers, a mid-twentieth century gospel duo, are appropriated into Boubacar's sense of his own future freedom. For the reader, however, the song (and others like it⁷³) foreshadows the events of September 11 that we know loom just out of sight.⁷⁴

Boubacar's vision is unique within the novel, and his understanding of the National Steel guitar illustrates that vision quite clearly. Boubacar eventually obtains the National Steel, but not before it moves around quite a bit more. Angus buys the National Steel for a woman he's trying to impress, a Honduran named Consuela who lives within the Honduran community and briefly works at the Celestial Grocery, but she leaves it by a dumpster in an act of defiance, "a statement she was making to him about money" that she did not need (206). The guitar is hauled away with the garbage, which is later picked through by Bebe Marie Abide, an old woman who makes her living crafting birdhouses out of recycled books and beer caps. She in turn sells the guitar in a pawnshop in Clarksdale for "enough money to

⁷³ Wanda Jackson's 1957 hit "Fujiyama Mama" also plays on the Celestial's jukebox, contributing to the gathering sense of destruction that the novel's concluding chapters confirms.

⁷⁴ In fact, the chapter in which 9/11 occurs is titled "The Great Atomic Power."

feed her for two weeks” (228). As fate would have it, Boubacar finds it on the market once more when he travels to a Clarksdale blues club. He meets a musician, Cornelius, who, after learning that Boubacar wants to buy the National Steel, gets him a job washing dishes in the club’s kitchen. The job nets Boubacar fifty dollars a night, but Cornelius surprises Boubacar by giving him the guitar, only making him promise to “pay him back with seven songs” (262). While the novel situates the guitar within capitalist exchange—it’s bought or sold at least four times—it only stops moving when it is procured through labor rather than money. The National Steel’s abstract overdetermination makes it too heavy for Raine and Chance. Its capitalist value makes it impossible for either Consuela to accept or Bebe Marie Abide to keep. Boubacar, however, keeps hold of the National Steel, pulling from hybrid sources ranging from his father’s cassette tapes, which contain “the entire musical history of Africa” (Shearer 18), to “the live broadcasts from the churches in Clarksdale or the DJ’s spinning gospel tunes” (291). Rather than simply pressing play and mimicking his father’s tapes, which he carries with talismanic significance all the way from Mauritania, Boubacar pulls inspiration from any available source he can find in Madagascar. It is Boubacar’s willingness to build something new from his heritage that puts him in league with Ariadne and Marie: all characters who find pliability in objects instead of being crushed under their metaphysical weight. Narrating the movement of the National Steel guitar and allowing it to remain in Boubacar’s hands allows Shearer to illustrate the potential he has to relate to objects with flexibility rather than destructive anger or melancholic nostalgia embodied by Chance and Raine, respectively. Shearer inscribes this potential in the relationship between the object of desire and the ideal subject, who allows space for the object’s meaning to shift without bemoaning that evolution.

Read through Boubacar's experience as an immigrant, the South is what Homi Bhabha terms a "Third Space," or an area that allows "the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process," and thus "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past" (54). His willingness to listen to seemingly conflicting musical voices, particularly those he hears in church, demonstrates the potential of his hybrid approach to learning and playing music. The Wastrel, Boubacar's caregiver, is mired in musical dialectic between the authentic Wolof drums of Mauritania and the music he hears and sees in Mississippi. The Wastrel specifically targets southern icons Johnny Cash and B.B. King, who Boubacar has said he likes, for commodifying loss: "To L'Amercain, everything is commodity. Even his misery. His misery is his music. He sell shares of it in the stock market. ... For a price, everyone can sing along to the same misery. 'Ooh, baby, baby, I am dying. I am drowning in the sea of myself'" (Shearer 117). The Wastrel all but calls American music the opiate of the masses, showing Boubacar's willingness to exist in this third space to be one among possibly more oppositional alternatives.⁷⁵ However, the Wastrel also identifies the economies of melancholic desire that govern the production and reception of art in both the nation and the region.

If the novel's conclusion is any indication, the Wastrel's opposition to American music is a symptom of a doggedly prevailing discourse between West and East. *The Celestial Jukebox* ends with the trauma of 9/11, an event that immediately causes ripples in Madagascar. When Boubacar arrives at the Cloud Nine Club for work, he finds its employees watching the events unfold on television. Another employee of the club, Sarah, tells

⁷⁵ Bone points out that the Wastrel critiques all forms of American music much in the way that Adorno critiques popular culture (73).

Boubacar to “go get with your own people,” and Boubacar senses that “[s]he was afraid of him” (Shearer 412). Thus, 9/11 ushers Boubacar into a seemingly fixed position—the Muslim in post-9/11 America—that contradicts his tendency toward postmodern hybridity, itself an attempt to revolutionize the very idea of a fixed position. Yet the end of the novel seems to confirm that these fixed positions hold sway, perhaps more so in moments of political crisis. Worried that he, like other Muslims in the community, will be collected for questioning in the days after 9/11, Boubacar decides to turn himself in to an immigration judge, thinking “[h]e knew he would never be a child again” (414). Boubacar can no longer inhabit the space that offers him a hybridized future others cannot seem to access.

Yet, even in this moment of crisis, the novel presses at Boubacar’s newly established positionality. As Dean and Angus drive him to the immigration judge in Memphis, Angus states that there “[a]in’t no such thing as original Americans ... We all come off the same boat,” and Dean answers him, saying, “I hear you” (413-414). This final push and pull between postmodern freedom and political fixity ends with Boubacar failing to meet with the judge, opting to play his hybrid music on the streets of Memphis before taking a bus to meet Cornelius in New York. Boubacar intends to make a living as a musician, and we must investigate that future carefully. After 9/11, music, too, takes on a different valence to Boubacar. He begins to align music with loss, thinking any “noise translates to music through the filter of sorrow” (415). Where Boubacar once saw possibility, he now sees only melancholic repetition.

Read through this turn, the novel becomes an archive of loss. If Boubacar’s ability to inherit the National Steel successfully suggests that his position as an outsider allows him to keep hold of it, then his reluctant acceptance of his position in this long southern chain

incorporates him into a familiar southern history. In his last day in Memphis, Boubacar sits in W. C. Handy Park playing the hits for a gathering crowd. As chance would have it, Raine happens to see him playing her family heirloom, telling her daughter that the National Steel “belongs to him now” (420). In other words, the novel leaves Boubacar in a place similar to where it found him: unaware of his recursive signification, an African musician singing songs about lost opportunities in the South and beyond.

Boubacar’s experience in the globalized twenty-first century represents his, as well as the novel’s, attempt to, as Smith advocates, “muddle through a very complex present” (*Purple America* 49). Smith’s chosen metaphor for the turn away from the false choice of either a utopian future or a reactionary present is astonishingly relevant to Shearer’s novel:

Under such circumstances, if scholars, in theory or practice, end up circling either the *objet petit a* of a radical futurity or that of a reactionary pastness, the critic ... has a singular responsibility, in Lacan’s terms, to “traverse the fantasy.” At such a point, that is, the critic needs to brace himself or herself for the inevitable (and, for Žižek, inevitably “catastrophic” [*Plague* 29]) accusations of recklessness, even madness—and shoot the jukebox. (49)

Responding to Judith Butler’s claim that a group erected in the wake of a loss, real or imagined, “cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community” (468), Smith cites Mark Chesnutt’s hit, “Bubba Shot the Jukebox,” a song that shows how crazy Bubba must be for shooting “a sad song that made him cry” (Chesnutt) and thus disrupting “this community’s ‘reality’ by properly disposing of the jukebox” (*Purple America* 42). In advocating Bubba’s proverbial shot, Smith attempts to throw a wrench into the critical machinery that requires us to play (and listen to) the same hits over and over.

It might appear that a novel with a literal jukebox at its core circulates that very desire. *The Celestial Jukebox* does, in fact, play the proverbial hits. Boubacar’s recursive positioning, from his journey across the Atlantic to his eventual disappearance into the ether

as a blues musician, might be read as a type of nostalgia, a longing for southern stories we know. But these concepts are a contested feature of the novel rather than a symptom of these sorts of attachments. The novel principally interrogates a culture of narcissistic desire to hold onto the hits—to save the jukebox—in a present that makes such a position an anachronistic indulgence, as Smith says, romantically (*Purple America* 48). History occasionally appears like a romanticized temporal other in *The Celestial Jukebox*, but the novel’s complex global networks at work in the present offer sharp alterations to the romance of history for which southern literature is famous.

However, in another sense, the Celestial Grocery’s jukebox *is already shot*. It doesn’t work, playing randomly chosen songs rather than the song its user selects. Angus keeps money in a cup next to his jukebox to keep customers from spending their money on a jukebox that plays its own hits. Even at the novel’s close, when Angus thinks a passing trucker has finally fixed the jukebox, it eerily plays The Louvin Brothers’s song, “Satan is Real,” and Angus says, “That ain’t the one I wanted” (Shearer 409). As in Smith’s metaphor, the Celestial’s jukebox operates as a relic, a marker of history that we can use to replay the past in the present. But unlike Smith’s dichotomy between either a utopian future or reactionary past based on the lost loved object of southern history, the Celestial’s jukebox insists that the old hits we know are still operating on us in the present even after we shoot the jukebox. In other words, destroying the jukebox makes sense, but *The Celestial Jukebox* suggests that it wouldn’t quite work.

We cannot mistake the persistent jukebox for a melancholic narcissism. Smith would fear such a device is psychically untenable and try to destroy it, and Angus thinks it’s not doing its job and wants to repair it; either way, the jukebox plays songs whether we want to

hear them or not. These allegorical consequences of the jukebox's persistence tell us something about its usefulness in the post-South. Histories cannot be romanticized without carrying along unintentional baggage and leaving subjects spinning the same unsatisfying tunes, a concept the novel investigates with Dean, Aubrey, Raine, and Chance. Melancholic attachments permeate the novel through these characters, but these attachments also clash with other values the novel puts forth through Ariadne, Marie, and, most notably, Boubacar.

Boubacar's future depends on his ability to navigate post-9/11 America as an Islamic musician. But in *The Celestial Jukebox*, perhaps Shearer has created a postsouthern story in which at least one character's relationship to the present and the past defamiliarizes its own sense of history even as it suggests that histories do survive in the present. The undying jukebox, as I've suggested, demonstrates this perspective tellingly. With this perspective in mind, perhaps Shearer asks us to take from Boubacar a perspective that questions the gaze with which we use to read the twenty-first century South. By exposing the way the contemporary South can be seen as both tragically and hopefully (un)familiar, Shearer explores the possibility of forging a new regional sensibility that neither bemoans nor elides change. This new sensibility would be built on reassembly rather than destruction, on making old things new rather than throwing them away. As he exits the novel, resting at a bus stop in Memphis, Boubacar holds one of these found objects close and thinks about how to make it new:

He took the National Steel out of its case and put it under his head for a pillow. He lay with his ear to the nickel plating, his pulse warming the metal. It was not the first time that he could still hear the music that the day had somehow made part of his own pulse: Wolof drums and Jewish clarinet. He could hear the cars rushing in the streets, their lights strobing the walls, crossing the light that came all the way from the river bridge. It was pulse without sound, the movement of the lights. He listened closely to the black space within the National Steel guitar, instructed by the resonance of its

hollow core. He fell asleep, and his fingertips moved slightly, playing songs that had never yet been heard. (420)

The sounds of Boubacar's youth, the Wolof drums, mix with jazz standards, the blues sounds of Beale Street, the Mississippi River, and the talismanic secrets of the National Steel guitar. Certainly the moment is romantic. Importantly, no sound drowns the others out; they combine. The novel's last moment before returning to its frame and to Ariadne's thread offers Boubacar as a figure of the twenty-first century South with both optimistic hope—where might he go?—and realistic fear for his life in post-9/11 America. Crucially, Shearer avoids turning inward to retreat from the complexity of this final moment. While southern fiction is typified by fatalistic endings that turn inward, Shearer challenges that regressive impulse by anchoring her novel in Boubacar's potential. Rather than foreclosing the evolving global networks the novel has displayed all along, the final scene with Boubacar acknowledges that the era after September 11, 2001 will be made new by new networks that do not represent a clean break from the world Boubacar has occupied. Without knowing what will happen to Boubacar, we know that he cannot simply idealize the time when he was free to move about the nation and region largely unnoticed. It does not seem naïve to predict that Boubacar will use his time in Mississippi just as he did his time in Mauritania to craft a new way to position himself in his brave new world. This world is neither southern nor global, neither old nor entirely new; it is familiar and unfamiliar.

SECTION TWO THE NATION IN THE SOUTH

The writer finds himself bereft of a moral frame within which to develop his characters and work out his plots. There is no place to start, there are no standards by which people and actions can be judged: in a meaningless world there is no way to develop meaning. So the writer looks within himself and finds there only an equal emptiness.
Walter Sullivan / *Death by Melancholy* / 1972

This section shifts its focus away from the globalizing Souths of Brad Vice and Cynthia Shearer and explores novels by authors often read within the context of American literature generally rather than southern literature particularly.⁷⁶ Both Percival Everett and Colson Whitehead explore the South through national conceptions of identity that are, paradoxically, both essentialized and constantly fluctuating. First, I will examine Percival Everett's absurdist novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), which tells the story of a young boy named Not Sidney Poitier who looks very much like the actor his name specifically states he isn't. This novel uses literary strategies such as revision and parody to muddy questions about essential identity and selfhood, as well as comment on the foundations of the postsouthern novel and wider conceptions of postmodernity. In *John Henry Days* (2001), however, Colson Whitehead explores the recurring mediated versions of John Henry, a tall-tale railroad spike driver famous for racing a steam drill and winning before dropping dead. Where Everett uses Not Sidney's life to revise the characters played by Sidney Poitier, Whitehead's encyclopedic historiography explores how and why the national ideal embodied by John Henry—a laboring black body of the South that is subservient to national progress—

⁷⁶ In turning to national literature, I do not mean to suggest that the relationship between the nation and the region is more important to postsouthern literature than writing from the Global South, for instance. Recent critics have painstakingly and convincingly proven the South be always already implicated in global literature. In *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, for instance, Smith and Cohn argue that “[t]he very factors that make the South exceptional within the context of the United States thus make it acutely familiar within broader categories of Americanness and postcoloniality” (3). This chapter turns to national literature about the region to clarify the mental space the region continues to occupy in the nation *in spite of* shifting geopolitical affiliations that many critics have rightly explored.

has changed so little over time. In both cases, Everett and Whitehead write novels that move in and out of the South, exploring the nexus points between nationalism, race, and the place of the region in America from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Additionally, both writers use contemporary literary techniques to understand and critique melancholic conceptions of the South in the nation.

Both novels attempt to access the political urgency of social realism by unsettling history in favor of historiography, continuing in the long tradition of postmodernism that, as Linda Hutcheon influentially pointed out, “installs and then subverts ... the very concepts it challenges” (3).⁷⁷ Everett’s absurdist novel, for example, first critiques the constricting version of blackness put forth by Sidney Poitier films through parody and revision before turning those strategies on their head and identifying the melancholia inherent to postsouthern parody, which searches for an authentic reality underneath simulacra. Thus, the novel installs and subverts the prominent literary tropes of earlier postsouthern literature. Likewise, Whitehead dismantles the myth of the sacrificial black body operating through the tall tale of John Henry in an encyclopedic novel that repeatedly circles around the mythic figure, observing how and why the myth surfaces throughout the twentieth century.

Whitehead’s concordant historiography highlights the potential of the twenty-first century novel to understand and depart from the familiar stories, such as the story of John Henry at

⁷⁷ Hutcheon writes that postmodern art thrives in contradictions like these: “The result of this deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions is a contesting of what Lyotard ... calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit. This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical ‘facts’ out of brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience” (x). Hutcheon’s germinal statement about historiographic metafiction has been formative for the study of postmodern literature, and it draws necessary connective tissue between twenty-first century fiction and the high postmodernism of the mid-twentieth century. While I do not claim that *John Henry Days* resolves its contradictions, it does gesture toward a substantial thesis about the affective attachments that cling to myth and history. This chapter will explore that thesis in depth.

the novel's core. The two novels rely on different literary strategies to arrive at similar destinations: each finds potential in twenty-first century postsouthern literature to make sense of recursive, melancholic social narratives.

A feature of both projects is that history is inseparable from either broad cultural narratives or specific stories. While these novels generate dynamic stories grounded in their postmodern conceptions of history, critics in both postsouthern and postmodern literary criticism have espoused melancholic longing for the so-called real: true history has been lost amid these mediated narratives.⁷⁸ *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* makes plain the melancholy inherent to such positions by troubling the proverbial search for the real amid mediated fakes. The novel tells a story that about the mediation of all histories—including personal histories—by focusing Not Sidney's textually layered sense of himself. Not Sidney loses his mother at age seven and never meets his father, so he spends much of the novel on a quest to “discover” his origins, which his name at once points to and obscures (*Not Sidney* 43). His search, akin to that of varied southern characters from Walker Percy's Binx Bolling to Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952), follows an absurd formula: Not Sidney continually finds himself reliving uncanny echoes of Sidney Poitier films. Not Sidney's life

⁷⁸ The sentiments of foundational critics of the postsouthern novel, Simpson and Sullivan, place the postsouthern into dialogue with prevailing theories of postmodernity. Simpson argues that postwar southern writing would not recreate “[t]he epiphany of the southern literary artist,” which he deems an essential task of southern literature (269). He suggests that we live in a postsouthern America, then, because the search for southern order amid the “literary disorders” of postmodernity would be fruitless (268). Sullivan writes of postmodern southern writing in even more dire terms, claiming the South no longer offered a communal southern framework, a singular reality, from which writers could construct their own moral realities (Sullivan 123). For his part, Fredric Jameson writes that we live “in an age that has forgotten how to think historically,” instead favoring “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (Jameson ix, 18). His critique of postmodern notions of history might more accurately be described as a critique of period fetishism: borrowing the aesthetics of times past or revising specific histories using contemporary aesthetics engenders an artificial sense of rupture. This separation both privileges the present (these styles are old) and obfuscates the so-called real materiality of history (these styles are timeless). Jameson fears that thinking about history as an aesthetic to be revised and perhaps, revived, minimizes the reality of history, “leaving us with nothing but texts” (18). In other words, he arrives at the conclusion that the *real* narrative of history lies within our reach, and that the strategies of postmodernism make it more difficult to find.

takes on a Baudrillardian sort of precession: everything happening to him has already been represented in film.⁷⁹ In investigating the results of Not Sidney's search as well as the form it takes, I argue that the novel ventures into broad literary and critical conversations about postsouthern parody and revision to expose the melancholic drive that causes artists and critics to search for the real underneath mediated fakes.

Before beginning my analysis of Everett's novel, I will offer brief accounts of postsouthern parody and literary revision. Critics have often discussed postsouthern parody as a strategy used to subvert what Barbara Ladd calls the "high seriousness and self-conscious historicizing" of canonical Southern writers—Faulkner, specifically (*Resisting History* 55). If parody once organically grew out of "a Faulknerian anxiety of influence," I argue that it functions differently in Everett's novel (*Postsouthern Sense of Place* 43). By examining the way Everett's protagonist is a parody himself, I argue that the novel exposes the limitations of parody as a political mode for achieving a non-melancholic postsouthernism, what Katherine Henninger calls "a continuing southern project of resistance and renewal" that is "open to challenge and re-vision" in the present (181). Revision, in a formal literary sense, names a strategy through which one text or set of texts is directly reinterpreted by changing points of contact and conflict and resolving plots in alternative ways. Everett's parodic novel also fits the formal concerns of literary revision and occasions a reexamination of the films' conceptions of black selfhood in America and the South, critiquing both their contemporary politics and their cultural afterlife. Revision's disavowal,

⁷⁹ At the foundation of Jean Baudrillard's seminal postmodern text, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), is his claim that simulated versions of reality precede experience in postmodernity: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map" (1).

unlike parody's anxiety, arises out of a confident rejection of specific markers of selfhood; in the case of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, those markers of masculinity are tied to the first black lead actor white audiences found palatable.⁸⁰ Everett's revisions attempt to short-circuit the means and methods through which the white nation and region code narrative reality—particularly as that reality relates to black identities. In other words, like Vice's narrative play with the narrative reality of *Stars Fell on Alabama*, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* returns to the site of Sidney Poitier films to bury their narrative realities under parody and revision.

But the novel is also suspicious of its own approach. If revision arises out of an attempt to correct historical wrongs, remaking the past in an effort to recover something lost in the present, Everett's novel critiques that part of that desire that seeks lost origins underneath excessive cultural narrative. The novel troubles both parody and revision, exposing the melancholic underpinnings of both strategies. The implications of the novel's critique stretch beyond these strategies and over the postsouthern itself: if the postsouthern is supposed to clear a space for a more conscious engagement with history, the literary strategies employed by postsouthern fiction sometimes undermine those efforts by unconsciously employing melancholic modes. While Everett troubles the aesthetics of postsouthernism without necessarily pointing to alternative strategies for the contemporary novel, *John Henry Days* presents historiography as a strategy well suited to explore and understand alternatives to the contemporary nation. Whitehead's novel demonstrates what

⁸⁰ Aram Goudsouzian writes that Poitier's famous on-screen presence, his "cool boil" during moments of racial tension, "struck a delicate balance" by "revealing racial frustration, but tacitly assuring a predominantly white audience that blacks would eschew violence and preserve social order" (1). It's also worth noting, of course, that Sidney Poitier's status as an exemplary African American actor is complicated by the fact that he was born and grew up in the Bahamas—first in Cat Island and then Nassau. Goudsouzian writes that, in his later years, Poitier "yearned for the simplicity of his parents' life" on Cat Island, which was largely "a society free of racial hierarchy" (12, 13): "On Cat Island, skin color had little relationship to power. Unlike his American contemporaries, Sidney did not grow up mired in discrimination, forced to negotiate racial codes, or resigned to limited opportunities based on his skin color" (13).

Lauren Berlant calls a “desire to form,” or an investment in the potential of inhabiting generic forms in an effort to temporarily suspend the conditions of “habituated life” and enabling clear-headed optimism rather than unconscious melancholia (36). Like Everett, Whitehead troubles the position that the real understanding lies in the origin story of John Henry, which his novel renders without romance or nostalgia, and instead recognizes the primacy of the myth’s recurring representations. *John Henry Days* focuses on the re-mediations of John Henry to investigate the myth’s pliability: the story transcends a single time and fits into American history as a recurring, melancholic story that the contemporary postsouthern novel is uniquely qualified to unpack and understand. In step with these critiques, section two of *Postsouthern Melancholia* traces the formation of a new epoch that uses the strategies familiar to the postsouthern to decouple contemporary fiction of or about the South from melancholia. Articulating the relationship between postsouthern strategies and melancholic desires demonstrates that while parody and revision may fail as aesthetic strategies for avoiding influence or constructing historical correctives—tasks they have been charged with in the past—they succeed in helping us identify the economy of desire that has long governed the production and analysis of southern fiction.

CHAPTER 3
MELANCHOLIC REVISION IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S
I AM NOT SIDNEY POITIER

Before the opening lines of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Percival Everett places a disclaimer about the novel's many characters with contextual counterparts:

All characters depicted in this novel are completely fictitious, regardless of similarities to any extant parties and regardless of shared names. In fact, one might go as far as to say that any shared name is ample evidence that any fictitious character in this novel is NOT in any way a depiction of anyone living, dead, or imagined by anyone other than the author. This qualification applies, equally, to the character whose name is the same as the author's. (*Not Sidney disclaimer*)

As the disclaimer explains, many of Everett's characters other than Not Sidney share names with real people. Other notable characters include Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, Harry Belafonte, Elizabeth Taylor, Bill Cosby, and, as the disclaimer indicates, Percival Everett. In an interview, Everett (the book's actual author) describes two possible effects the author-as-character produces if readers "remember the name on the front of the book": "One is a chilling effect, where it will pull you out of the text. The other is antithetical to that. It brings the text into a circle, into perhaps a reality that you haven't imagined" (Everett interview). These effects go hand-in-hand. When pulled out of the novel, readers are asked to relate the text to the specific cultural figures it represents. So the dual effect of pulling readers out and imagining another space must be sequential. Readers first understand the limits of the text before beginning to grasp the lingering effects of all texts: fiction produces and delimits textual boundaries, showing at once the borders of a book and the recursive nature of narrative. Likewise, Everett's disclaimer establishes what these characters are not. They are not the people themselves, contextual bodies, but they can be read against and onto those bodies. Furthermore, this comparison between narrative reality and the real world, as Everett

himself points out, allows us to imagine the latter through the former, helping readers envision a world made new by the text.

While the characters themselves are often over-the-top versions of their real-world counterparts, calling the relationship between these characters and real people *parodic* can feel too vague—largely because parody has so frequently been used as a critical tool for reading postsouthern and postmodern fiction. Michael Kreyling first defines postsouthern parody as “the expression of a suspicion or conscious conviction that as humans we can make nothing but analyzable parts; wholes are figments of the imagination” (*Inventing* 148). Examining an assemblage of parts requires that we resist the idea of a complex whole that earlier New Critical perspectives assert. Instead, parody draws our attention to the contingent act of assembly—of people or ideas taken from their traditional context and placed somewhere else—thereby exposing the absurdity of wholeness. This work was at play in the artistic assemblage that was both a feature of the narrative design of *The Celestial Jukebox* and a significant part of the plot. But reassembling in the name of parody has been regarded as a method fraught with melancholic circularity and, alternatively, eschatological fear. Kreyling, for example, calls the “turn of southern literature into parody and postsouthernness ... an emergency of the highest seriousness to believers in the whole” and “a relief” to those who question the idea of wholeness, bringing to mind the melancholy of Sullivan and Simpson as they declare the end of real Southernness (148). Alternatively, Bone’s thorough investigation of parody, primarily in the work of Percy and Richard Ford, describes parody as a tool used to liberate authors from crumbling under the weight of Faulkner’s influence (43).

Ideally, then, parody clears narrative space for postsouthern fiction to tell about the South without requiring that writers peer over their shoulders. Bone’s entire discussion of

parody, in fact, turns on the ways postsouthern writers attempt to reconcile the way their texts are southern with the way they are contemporary. In the case of Ford's *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), a character gazes upon the "imponderable" Mississippi river and can think only of *The Sound and the Fury*'s Quentin Compson staring into Boston's Charles River before jumping to his death (qtd. in Bone 86). Ford's character, Newel, wades in and nearly drowns by accident in a farcical parody of Quentin's suicide. Bone reads the scene as an example of Ford's strategic demonstration that "the tropes of southern (literary) history and place legitimized and naturalized by 'the Faulkner-Quentin model' are *no longer tenable*" in the late twentieth century (86, my emphasis). The most we can say of Faulkner's Quentin is that he was (in a self-serious way that only he could) acting out the feeling of a historical moment, what Seth Moglen calls the "ultimate telos" of melancholic modernism (Moglen 37). The concept underpinning the critical rhetoric about postsouthern parody—that it marks a shift away from meaning or a decline of an essential South—covers over Quentin's performance of a specific type of melancholic southernness. As Romine points out, the so-called real South of the early twentieth century was an accumulation of these performances, which turned the South into "a noun that behaves like a verb"—a structure of doing, not being (*Real South* 11). In other words, the strategies that Bone finds parodied in Ford's novel have never been essentially southern.

In Everett's novel, in fact, we find that parodic attempts to interrogate essential components of identity are doomed from the start if, or perhaps because, they take the objects of their parody to be real things rather than facets of a historical imaginary. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* takes to task one particular narrative facet that has been associated with both

postsouthern and postmodern parody: the search for the real.⁸¹ The novel begins with Not Sidney explaining the circumstances of his early life from the vantage point of adulthood. The first paragraph introduces the central tension of the novel: Not Sidney Poitier seems to have a clear origin that others can recognize despite the fact that he does not know the details of his origin. The novel begins,

I am the ill-starred fruit of a hysterical pregnancy, and surprisingly, odd though I might be, I am not hysterical myself. I'm rather calm, in fact; some might say waveless. I am tall and dark and look for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier, something my poor disturbed and now deceased mother could not have known when I was born, when she named me Not Sidney Poitier. . . . At least this was the story told to me. (3)

Not Sidney remarks that his mother's pregnancy, which lasted "twenty-four months," was first regarded as hysterical because she was "famously odd, offbeat, curious to all who met her and famously very much without a partner" (3). Yet, Not Sidney is steady, calm, waveless—words that we might use to describe many of Sidney Poitier's on-screen personas. From his beginnings, Not Sidney is a contradiction: he doubly signifies a person his name says he is not, but his understood resemblances cause him to wonder whether he is Sidney Poitier's child. To "the best [he] can figure," his mother interrupted her hysterical pregnancy in month fourteen, when she "somehow managed to find and utilize the sexual organs of [his] father . . . who may or may not have been Sidney Poitier" (5). Nearly all of the specifics of his conception and birth appear here as seemingly open questions that Not Sidney's name forecloses. Sarah Mantilla Griffin reads Not Sidney's missing father using Lacan's concept of foreclosure, in which "a signifier is not repressed, but is rejected completely from the signifying field before one is aware of it" (20). Not Sidney's name performs this action,

⁸¹ The prevailing form postsouthern parody has taken, in fact, is "the search" for the once familiar tropes of southern order that was largely popularized by Walker Percy in novels like *The Moviegoer* (1961) and *The Last Gentleman* (1966) as well as by Richard Ford in *The Sportswriter* (1986).

signifying a possible origin in a simultaneous act of negation, creating what Griffin calls a “missing truth” (21).

Indeed, Not Sidney suffers from a missing origin. When his mother dies of a mysterious illness, she leaves Not Sidney entirely without those who could offer explanations. Before her death, however, his mother invests in Ted Turner’s then nascent Turner Communications Group before it expands exponentially, leaving the seven-year-old Not Sidney “*filthy* and insanely rich” (6). The investment also leads Turner to informally adopt Not Sidney, moving him from Los Angeles to Atlanta. Not Sidney’s movement into the South initiates many of the conflicts he spends the rest of the novel attempting to resolve. First, the move takes him away from the place he understands to be his home—an interesting variation on the way the South, rather than the West, has occupied a similar status in African-American fiction after Northern migration. Second, Not Sidney is the victim of a series of sexual assaults that lead him to the conclusion that he wants to drop out of high school and “light out for the territory” to “discover [him]self” (43). Everett’s novel uses postsouthern spaces to work through its own engagement with melancholia. For that reason, it figures the search for real origins hidden behind simulacra as a melancholic trope of early postsouthern fiction. That is, in Not Sidney’s search for his real origin, which is often further confused by his many misrecognitions in light of his name and appearance, he overlooks the fact that these misrecognitions are as much a part of the story of himself as would be any origin. Not Sidney’s origin would only offer another narrative that is no more satisfying or real than his overdetermined identity in the present, and the privileging of his origin narrative as somehow

more real or authentic relies on melancholic mental maneuvers that displace the present to recover the past.⁸²

The novel acknowledges that Not Sidney's search for himself has a proliferation of textual antecedents. In fact, as he embarks on his journey of self-discovery, he rhapsodizes: "I was, in life, to be a gambler, a risk taker, a swashbuckler, a knight. I accepted then and there, my place in this world. I was a fighter of windmills. I was a chaser of whales. I was Not Sidney Poitier" (*Not Sidney* 43). It is fitting that in a moment when Not Sidney attempts to tell the beginning of his own story he pulls images from the fantastical epic *Don Quixote* (1605) and the largely melancholic *Moby Dick* (1851), both texts in which the narrators are famously not to be trusted. These lines should reveal that he will not find satisfactory answers to his questions about himself outside of the imposition of narrative and also invite us to question his narrative reliability. The rest of the novel sheds light on the present consequences of searching for the elusive real believed to be sedimentary for the postsouthern. The novel highlights the melancholic absurdity of such a search as its unreliable figure moves through an absurdist plot. Not Sidney dreams of killing Hamish Bond, the plantation progenitor played famously by Clark Gable in the 1957 film *Band of Angels*, a film based on Robert Penn Warren's 1955 novel of the same name. He is later chained to a prisoner in rural Georgia remarking on the Caldwellian noses on the "pie face[s]" of country people, a scene all too similar to the film *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and reminding readers of the grotesque realism of Erskine Caldwell. Later still, the darkly complexioned Not Sidney visits his girlfriend's lighter complexioned family for

⁸² I do not dismiss the long, dynamic conversation among scholars of African American literature, in particular, about what Paul Gilroy calls "the tension between roots and routes" (*The Black Atlantic* 133). Rather, I want to read Everett's examination of such questions through the praxis of southern studies—particularly because the novel wanders in and through southern spaces as it explores the efficacy of parody and revision to think about such spaces in new ways.

Thanksgiving in Washington, D.C. The scene plays out similarly to that of Sidney Poitier's most famous film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967).

In each setting, the novel's parodic mode momentarily lightens the overdetermined identity of Not Sidney in a way not altogether different from the way Bone and others discuss postsouthern parody's usage more generally. Yet, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* demonstrates an acute awareness of how its parodic search ultimately fails to clear narrative spaces for unmediated selfhood. In fact, in the novel's final pages, Not Sidney understands his lack of definitive selfhood to be a direct result of his search. After being mistaken for Sidney Poitier his entire life, Not Sidney accepts an award for "Most Dignified Figure in American Culture" as *Sidney Poitier* at the Academy Awards in Los Angeles, stating

I came back to this place to find something, to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it. What I've discovered is that this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere. I have learned that my name is not my name. It seems you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself. My mother is buried not far from this auditorium, and there are no words on her headstone. As I glance out now, as I feel the weight of this trophy in my hands, as I stand like a specimen before these strangely unstrange faces, I know finally what should be written on that stone. It should say what mine will say: *I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY*. (234)

By the novel's conclusion, Not Sidney's absurd overdetermination renders him almost completely invisible. He knows less about his "whole self" at the end of his journey than he did at the start, when his identity was grounded in the circumstances of his mother's "hysterical pregnancy" (3). If Not Sidney's lived experiences should pull his identity out of narrative, his experiences instead prove that his life will signify in narratives he cannot avoid or control. Read allegorically, however, the constant tug of war between past representations and current notions of selfhood transforms the novel into a warning for postsouthern novels trading in parody. In other words, Not Sidney's central tension might be read as the central

tension of postsouthern fiction, as a failure to find narrative agency by negating one's predecessors through parody. If parodying old narratives represents the attempt to recover some *truer* narrative—in Not Sidney's case, some truer self—then these new narratives run the risk of remaining permanently tethered to the old and, eventually, losing their distinguishability. The end result is profoundly melancholic in the sense that a lost cultural ideal gets pathologically tethered to the self, eventually leading to a displacement of the ego: a suicidal act that Not Sidney Poitier's final speech displays. In foreclosing a tidy ending for Not Sidney, the novel seeks to understand and identify the melancholic drive that sealed its protagonist's fate. In such a way, Everett's text contributes to contemporary efforts to reveal the way earlier texts that embrace such a search further melancholic attachments through uncritical parody.

Literary revision shares some key attributes with parody. In both cases, writers return to earlier texts to, in part, directly define their own texts with or against earlier work. Texts can be classified as revisions if they complicate an assumed center through overt reinterpretation, pointing to absences in the texts they revise, and theorizing on the legacy of those texts in our present.⁸³ *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* troubles revision as a political strategy through which we can correct history. That is, examining the novel's Gordian knot helps us see the text struggling to conceive of the present outside of the dichotomy of either corrective

⁸³ An example of such a project is Alice Randall's 2001 novel *The Wind Done Gone*, which retells perhaps the most popular southern novel—Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936)—from a slave's perspective. For an analysis of the novel's goals and effects, see Thomas F. Haddox's "Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* and the Ludic in African American Historical Fiction," in which Haddox argues that the novel's reversal placates a desire to subvert the structures of the plantation but never escapes the machinations of desire, which he describes in melancholic terms: "Until we can again find ways to talk about common human endeavors and to ground these in an understanding of history instead of desire, we are *doomed to repeat* separate, unequal, and solipsistic stories" (135, my emphasis). The issue this chapter raises with revision is not whether it gets history *right*, but instead, what our desire to recover history through the production and analysis of fiction says about our contemporary moment. The truth of history, in other words, might be immaterial to the way literature uses that history and what our analysis of it says about us now.

revision or recursive repetition. So, oddly, the mode that Sullivan claims will produce only “self adulation” actually questions whether authentic selfhood can be found in the place that critics like Sullivan and Simpson left it: the so-called real South (123). Everett’s novel demonstrates the problem of selfhood that Sullivan sees on the horizon. Crucially, however, it blames the frequent urge to revisit earlier representations for the psychic injuries Not Sidney experiences.

When Not Sidney first moves in with Ted Turner, he remarks that neither he nor Turner feel comfortable with the politics of their living situation, which seemed all too similar to “the rich do-gooding white man taking in the poor little black child” on “Diff’rent Strokes” (*Not Sidney* 8). Regardless of its particular divergences from this narrative, Not Sidney’s tutor, Betty, sees their relationship only through previously aired programming, calling Ted a “pestilential, poisonous, pernicious parasite” around whom Not Sidney should “be careful” (10). That Not Sidney and Ted both acknowledge the potential pitfalls of their relationship is important; it’s this shared, conscious acknowledgement that allows them to avoid the type of relationship Betty cautions against. The fact that Not Sidney is wealthy independent of Ted because of his mother’s business acumen further distances Not Sidney and Ted from the model originally put forth by “Diff’rent Strokes” (10). This quick exchange in the novel’s first few pages identifies a trend that much of the novel repeats. Not Sidney’s life appears similar to a version of an earlier text but is distinctive in important ways; however, others fail to see the space between the representation and the real.

The novel’s play between its own plot and the plot of Sidney Poitier films clearly extends this concept, but those recursive moments only appear after Not Sidney experiences a series of personal traumas. First, school bullies repeatedly pick on Not Sidney, ostensibly

because of the confusion his name causes. Not Sidney explains that “[a] steady diet of humiliation” led him to feeling the blows less and less (29). His feeling of “immunity” only comforts him to a point, however:

Sadly, that journey to pointless and profitless immunity often is completed with a degree of permanent injury, usually to the brain and/or nervous system, but I luckily made it though without any perceptible lasting marks—physical, physiological, or neurological. Psychic damage, however, is far more difficult to assess, though I think I was saved from even that by my sense of irony. (30)

This passage reveals Not Sidney’s sense that his past might infect his present. While he believes his sense of ironic detachment saves him, these traumas are compounded by sexual traumas he endures after being repeatedly raped by one of his teachers, Miss Hancock.⁸⁴ After being tricked into following Miss Hancock to her home, Not Sidney initially tries to avoid her advances and leave. She then threatens to give him a failing grade in history class and Not Sidney submits to her advances “understanding ... how what was happening had nothing to do with sex, only and simply power” (36). The fact that *history* is, in that moment, tied so explicitly to trauma identifies the novel’s wider interest in social and personal losses. Without a fuller sociohistorical account of the loss, the event feels “not merely ... injurious, but ... mysteriously and inexplicably so” and leads toward melancholia (Moglen 19). It is the missing narrative that makes the erosion of social ideals “not only painful but psychically unassimilable—and may doom the victims to traumatic symptoms, including the compulsion to repeat” (19-20).⁸⁵ That is, if Freudian psychoanalysis sometimes foregrounds the primal scenes of our youth as deeply cementing our psychological futures, then Everett’s novel uses

⁸⁴ Without investing too much importance in the humor of Miss Hancock’s name, let me say here that it’s one example of the novel’s interest in both the naming and humor. Comedic naming here, like parody, seems to have the potential to lessen the long-term violence of trauma. We might read Not Sidney’s experiences with Miss Hancock as alternatively comedic or traumatic, but both are essential to understanding the goals of the novel. The novel often introduces comedy to distract readers from the horrifying present, but that present has traceable effects that can be clearly mapped onto later events.

⁸⁵ Moglen shifts Freud’s dyadic figuration of individual object losses to a triadic model, including not only the subject and the object but also a third entity: the social forces involved in the object loss.

such a scene, imbuing it with historical import as well. Not Sidney's rape is connected to his failure in history class—and, perhaps, his failure to understand how history is working on him. His ironic detachment from that event, much like the literary strategy of parody that the novel interrogates, does not by itself save him from feeling a continual, abstract sense of loss.

Furthermore, Miss Hancock's violations activate Not Sidney's eventual escapism. After this scene, the novel begins its litany of references to Sidney Poitier films, which Not Sidney slowly understands as psychically and socially injurious. In an attempt to leave the South, a site of physical (but not yet social) traumas for Not Sidney, he is pulled over by a police officer just outside of his hometown of Atlanta, recalling Ted's cautionary advice: "Once you leave Atlanta, you're in Georgia" (*Not Sidney* 46). The officer arrests Not Sidney for being black in the fictional Peckerwood County, sending him to work on a dirt farm, where he is chained to another prisoner throughout the ordeal. This man, Patrice, plays the role of Tony Curtis opposite Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones*.

Like the 1958 movie, the novel's revision should be read in black and white. Peckerwood County is the first space in which Not Sidney's race places him in harm's way. Not Sidney describes his arresting officer as a "nine-foot-tall, large-headed, large-hatted, mirror-sunglassed manlike thing" with a "hairy-knuckled suitcase of a hand" resting on his pistol, "dragging [the other hand] along the ground" (46). This caricature of the Southern Small Town Sheriff would be nearly impossible to trace to its origin, but the character type has appeared in films and television shows ranging from James Dickey's portrayal of his own sheriff in *Deliverance* to more primarily comedic examples, like Sheriff Rosco P. Coltrane in *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Everett's sheriff is buried under these earlier representations, never emerging as anything other than cliché. In its articulation of the static, overdetermined

signifier—the potbellied, small-town sheriff—the novel suggests that other similar parodic portrayals of seemingly authentic southern symbols create an erasure in the present. Like Not Sidney’s name, the sheriff’s appearance signifies too much. In marking the sheriff as what Baudrillard would call a “hyperreal” production—a copy “without origin or reality”—*I Am Not Sidney Poitier* demonstrates that the only way to appear authentically southern in the twenty-first century is to be characterized by grotesque caricature (1). Romine calls attention to the capacity of the “hypertype,” or a “stereotype that has entered the domain of the simulacrum proper,” to “induce a kind of comic nausea” that makes light of a person or thing in order to “recuperate moral legibility” (*The Real South* 136). Everett’s “manlike thing” of a sheriff functions similarly, momentarily suspending the comedy of these stereotypes by revealing their horrifying actuality through an interaction between the sheriff and Not Sidney, who is arrested for the crime of “bein’ a nigger” in Peckerwood County (*Not Sidney* 46, 48).

Everett uses parody much in this way throughout the novel: attempting to “short-circuit the reproduction of culture and its nauseating inertia” (*Real South* 136). The ceaseless continuation of the text’s absurd returns to Sidney Poitier films suggests that this literary strategy is ineffective in damming the flow of these postsouthern hypertypes—both real and imagined. Before escaping Peckerwood County, Not Sidney falls asleep. His dream takes the form of the film *Band of Angels*, a film based on Robert Penn Warren’s Civil War novel of the same name. Not Sidney is called Raz-ru, a direct reference to the film’s Rau-Ru, a slave turned Union soldier played by Sidney Poitier. Raz-ru / Not Sidney witnesses the myth of the happy slave in action, as he describes a scene with Hamish Bond and his mulatto mistress, Samantha Moon—playing the role of Yvonne De Carlo’s Amantha Starr:

The wagon carried him and his mistress to the plantation, the singing Negroes dancing behind, singing, cakewalking, grinning, grinning, grinning. One short, spry, bald black man high-stepped the whole way beside the wagon. I lagged behind, wondering at once what I was doing there as Raz-ru and what I was doing in this dream that certainly could not be my own. (68)

Yet again, the novel shows us a mythology in the making, an idea that has seeped into Not Sidney's dream, perplexing him. In acknowledging that he is not the owner of his dream, Not Sidney points out that his present is often unwittingly activated by past representations of which he's only vaguely aware. While Rau-Ru helps his former master escape capture in the film, Raz-ru / Not Sidney shoots Hamish Bond in the chest near the end of the dream. Not Sidney's dream revises the film in what we should read as an obvious social corrective to the myth of the happy slave, but it ends with Raz-ru / Not Sidney in a brothel experiencing something akin to his rape at the hands of "a long-legged white woman" (72). Not Sidney's dream life becomes a contact zone in which he can attempt to understand both the social and personal traumas he's already experienced. However, he wakes up in a state of confused fear and arousal, suggesting that the act of simply revising these scenes does not erase them.

The novel's many revisions of Sidney Poitier films must also be contextualized within the wider context of Percival Everett's oeuvre. William M. Ramsey suggests we should read Everett's short story, "The Appropriation of Cultures," as an example of "the South [showing] subtle shifts and altering perspectives" through revision (121). Describing the story, in which Everett's African-American protagonist appropriates the Confederate Flag in an attempt to change its meaning in South Carolina and the surrounding region, Ramsey notes that Everett's "South [is] susceptible to postmodern erasure" and changes "through mutation rather than a rationalistic clash of abstract ideas" (129). Ramsey claims that Everett's South treats meanings as fluid rather than static. If "The Appropriation of Cultures"

finds potential in dismantling offensive, mythic symbols through parody and revision, then we must wonder whether *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* should be read as an effort to rethink that framework.⁸⁶

Indeed, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* examines parody and revision with more depth and suspicion. The novel even stages these concepts through the character Percival Everett, who lectures on the subject of destabilizing sacred symbols in his “Philosophy of Nonsense” course. Everett (the character) argues that art functions as a

kind of desacralization, perhaps a sort of epistemological discontinuity that is undoubtedly connected or at the very least traceable to an amalgam of very common yet highly unusual sociohistorical factors. In this, the end of our rapid expansion into mass-media pop-industrial urbanization, all of which changes daily, not only in and out of itself, but transforms the texture and the intertexture of daily life and discourse, we find the degree of expansion or unfolding modified and tested by the parallel distension and unfurling of moral and ideological attitudes, even those and perhaps especially those of religion and traditional repositories of the so-called and so-seen sacred. (100)

Presenting this thesis through a layer of postmodern “nonsense” and muddying questions about authorial intent, Everett (the character) argues that art produced during the media age can desacralize symbols quite well. According to his lecture, art doesn’t merely reflect the reality or truth of the “so-called and so-seen sacred,” but instead modulates its audience’s continued perceptions of the reality those texts create. Thus, the gap between the two texts might be a corrective, ideologically motivated revision. Considering the fact that our character version of Everett is teaching a class entitled “Philosophy of Nonsense,” we must wonder about the possible effects of this heady concept (87). Not Sidney, furthermore, listens to Everett’s verbose declaration having just returned to Atlanta after being arrested in

⁸⁶ It may be worth noting that Everett once refused to speak in the South Carolina State House because it continued to fly the Confederate flag. Everett says he has “since changed [his] mind about the flag”: “I think it ought to fly over the state house. In the same way that if I come to a field and it’s full of land mines I appreciate a sign that says ‘land mines’” (Everett interview).

Peckerwood County. Therefore, the novel presents these corrective literary methods—such as parody, revision, and desacralization—only to contradict them within the narrative itself, in which Not Sidney’s lived experience seems to prove that returning to the scene of the crime of misrepresentation only further tethers his identity to the figures and myths his name, likeness, and position in the South signify. The continual returns begin to feel like hopeless attempts driven by a melancholic rejection of the present over the course of the novel’s accumulated revisions.

With each revision, each desacralization, the novel brings us closer to naming that feeling as a type of melancholia. Not Sidney leaves Atlanta again, this time to visit his girlfriend’s Washington, D.C. home for Thanksgiving in a revision of Sidney Poitier’s most famous film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. While his girlfriend Maggie’s family, the Larkins, identify as African American, they find Not Sidney too dark, mirroring the white Draytons of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Maggie’s sister, Agnes, decides she wants Not Sidney to herself. She finds him in a towel after a shower and demands sex, pulling away his towel:

I caught a glimpse of us in the standing mirror, and the image was a bit of Gothic porn. I looked so much like Sidney Poitier that I was momentarily distracted, until I remembered that Sidney Poitier would never have appeared in a scene like this one. I closed my eyes, stood there, and had a remarkably relaxed and floating nice time, during which I dreamed. (142)

Everett’s scene starkly contrasts with *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, in which Tilley, the housekeeper, walks in while John Prentice is getting dressed. Tilley dresses John Prentice down, questioning his reasons for trying to marry Joey Drayton. Just as the novel creates space between Not Sidney and his on-screen counterpart, Not Sidney slips into another dream, this one a brief retelling of *No Way Out* (1950). In other words, Not Sidney’s sex with

Agnes seems to open up a space for him to define himself, to differentiate between himself and Sidney Poitier, only to immediately foreclose that opportunity through a nightmarish reminder that he is stuck in an unwilling repetition. Not Sidney himself has no way out.

The end of Not Sidney's stay at the Larkins offers the clearest contrast between the film and the novel. In an attempt to regain some measure of control, Not Sidney chooses to confront the family for its racism and classism. After the family conversation turns to affirmative action's "undermining of real achievement," Not Sidney interjects to call attention to the way the Larkins treat their domestic worker, Violet, who eats her dinner in the kitchen: "You people almost had me hating you because of the color of your skin, but I've caught myself. . . . I don't hate you because you're light. I dislike you because your *help* has yet to sit down and enjoy any of her own cooking" (160, 162). In his critique, Not Sidney calls attention to one of the more troubling aspects of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Tilley's stance on the union between Joey and John Prentice seems to be the character trait the film most wants to emphasize, and the novel points to the gaps in the film's vision. While the revision affords Not Sidney the chance to say and do things Sidney Poitier could not, the novel's setting remains largely unchanged. Not Sidney leaves the Larkins, thinking there was a part of himself that believed "there was something to be learned from the color-challenged Larkins," but he isn't sure what exactly (163). Given the comparative context of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, readers can gain a clearer understanding of the narrative spaces the film leaves unexamined from the encounter. Not Sidney, however, returns to Atlanta feeling "vague regret," wondering whether he ever desired Maggie or vice versa (163). His abstract regret suggests that revising the film is ultimately unsatisfying. These revising practices leave Not Sidney with a clear understanding of who he is not, but they further confuse the question

of who he is. Although there is of course something to be said for the former effect, the novel's Icarian mode—its tendency to present potential progress before falling back to the status quo—ensures that revision registers in a melancholic key for Not Sidney: he still believes he has lost an idea of selfhood that he never really had in the first place.

Yet he continues to search. After returning to Atlanta, Not Sidney decides to make one last go at traveling to Los Angeles to see his mother's grave. The trip stalls quickly; Not Sidney gets lost when his car breaks down at night in Alabama. He remarks that Alabama darkness "is darker than night anywhere," recalling the song, "Stars Fell on Alabama," before thinking, "no, they didn't"—offering yet another example of Not Sidney's lived experience contradicting earlier textual representations (168-169). Not Sidney ends up in a town called Smuteye,⁸⁷ where he agrees to help a group of Pentecostal women build a new church. The plot mirrors the film *Lilies in the Field* (1963): three Pentecostal women insist that he build them a church, and Not Sidney folds, a decision that sets into motion the climax of the novel. Not Sidney travels to a Montgomery bank to take out fifty thousand dollars from his vast TBS fortune to build the church. After the Montgomery banker who delivers Not Sidney's money alerts a relative in Smuteye a cash grab ensues. Local authorities implicate Not Sidney, likely because he is an African American outsider, in a murder mystery mirroring that of *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). As is always the case, the novel repeats the film with a difference: after clearing his own name, Not Sidney is enlisted to solve the murder of a man appearing to be himself. He views the body of a man who "was young, black, with short-cropped hair" who Not Sidney thinks "looked just like me" (211). Reflecting on the sight of himself in the Smuteye morgue, Not Sidney thinks that "if that body in the chest was Not

⁸⁷ Everett's Smuteye is stylistically hyperreal—taking its name from the proverbial local diner's signature dish: corn smut—but Smuteye, Alabama, is an actual place. It's located in Bullock County, approximately 55 miles southeast of Montgomery.

Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier” (212). Not Sidney’s momentary thought that he could have been wrong about himself from the start, this figurative death, indicates that he understands selfhood to be largely out of his control. This moment foreshadows the novel’s final chapter, in which Not Sidney submits to the mounting pressure of the novel and accepts the (mis)characterization the novel has repeatedly staged.

After arriving in Los Angeles, Not Sidney is mistaken by a cab driver for Sidney Poitier.⁸⁸ Rather than correcting the cab driver, Not Sidney gets in, relinquishing control over his journey and going along for a ride, stopping briefly at his childhood home. What might have once seemed like a climax appears insignificant, “less profound ... than [he] had imagined” (233). The novel’s penultimate scene shows that the moment Not Sidney (and perhaps the reader) has been waiting for all along was a false climax, a moment that was supposed to change everything that came after it and only did so insofar as it unexpectedly changed nothing. When Not Sidney accepts the Academy Award for “Most Dignified Figure in American Culture,” the novel crystallizes two of its broad interests (234). First, Not Sidney’s search has led to a melancholic end. Searching for a lost thing that never existed, his true self outside of narrative construction, leads to an abstract sense of loss that he maps onto his present person, compulsively repeating that experience of loss until it subsumes him. He figuratively dies for the second time—the first being the murder of his body double in Smuteye. Second, the novel’s final moments once again remind us that the role Not Sidney has been assumed to be playing all along is one that society rewards. The novel seems

⁸⁸ The cab driver asks Not Sidney, “Are you not Sidney Poitier?” to which Not Sidney replies, “I am” (231). The exchange leaves the reader wondering whether Not Sidney understood the question as it was typed in the text, but given that he’s heard similar questions for the duration of the novel it seems safe to say that Not Sidney understood his identity to be mistaken.

specifically critical of the role racial paternalism played for both Sidney Poitier and Not Sidney Poitier; in both cases, playing the role that white audiences accepted and applauded leads to widespread recognition.

Without reading Not Sidney's acceptance of the award as a pathological failure, we can read the struggle the text demonstrates through Not Sidney's example. The novel gives rise to questions about postsouthern literature's negotiation of history. Critics and artists alike have come to accept that these histories were partially imagined memories, what Kreyling has called "the Moebius strip of memory-and-history" (*Wasn't There* 2). Like the version of controlled, white-approved black identity offered by Sidney Poitier films, the South was enacted and reproduced through its textual representations—in both cases these representations have become excessively overabundant. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* plays with these recurring mediations, often staging the continuing problem with contemporary representations of southernness, a signifying category that surfaces intermittently as Not Sidney makes his way from the South to Hollywood. The novel consciously explores these spaces through a parodic mode that questions the contexts in which parody has been put to use either to massage the anxieties of melancholic southerners or confirm the suspicions of Americans. Reexamined through the novel, twenty-first century parody becomes a self-conscious literary strategy that is revealing for its contemporary uses and effects rather than its approximation of an authentic, essential regional mode.

Despite its narrative trajectory, Everett's novel is less an expression of postmodern longing for historical truth about lost origins than an investigation of postmodern longings—not the search for place amid disorder that critics studying both regional literature and postmodernism have posited time and again but a circulation of nostalgic desires for rupture

and recovery. The South in this equation is less a real site than a condensation, an accumulation, a depository of melancholic longing. This is where Everett's twenty-first century postsouthern fiction parts ways with earlier parodic treatments of the South: his investigation of postsouthern melancholia shows no anxious allusions to the Southern Renaissance in its movement toward a new epoch. What makes this new epoch different and distinctive is what simultaneously ties it to its predecessors: the parts of postsouthern writing that have been discussed as essential to the category, like parody, have broken away from their original expressive register of deferential anxiety and begun to reorganize around a new sensibility. This new sensibility is interested in what it means to look back rather than in the object that is looked back upon. For postsouthern fiction, as well as *Not Sidney*, the negating prefix "post" sustains a parasitic relationship to what it claims to reject. Likewise, the old aesthetic strategies of postsouthernism preserve the very thing they attempt to subvert—the persistent signifiers of the South.

The revising of southern to postsouthern might seem to clear a space for the displacement of the original signifying field from critical discourse much as directly placing *Not* in front of Sidney Poitier might seem to reject the restrictive possibilities for Black masculinity that the films proffered. My suggestion here is not that we should ask for contemporary novels such as *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* to subvert the persistent signifiers of the South or that we should require new ways of accessing the real South—quite the contrary. Following the lead of novels like *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, twenty-first century postsouthern fiction troubles our very assumptions about postsouthernness. Just as the *Not in Not Sidney* keeps him from eluding the specter of Sidney Poitier, it is the post in postsouthern that tethers the region to specific histories as it attempts to free the region from

those histories. As we attempt to forge new categories, we often turn to the prefix “post.”

These terminological methodologies often rewind and replay old narratives, showing a problematic economy of desire that twenty-first century fiction attempts to navigate, avoid, and subvert.

CHAPTER 4
“YOU THINK YOU PUSH BUT YOU ARE BEING PUSHED”:
MYTH AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN
COLSON WHITEHEAD’S *JOHN HENRY DAYS*

I am at the barber’s, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.
— Roland Barthes / *Mythologies* / 1957

The tall tale goes like this: John Henry was a former slave working for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company at the moment the steam drill became available for mass usage in the 1870s. As the C&O contemplates switching from manual to mechanical labor, John Henry races the steam drill to prove his mettle. He wins the race, demonstrating both the abstract and quantifiable value of his labor. However, his victory in the race is thrown into perplexing doubt when he dies immediately after beating the steam drill—possibly of exhaustion after his superhuman feat, possibly of sadness over his labor’s physical and metaphysical obsolescence in the face of the steam drill, a marker of industrialized labor. John Henry’s courage credits him with legendary honor despite the fact that his efforts are carried out in vain. In this way, the tale of John Henry is essentially American. It is cruel in its valorization of sacrifice in the face of encroaching progress. In what amounts to an act of carnivalesque resistance to nationalist progress, we may celebrate John Henry precisely because we ultimately endorse the mechanistic progress that kills him.

Colson Whitehead’s second novel, *John Henry Days* (2001), casts John Henry as both man and myth, offering first-hand accounts of John Henry’s life in the days leading up to his

contest with the steam drill as well as stories of his movement into mythical tall tale.⁸⁹

Whitehead uses fragmentary chapters to move through time and change perspectives frequently, organizing the novel through stories orbiting around John Henry. The novel is encyclopedic in its historiographic organization, making it a formal departure from *The Intuitionist* (1998), Whitehead's more linear and highly acclaimed debut novel. In *John Henry Days*, Whitehead narrates John Henry's ordinary life in unromantic prose; he conceives of the capitalist forces driving the recording of John Henry's ballad on vinyl, as well as its transcription onto sheet music to be played in bars and homes; he explores how that music moves through the hands of a young African American striver in mid-twentieth century Harlem; he briefly tells of John Henry's adaptation to the stage in the form of a struggling Broadway play starring Paul Robeson; finally, he zooms in on J. Sutter, a freelance journalist trying to beat the contemporary machine of public relations journalism on the eve of digital media's takeover in the 1990s. These alternating narratives pull together seemingly disparate characters into a concordant historiography of John Henry that spans the years from the end of the nineteenth century to 1996, the year of the first John Henry Days festival. Each story, furthermore, involves similar conflicts and contingencies. Like John Henry, whose victory over the steam-drill is short lived, many of Whitehead's paralleled characters try to get ahead of encroaching capitalist futures, but ultimately fail: the musician recording himself on vinyl makes his live performances obsolete; the sheet music ballad never becomes the top-seller its author hopes it will; the failure of Paul Robeson's stage production parallels his fall into reclusive obscurity in the 1960s. Emplotted in Whitehead's

⁸⁹ As my epigraph indicates, I will be using myth in the Barthesian sense. According to Barthes, myth is not best understood as an object that is true or false—real or fake—but rather as a mode or form of discourse. In this mode, truth or facts are only significant insofar as they take on a formal quality within the myth (*Mythologies* 217-220).

expansive novel, these otherwise unrelated stories take on the guise of inevitability: each hammers home the reminder that the novel is riddled with characters who cannot see a path outside the same systemic pressures that kill John Henry. However, Whitehead's historiographic tracing of the John Henry myth's uses and functions—which shift over time but retain their core valorization of sacrifice—emerges as a literary strategy that helps characters in the present understand the potential cruelty of the myth. The novel uses historiography, then, as a strategy to reveal that attachments to the John Henry myth are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but the recurring presence of these myths does not make them inevitable. Whitehead's historiography, then, emerges as a literary strategy that can problematize the aesthetic forms and historical functions of myth, which, like many of the illusory origin narratives this project has investigated, has the potential to preserve melancholic attachments if left unaddressed.

The novel is also fueled by a lingering fear that technological shifts are accompanied by ritual sacrifice—in particular, the sacrifice of black bodies. This fear is made palpable, perhaps, because *John Henry Days* is written by a black writer at what was then beginning to feel like the now never-ending End of Print Culture, a shift that has stretched past the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁹⁰ In other words, we might read Whitehead's novel as a fight against the machine of digital media, a last-ditch effort to save the printed word not altogether different from the stories of struggle the novel explores. Many critics and readers, in fact, have argued that *John Henry Days* is a novel about the many crises of the present, be it the decline of print culture, the absence of an authentic region, the loss of viable forms of

⁹⁰ One can find many critical studies declaring the end of print. However, Ted Striphas's book, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (2011), suggests that we may be in a late age of print rather than post-print. The distinction accounts for the continued vitality of the novel, a form both printed and digitized.

black masculinity, or the lack of easily understood resolutions.⁹¹ Readings that focus on major cultural shifts make sense for a novel largely about the way myth gets codified when one medium gives way to the next. However, this chapter will explore the continuities found amid such shifts by connecting the quest of Whitehead's freelance junketeer, J. Sutter, to John Henry's quest to beat the steam drill, a relationship the novel explores time and again. The figuring of history as a series of absolute shifts allows melancholia to fester, as it positions the present after a series of irrevocable losses that enable nostalgic attachments. However, as the twentieth century comes to a close, J. Sutter can understand his place in a continuous history that is less a series of breaks than it is a constructed and reconstructed story culminating in the present. The novel's present does not install a master narrative of history; instead, it uses the myth of John Henry to explore the way cultural myths survive across the history of pop culture on the cusp of the digital age. Whitehead's treatment of history, then, produces a more nuanced conception of time, progress, and narrative; instead of a series of absolute shifts—of which the move from print to digital media would be the latest—his historiography gives us an accumulative map that reveals the deeply continuous qualities of mediation underneath superficial changes in media.

Whitehead's protagonist comes to an understanding of his place among both the producers of media content and those who, at some level, buy into the figuration of sacrifice celebrated by the John Henry myth at the end of the novel. When we meet J. at the beginning

⁹¹ Daniel Grausam connects the novel's interest in stamps to its purported fears about print. William Ramsey wonders whether "the time has come to ask how much force the historical South still exerts in the black literary imagination," suggesting the end of what was once legitimate and real (769). Jonathan Franzen wonders why Whitehead's protagonist has any choice to compete before vacillating, wondering whether competition is "manly" after all. Eva Tettenborn traces many competing versions of African American masculinities in the novel, ultimately finding that the only revelation to be found in the novel is that all available forms are fragile and under constant attack. John Updike questions Whitehead's protagonist's lack of action in the end, writing that "J. is no John Henry." Each of these takes locates the novel's past as a time of agency and control—particularly regarding masculinity—ignoring the flexibility that the present day affords Whitehead's protagonist.

of the novel, however, he is flying from New York to West Virginia for the inaugural John Henry Days festival celebrating the release of a John Henry stamp by the Postal Service. J. is “on a three-month junket jag,” a streak of consecutive public relations-driven events “he is too unwilling or too scared to break” (*John Henry* 15). At the end of *John Henry Days*, J. faces the choice to either continue his streak, which seems to represent a triumph over the public relations machine that devours promising young writers by corralling them away from telling stories and toward producing content, or abandon that streak and seek something else.

Focusing only on the crises of the present—and thereby ignoring the possibility of J. choosing to abandon his doomed quest to beat his moment’s machine—can lead to a fundamental misreading of the novel’s stance on myth in the present. That is, if *John Henry Days* has been read as a screed against the information age, we must also recognize that the twenty-first century affords Whitehead a vantage point from which to critique the melancholic construction of the past in the present. The genre of the twenty-first century historiographic novel is particularly well equipped to expose and critique the objects of desire that cling to the myth of John Henry as well as cultural myth more generally. That Whitehead does this in a historiographic novel, then, is important: it demonstrates faith in the written word and the novel form, specifically, suggesting both enable an understanding of melancholic attachments this project advocates.

In addition to shifting the critical discourse on *John Henry Days*, I want to place the novel within the wider context of twenty-first-century postsouthern literature, which uses a variety of literary strategies as points of access to understand and reject melancholia as an aesthetic mode of southern identification. *John Henry Days*, too, locates its inquiry into melancholic attachments in the nexus points between blackness and southernness. In this

space, it uses the strategy of historiography to interrogate those very concepts, which have appeared unproblematically self-evident and naturalized by myth over time. Despite the rhetoric of narrative decline that has accompanied the critical understanding of the novel's interrogation of these concepts, the novel offers neither a radical, transformative break from history or a melancholic sublimation of mythological realities. This chapter is an attempt to understand how Whitehead's historiographic novel challenges the melancholic mythology of John Henry by thinking through its continual manifestations from the inside out.

* * *

Social anthropologist Guy Benton Johnson's description of John Henry in his 1929 study, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend*, could be rephrased in Barthesian terms, in which myth is "a type of speech" not defined by the particular parts of its message but rather "the way in which it utters this message" (217). Johnson begins with a generalizable anecdote about his research:

John Henry is, I suppose, the Negro's greatest folk character. His fame is sung in every nook and corner of the United States where Negroes live, sung oftenest by wanderers and laborers who could tell three times as much about John Henry as they could about Booker T. Washington. ... Ask almost any Negro working man who John Henry was, and he will reply with, "He's man beat the steam drill," or "He's best steel driver the world ever afforded," or some such statement. Some will tell a detailed story of how John Henry competed with a steam drill, won the contest, but dropped dead. ... Most of them have vague ideas about the time and place of the alleged drilling episode, but whatever they lack in this respect they compensate for in their unshakable belief in the reality of John Henry and his victory over the steam drill. John Henry has become a byword with them, a synonym for superstrength and superendurance. He is their standard of comparison. They talk him and they sing him as they work and as they loaf. (1)

Johnson frames John Henry as a person only insofar as he is a persona, a character who is *sung*. In defining that character, Johnson offers two types of statements meant to typify a kind of conversation one might have in which John Henry is talked around as much as about.

John Henry is a story with a few possible variations. He is a *byword*, a *synonym*, a *standard*—all types of speech. Even when Johnson introduces the idea of reality—here, perhaps a byword for history—it is couched through belief, suggesting that Johnson himself is not a believer in John Henry in a strict historical sense.⁹²

But it is exactly this strict sense of history that Whitehead's novel undermines. The prologue of *John Henry Days* offers personal accounts of John Henry that he either takes from Johnson's book or models after the anecdotes reported there.⁹³ The four-page section is the first of many signposts signaling the novel's interest in exploring historiography rather than trying to establish a singular, factual history. The prologue is told in reportage, offering short, separate responses to a call for background on the real John Henry. The accounts of John Henry vary, of course. One calls him "black as a kittle in hell," while the next identifies him as "a white man" (*John Henry* 4). A few refer to older generations of steel drivers who reportedly knew John Henry, while one claims "this John Henry stuff is just a tale someone started" (5). John Henry's origin is likewise contested in nearly every account; depending on the speaker, he hails from West Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, or Mississippi. The novel presents these accounts without the context Whitehead reveals much later: Johnson sent out dispatches to track down the man behind the myth, if indeed he ever lived. The prologue, however, offers the responses to Johnson's call without narrative interruption after a mysterious introductory paragraph situating an unknown narrator's search for the real John Henry through work on a song they sang "to keep time with their hammers" (3).⁹⁴

⁹² Of course, Johnson's implicit suggestion is that the subjects of his study believe in the reality of John Henry because of a naïve, vernacular system of belief that he conveys here through dialect and ethnography.

⁹³ Whitehead models his prologue after portions of Johnson's book on John Henry, specifically the chapters entitled "On the Trail of John Henry" (8-26) and "John Henry: Man or Myth?" (45-54).

⁹⁴ This song was "The Ballad of John Henry," which occupies an important position in the novel to which I will later return. As the novel suggests, Johnson began working on John Henry only after his research on spirituals led there, and he had previously published *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926).

Whitehead's prologue instructs readers to understand John Henry as a myth rather than a real figure, underscoring the novel's interest in myth—in how and why John Henry's story gets told and what those retellings reveal about the culture that requires them. He is, indeed, a type of speech: a story with many variations. Interestingly, the prologue's responses arise instead out of a historian's search for the man who lived and not the myth that moves—for the real man behind the representation.

As William Ramsey points out, *John Henry Days* does away with the so-called reality of roots—particularly southern ones. Examining the few moments in the novel in which the South is an analytical object, Ramsey argues that the South of the novel is “a simulacrum of what *it once was*” (784, emphasis added). This confusing statement about the reality of southern history arrives at the end of an astute reading of the novel's many signals that the post-South is a recapitulated idea—that “regional essence is a sham” (781).⁹⁵ Thus, on the one hand the novel questions historical narrative by charting the history of a myth but, on the other hand, it also grasps at simulacra in the present, searching for the elusive real. We must recall that the South has always been an imagined site of storytelling—often “of the assault of something *by* something”—long before postmodernism offered these types of stories en masse (*Real South* 4). I offer this juxtaposition not to point out a contradiction, but to say that the trap Ramsey falls into is importantly camouflaged by the many previously represented Souths as well as the mechanism of reproduction that the novel exhaustively explores through the many reproductions of John Henry's myth. *John Henry Days* overtly poses

As John C. Inscoe points out, however, Whitehead obviously fictionalizes Johnson's research trip to Hinton, West Virginia—most notably by changing Johnson's race by making him African American (89).

⁹⁵ Ramsey points out that the Talcott hotel in which J. stays, the Millhouse Inn, features “a fake waterwheel attached for the commercial manipulation of an agrarian myth” while smartly noticing that J.'s last name, Sutter, calls to mind site of the California gold rush, Sutter's Mill, “suggesting that the gold Sutter makes as media hack is false currency” (781, 782). Indeed, J. actively and consciously participates in public relations spin and media hackery.

questions about whether regional essence was ever real in political terms: to continue to assert decline narratives is to leave the melancholic desires that drive the search for the real version of John Henry. Whitehead's historiography, in other words, is as much about the functional irrelevance of John Henry's reality—or the reality of regional essence, now or ever—as it is about the recurring iterations of the mythology that outlived him.

John Henry Days cannot avoid dealing with questions about how constructed histories and myths are documented in print. The novel takes up those questions in its first few pages, as J. Sutter travels into the southern locale of Talcott, West Virginia for the inaugural John Henry Days festival. While J. waits for his flight to board, he chases an unclaimed receipt, a prized recording of something bought that J. can claim. He wonders what it records, hoping for “[s]omething nonspecific ... just a fat total at the bottom he can tell them it records anything he wants to. Within the elastic confines of reimbursable expenses, of course” (*John Henry* 9). J. fantasizes about the flexibility of non-itemization, the lies he can use the receipt to tell. As Daniel Grausam asserts, we might read J.'s description of the receipt (as well as his job as a junketeer) as introducing the novel's wider interest in the end of print culture. Since J. notices that the receipt is a mere “twenty minutes old and already affecting a world-weary languor,” Grausam's analysis seems spot on (10). The story of print culture as told through the receipt goes like this: print is transforming from “a record of something to a fantasy of print as a record of nothing, finally, but a monetary sum” (Grausam 634-635). This transformation is, for Grausam, symptomatic of a novel that reads the decline of 1990s optimism about postal communication, which the novel suggests is in sharp decline (626). And yet, if we read the scene as the follow-up to the prologue, we see that print culture is and was often a recording of the fantasies of both writer and reader. In

fact, one respondent, “a prisoner here in the Ohio Penitentiary,” writes with the intention of being paid for his account of John Henry (*John Henry* 3). We know the prisoner’s story is one among many, and he sent it with a bill—or, perhaps, *as a bill*. The receipt may seem to insist upon a type of perspective that the prisoner’s account does not, but the novel places these interpretations of the printed word side by side to emphasize continuities, not shifts. The fact that J. can twist the meaning of a receipt, a sparse (and literal) account of an event, suggests that print has always been inadequate and malleable—that print, not our contemporary culture, is being exposed. That distinction is important. Understanding the novel’s present as the latest iteration of print culture rather than a fatalistic view of print-culture-in-decline goes hand in hand with the novel’s exploration of melancholic attachments to print.

These continuities extend to J.’s experience of the South, which Ramsey characterizes as funny and “atavistic” (781). Indeed, when J. steps off the plane in West Virginia, he fears for his life, thinking “Forget the South. The South will kill you” (*John Henry* 14). He then runs through his own prescribed idea of the region, calling the people waiting in the airport “cannibals” and realizing that his familiar disdain for flyover people is different this time: “[H]is dread expresses itself so forcefully that he has half a mind to scurry back up the ramp for the protection of his aisle seat. He has arrived at a different America he does not live in. The undiagnosed press toward the gate waiting for kin. Placed hip-to-hip, the rivulets and shadings of their acid-washed jeans describe a relief map of blighted confederacy” (14). J. knows “[n]one of this is true” but adds that “perception is all” and again thinking “these people are liable to eat me” (14, 15). J. feels fear even as he realizes the absurdity of his own characterizations. Talcott is the site of global media embracing southern locality, as J. is sent

by Time Warner's burgeoning travel website to write a piece on the festival for wide consumption. Yet, the South is also the site of plastic decals "detailing the Confederate flag" that makes J. fear captivity, an idea he'd like to forget (18). So it doesn't follow to assume that "J. Sutter never immerses in an actual South, never becoming its captive" (Ramsey 783). As J. says when his driver begins taking a back road off the interstate: "He is being taken in," a phrase that denotes both helpless captivity and being fooled by an elaborate scam, perhaps the myth of the South that J. both fears and understands to be partially produced by texts (*John Henry* 19). The South of *John Henry Days* is activated by preceding notions of what it has meant to be black in the South, which is often a story of captivity, and the acknowledgement that regional signifiers are and have always been partially a ruse.⁹⁶

Furthermore, the novel illustrates how much of a hand print culture has in extending the regional signifiers that are most often associated with the South. The head of the public relations firm responsible for bringing the mass media to Talcott, a man named Lucien, reflects on the role of public relations journalism in making people, things, and places into branded content:

Lucien has a patchwork idea of the town stitched by pop culture. ... Peering past miles they have yet to travel, Lucien pictures Talcott and sees the tall spire of the town church, a crowd of parishioners glad-handing with the pastor on Sunday morning, a blond child in a bright striped shirt waving a sparkler on July Fourth and a glass pitcher of lemonade pimpled by condensation. We know that the lemonade is homemade because there are seeds swirling in the bottom of the pitcher and that detail is what makes it true. ... Lucien thinks,

⁹⁶ J.'s participation in the media depictions of Talcott heightens his understanding of the nexus point between space and narrative. Discussing which narrative peg they will use for the story of Talcott, J. and his fellow writers discuss a few alternatives. One says he's "thinking about making it a New South piece," which is a familiar enough trope that he hardly needs to say more (70). "No one thinks about West Virginia," he begins, possibly offering the first line of a familiar angle (70). Another path under consideration is "the industrial age-information age angle," which is supposed to connect with "John Henry's man-against-machineness": "That's still current, people can empathize with his struggle and get into it and all that shit," the man muses (70). These competing angles could likely describe the novel itself, a text that moves through and describes West Virginia's atavisms, its "shopping center" facades, and the "old and distinguished structures" of the original town (22).

maybe the trick about doing a town is making the thing into the idea. (192-193)

In Lucien's vision, things, places, and scenes coalesce into an idea of authenticity that he will help establish and "journalists will pick up on and in turn deliver to the people" (192). His description of the Talcott of the mind is an admixture of nationalist clichés steeped in puritan virtue. It turns Talcott into what Smith describes as "a populist world where people are more authentic" than they are elsewhere, and that authenticity is valuable for Lucien and his junketeers alike (*Purple America* 48). The South of *John Henry Days* derives its value from a prevailing notion of southern authenticity, an idea that positions the region as a site of melancholic preservation of reality: a historical phenomenon that has been lost amid fakes elsewhere.

Importantly, it is the very notion of being unmediated that the junketeers are enlisted in distributing to their readers through the mass media. It quickly becomes clear that the junketeers pull from only a few possible narratives for their work, all of which explore "the archetypal subject Bob" (70).⁹⁷ In the "Bob Is Hip" narrative, each previous iteration of Bob is "infused with new life by situating Bob in a scene or cultural eddy": "It is an exotic subculture that begs further exploration. ... The Bob Is Hip variation met with some initial protest until its endorsers suggested that creating novel catch phrases from 'the new' or 'post-' or devising witty neologisms for the nascent movement could ensure one's fame" (72). The various versions of Bob clarify the way the junketeers understand their work to deliver a set of familiar narrative meanings to their readers. The novel's careful delineation

⁹⁷ The first is "Bob's Debut," and it is a story of "the talented newcomer or long-struggling obscure artist" who is worthy of widespread recognition (70-71). The second, "Bob's Return," is about Bob's "sophomore record," which inevitably recapitulates the themes of the first after fame gets the best of Bob (71). Whitehead seems to be winking as he describes Bob's Return, which is likely meant to jokingly encapsulate *John Henry Days*: "the second novel, recapitulating some of the first's [*The Intuitionist*] themes, somehow lacking, emboldened by success he tries to tackle too much" (71). In "Bob's Comeback," Bob bounces back in a "miraculous" way after a long slump, perhaps after "[overcoming] a drug problem" (71).

of these possible narratives for “Bob” suggests both how illusory and effective this sort of narrative work can be. That is, the hipness of the populist world of Talcott or the gritty John Henry is dependent on readers’ familiarity with narratives they have been delivered by similarly mediated forms previously. At some level, they already know about Talcott before they read the new story; the compulsion to read it anyway arrives through the desire to see their affective attachments to the idea of Talcott reinscribed once more.

Indeed, the novel is hip to the idea of “subcultural capital,” a phrase Smith uses to describe trends in southern and American studies that situate the South as a space of unspoiled critical landscapes.⁹⁸ One junketeer makes his case for the hipness of the South: “Talcott is hip, they have a black hero. I can bring in Atlanta. I can bring in lots of stuff. Houston—Houston is hot now, it’s attracting a lot of diversity” (74). After a counterpoint that Talcott should be considered a debut, he retorts: “John Henry has been around for years, this town is a physical thing that has a history. I don’t personally care to know what that history is, but it surely exists” (74). The two definitions of southern locales—as deriving hipness from (surprisingly) progressive heroes that model likewise surprising regional trends and simultaneously an actual location filled with historical *place*⁹⁹—might seem to be at odds with one another, but this seeming contradiction lays bare its complexity: the South is now (perhaps more than ever) a space invented and reinvented many times over, but it is as real as it has ever been. That is another way of saying it was never unmediated, and it is the condition of mediation that *John Henry Days* so clearly maps through the legend of John Henry. The novel’s historiography corroborates the idea that the South functions as a populist

⁹⁸ See specifically pages 13-19 in Smith’s introduction to *Finding Purple America* entitled, “Introduction: What Does an American Studies Scholar Want?”

⁹⁹ Bone ties place to the Agrarians’ “idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society” (vii). Bone also dates the aesthetics of place back to Eudora Welty’s essays “Some Notes on River Country” (1944) and “Place in Fiction” (1956), claiming Welty usually used place to indicate the “aesthetics of antidevelopment” (ix).

territory that we still use, as we always have, to tell ourselves stories about ourselves. Or, to crib a particularly apt line from Romine: “Territoriality, it seems, isn’t dead. It isn’t even past” (*Real South* 228). The novel mocks the way the South is reterritorialized in the service of press junkets that require hip narratives of populist worlds, which themselves rely on a melancholic fantasy that the South remains unchanged by modernity. As a continually mediated territory, the South both activates J.’s fear and is an exaggerated farce.

The opening ceremony for the festival includes a dinner spread featuring prime rib and a series of welcoming announcements, concluding with a local teen singing the “Ballad of John Henry.” Before the song, a representative of the Post Office, Parker Smith, says a few words, slipping in a “y’all” before a quick aside: “Must be my Southern roots acting up” (*John Henry* 66). The speech is a case study in the type of nostalgia that southern territoriality can activate. Smith says he “can’t help but get caught up in the great history of this region” before romanticizing John Henry’s sacrificial death and “the men who died to get us where we are today” (66). The passage connects Smith’s sentimentality to the region in a gesture that, as Leigh Anne Duck points out, associates national time with change and regional time with tradition (3). While Duck’s interests lie in the intersection between modernism and nationalism, a diluted and seemingly depoliticized version of Duck’s bifurcated theories of national and regional time rises out of the sediment in Smith’s speech. This speech gives voice to a desire to keep the region set apart from national time in spite of the fact that Smith tells a story of the two collaborating: “John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln’s famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American. He helped build this nation into what it is today” (*John Henry* 66). John Henry’s death is figured within a national paradigm of progress that at once rightfully forces

the South to abolish slavery while more insidiously installing a labor market that sacrificed the very bodies it freed. Perplexingly, the patronizing nods to tradition and sacrifice set the region at odds with the nation while simultaneously asserting a sort of underlying Americanness in the region that echoes Lucien's description of Talcott. It is a place that functions in the perpetual service of American mythologies. The South is both a space at odds with national ideals and one where those ideals are most authentically preserved through the "good people of Talcott and Hinton whose grandparents and great-grandparents toiled under adverse conditions to bring this country together" with a railroad (66). Smith tacitly recognizes that the American mythology his speech celebrates with sentimentality is a lie; the railroad was built on the backs of exploited former slaves.

Smith's quick speech is not the only example of territoriality being reasserted at the night's events. He hands over the stage to the local teenage boy, who is to sing the "Ballad of John Henry." As the boy begins to bellow, J. takes a bite of prime rib, which gets lodged in his throat. "He can't breathe" as he listens to the words of John Henry's ballad, a song that details John Henry's sense of inevitability before his deadly race with the steam drill (*John Henry* 76). It begins with John Henry picking up a hammer when he "*was just a baby,*" already knowing it "*will be the death of me*" (75). Whitehead offers nearly the entire ballad on the page as J. struggles to breathe, leveling John Henry's life-and-death struggle with J.'s much less heroic but nonetheless life-threatening struggle to breath. After hearing the lines "*He said, 'I will beat that steam drill down / Or hammer my fool self to death, Lord, Lord, / Or hammer my fool self to death,'*" J. thinks, "It won't go down. ... Why won't it go down? He finds it inconceivable that no one knows what is going on with him" (76). The scene frames myth as a type of intoxicating fantasy that prevents the novel's characters from

understanding not only the broadly changing conditions of their world, but also the events unfolding immediately before them. Linking that distraction specifically to death by choking, furthermore, suggests that these myths are almost literally suffocating. This treatment places myth on parallel tracks to melancholia. That is, without suggesting that melancholic attachments and myth are equivalent, in both cases they reduce one's ability to make sense of the present through an abstract allegiance to an ideal that is understood neither in the present nor in historical context. Myth, in other words, produces a feeling much like melancholia, even if it arises out of a hopeful allegiance to seemingly heroic figures.

As J. struggles to breathe, the novel shifts into a stream-of-consciousness narrative structure that circles around his relationship to John Henry, another African American dropping dead in the South while others look on:

What's this guy singing? ... John Henry, John Henry. He works on the C&O railroad. He pushes puff, he is going for the record. ... I'm a sophisticated black man from New York City and I'm going to die down here. With cicadas, they got cicadas down here, don't they. I want roaches, real crumb-eating fucks from out of the drain. ... Nobody notices his death. ... Where is this place's sign? There must be laws about the placement of the signs, eating establishments must post them in convenient places. Federal law, but then maybe they vary from state to state. States' rights! States' rights, these people love their states' rights, signs on fountains, back of the bus, Rosa Parks. This place will fucking kill him. He should have known better. A black man has no business here, there's too much rough shit, too much history gone down here. The Northern flight, right: we wanted to get the fuck out. That's what they want, they want us dead. It's like the song says. (77-79)

The pronouns begin to blend together. John Henry tries to beat the steam drill while J. streaks toward a junketeering record. Listening to the ballad transplants the audience, and no one notices as J. nearly chokes to death. The scene ends with J.'s body taking control—"he is jerked up out of his seat" involuntarily—forcing others in the room to notice (79). We find out later that Alphonse Miggs, the man destined to open fire at the conclusion of the

ceremony, steps forward and saves J., but we do not learn this until a few chapters later. The chapter ends with a few harrowing lines: “All these crackers looking up me, looking up at the tree. Nobody doing nothing, just staring. They know how to watch a nigger die” (79). Given that it is the final chapter in “Terminal City,” which begins with J. beginning his travel to West Virginia from a New York airport terminal, the end of the section highlights the ways in which Talcott specifically and the South generally continue to operate as sites of racialized violence.

To hammer home the recursive nature of J.’s near-death experience, the junketeers have a conversation that starts with one junketeer, Dave Brown, saying that “what happened to J. reminds him of something he had seen years before” (87). Dave talks about the Rolling Stones’ famously brutal Altamont Free Concert in 1969. The story partially fictionalizes the death of Meredith Hunter—an 18-year-old black man who was killed by the Hell’s Angels, who provided security for the concert. Dave describes the killing as a necessary “sacrifice” (99). When an unnamed junketeer asks what the man was sacrificed to, Dave answers: “To the culture. The kids had brought a new thing into the world, but they hadn’t paid for it yet. It had to be paid for” (99). Whitehead may not name Hunter, but his retelling is both “intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also [lays] claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 5). For the novel, this facet of historiographic fiction reflects an image of sacrifice back toward J., suggesting that J.’s near death, like John Henry’s and Meredith Hunter’s, was a sacrifice for the new thing J. was helping bring into the world: digital media culture.¹⁰⁰

The logic of this melancholic, ritual sacrifice—that John Henry somehow had to die to usher in the steam drill and Meredith Hunter had to die to mark the ending of 1960s

¹⁰⁰ The choking scene also foreshadows the end of the novel, which leaves readers wondering whether J. will live or die. I will return to the question of J.’s survival when I examine the novel’s end in more detail later in this chapter.

counterculture—is painstakingly framed in particularly American terms. One junketeer, in fact, remarks that the dead Hunter was “like the Crispus Attucks of the seventies” (*John Henry* 99). Attucks’s death is widely considered the first blood drawn in the American Revolution: by tying these other black deaths to Attucks’s the novel comments upon what Mitchell Breitwieser terms a “reinvestment of riches” in which a loss in the present is figured as a “space reserved for the coming glory” and thus “converted to the negotiable fact of desire” (9). In other words, the deaths of Attucks, Henry, and Hunter were not present losses so much as they were necessary, predestined sacrifices for future Americans—indeed, for the very idea of America to continually come into being. Throughout American history, this logic suggests, black bodies have been sacrificed at moments of rapid cultural evolution. Such a logic obscures the brutal realities of the present, suggesting that these deaths were not actual losses but mere reinvestments in the promise of America. Yet, that logic shares psychic ground with melancholia insofar as both deny the urgency of the present in favor of either recovering the past or creating the future. Whitehead’s historiographic patchwork clarifies the brutalities of the recurring present.

The story also reminds readers that the John Henry Days festival will end in death. The novel reveals that early on in a chapter that tells the story of a young intern working for the *Charleston Daily Mail* who attends the last event of the John Henry Days festival in which Miggs opens fire in a crowded room (*John Henry* 25). The intern, Joan Acorn, gets a few important facts of the case wrong. She calls Miggs a postal worker, possibly influenced by the rising perception that *going postal* was a common occurrence. The narrator mentions that Acorn reports what “witnesses share,” each of the “thousand different stories” colliding,

fitting “their perspectives into one narrative,” telling us that “this making of truth is violence too, out of which facts are formed” (24).

If a newspaper article takes a thousand experiences and creates a violent, narrative collage, then stamps exaggerate those erasures by collapsing many cultural and personal narratives into one focalized, iconic image. The novel shows a stamp to already be what Barthes would call a myth, an image that offers a literal meaning but is more important for its form: to be placed on a stamp is to supersede one’s time and be placed into national narrative. In the case of John Henry’s stamp, the benevolent force it implicitly endorses is American progress: a future America that we must make through sacrificial labor. In other words, it is a type of commemoration that appears to arise out of a multiculturalist project to recognize non-white Americans¹⁰¹; however, it tacitly endorses the forces that kill John Henry by obscuring the historical realities that went into making the railroad.

The novel is attuned to both the violent illusion of objective narrative and the more specific violence of the unveiling of John Henry’s stamp, a thing that doubles Barthes’ formulations about myth (through the printing of a stamp and the myth of John Henry) and obscures any meanings lying outside of the espoused mythology. The John Henry stamp, like the image of the black soldier for Barthes, “has too much presence,” appearing “as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image” (Barthes 228). Where the image of the French soldier seemingly rejects those citing the horrors of the French colonial project, John Henry’s stamp seemingly rejects those concerned with the conditions of American progress—particularly as that progress relates to African-American labor. However, according to Barthes, “this distortion is not an obliteration” (232). John Henry

¹⁰¹ As one postal employee remarks, referring to Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and Casey at the Bat: “They got three white ones, you gotta mix it up these days” (*John Henry* 35).

remains on the stamp, and the myth concept relies on the denial of his literal meanings—his particularized, unromantic history (if indeed John Henry lived). In the case of the John Henry stamp in *John Henry Days*, this denial is a kind of ceaseless loop of sacrifices that occur after the original sacrifice: “The concept, literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates it” (232). This alienation is complete when one allows the stamp to take the full meaning of John Henry’s history and evacuate it, repurpose his image, pushing it into myth.

And yet the novel pushes back. *John Henry Days* includes five brief chapters telling the story of John Henry in realist prose. The vignettes offer scant details about John Henry’s life in the days leading up to the contest. The first section tells the brief story of John Henry mangling the hand of the young boy tasked with a risky job as a shaker, a job which required “steady hands and speed” but mostly “faith”: “The sledge came down and drove the drill bit into the rock and the shaker had to twist the bit between blows to loosen the dust in the hole and keep the bit level for the next blow. Two quick shakes and a twist made the rock dust fly out of the hole. . . . You had to hold it straight or you’d never hold anything in that hand again” (*John Henry* 83-84). Our introduction to John Henry is a story about human error; the shaker cannot hold the bit level, so he loses his hand. John Henry attempts to save the young boy when it becomes clear that help isn’t coming soon enough, but he knows his efforts are in vain. His shaker is likely to lose a hand and John Henry will likely have a new hand to shatter, as “[t]here was no shortage of niggers” (86). This first introduction to John Henry reveals a hopeless laborer who knows “the mountain was going to get him” eventually (85). It also reveals that Whitehead’s John Henry was a former slave, born on a Virginia plantation (84-85). These revelations distort the myth of John Henry. If he ever lived, the novel

suggests, he must be understood to have lived through a specific set of historical conditions that myth covers over. Whitehead's short chapters on John Henry's imagined life demythologize the man even as much of the rest of the novel clarifies the history of the John Henry myth. Thus, the novel reveals the obvious falsity of the tall tale while also troubling the governing impulse of myth, which obfuscates historical realities under the guise of moralistic memorialization. At the core of these psychic energies is a bedrock melancholia that forecloses the opportunity to forge new types of attachments and favors, instead, recursive movements around myth.

Each subsequent chapter moves closer to John Henry's contest with the steam drill. The second chapter reveals a contest between John Henry and an Irish American railroad worker, O'Shea. The contest between John Henry and O'Shea is latest in a series of contests that the site foreman, Captain Johnson, likely orchestrates to make the laborers momentarily forget about their working conditions:

The winner got fifty dollars; probably O'Shea would get a bonus if he beat the black. The white men would bet on O'Shea and the black men would bet on John Henry. The contest between the races would distract them from the mountain's vengeance all the more. If the black man won it would make the men feel good about themselves and they would forget about the mountain for a time. If the white man won it would remind them of their place in this world and the hate would drive the work. The work progressed in either event. (146-147)

The revelation that Captain Johnson uses race to reinforce class stratification is a familiar one, but it further highlights the way John Henry's mythology covers over what Whitehead imagines his lived experience to be. That is, the Post Office employee's remark in the novel's present, that "you gotta mix it up these days," reveals that John Henry's race trumps any sort of classist critique of the system in which he toiled (35).

Whitehead's frequently-used motif, "the mountain," illustrates the difficulties in critiquing the system of labor in which John Henry works and offers a naturalizing allegory for that system. Whitehead likely takes this motif from the "Ballad of John Henry"—"*The mountain was so tall, John Henry was so small*"—in which the mountain is turned into a symbol of all the forces working against John Henry (75, original italics). In Whitehead's prose, John Henry frequently remarks on the mountain's eternal presence. When he falls ill, he thinks that his "fever will pass but the mountain will not," remarking in the next paragraph that "[h]e knew the mountain was going to kill him the first time he saw it" (240). If the myth of John Henry places the man in competition with the steam drill, Whitehead's narrative reads that competition as a nearly irrelevant attempt to fight back against the massive mountain that swallows him. In Whitehead's penultimate vignette, John Henry's challenge is overshadowed in his own mind: "All the men followed him with their eyes. He stood before Captain Johnson and the salesman and all the men and made a challenge. Then he hoisted his hammer onto his shoulder and stared into their faces. He was sure that no one could see him tremble but the mountain" (358). Once again, the mountain is the foe that goes unnoticed by others, part of the background for onlookers but moving to the fore of John Henry's mind. Even on the day of the contest, he thinks that the money he saved was "hope against the mountain" (385). It is both observer and agent, so tall while John Henry is so small. Whitehead ends his last John Henry chapter with the steel driver, hammer in hand, walking toward the mountain. The image is not mythically heroic: it is conciliatory. If winning the race means stopping the progress that will make his livelihood obsolete, he knows he cannot win the race. The idea that he can, which gets reified time and again through national myth,

is never more clearly an illusion codified through relentlessly repetitive myth than it is in Whitehead's final vignette.

In the mind of Whitehead's John Henry, the mountain is byword for the forces that exert control over him.¹⁰² Like the mountain itself, these forces are too big to see or understand in their totality; John Henry only cuts through a cross section as he carves a tunnel, but he knows the mountain is big enough to consume him. The novel's unflinchingly realist rendering of John Henry lifts him out of the myth, casting him as a man afraid of the machine of American capitalism. Importantly, he is not afraid of a literal machine, but of a naturalized mechanics that we can see through his fear of the mountain, which might be mistakenly read as a sublime fear of nature itself. Strange as it may seem, Whitehead's postmodern historiographic novel employs the strategies of social realism to depict the totalizing system that oppresses John Henry. The effect of a momentary social realism in a postmodern novel that frames the American realities as a function of mass media and representations—things that create the simulation of reality—should be understood as a type of twenty-first-century understanding of social realism that carefully historicizes seemingly natural realities in the service of understanding structures of attachment, narrative, fiction that offer alternatives to an aesthetics of melancholia.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The mountain also brings to mind Langston Hughes's 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in which the mountain is both a metaphor for the obstacles standing in the way of free expression and a mountain that Black artists must summit: "But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. . . . We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes).

¹⁰³ Ramón Saldívar has proposed an emerging "postracial" aesthetics of "speculative realism," which he defines as a "hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, 'dirty' realism, and metaphysical realism" (5). While Saldívar is interested specifically in the formation of a new racial imaginary in writers who grew up after the Civil Rights era, my interests in

The John Henry chapters also raise questions about the project of reconstructing John Henry (a project in which the chapters themselves participate, of course). If the stamp alienates viewers by mythologizing John Henry, then the chapters, as a form, resist such alienation by offering a fuller meaning of John Henry, as Barthes might say. Hutcheon instructively observes that postmodern historiographic metafiction uses “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” as the “grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). As a novel that looks back, *John Henry Days*—specifically the five short chapters about its title character—defamiliarizes John Henry, setting him apart from the myth even as it tells the very story for which he has been mythologized. The novel fills in what the myth hollows out and offers a more sobering, less romantically idealized version of John Henry. The novel pulls apart the floorboards of the John Henry myth, which it presents as a function of melancholic attachments to a cultural ideal that is both racially oppressive in its valorization of black sacrifice and regionally restrictive in its nostalgic figuration of the spaces in which such sacrifice was both commonplace and expected.

When the novel looks back, it clarifies its present. For example, the mountain operates similarly in the minds of characters in 1996. Josie, the owner and operator of a local hotel she believes to be haunted by the ghost of John Henry, remarks that she is bound to her “place by history and family,” while the ghost is bound “to the mountain by its mountain death” (105). Alphonse Miggs, the stamp collector destined to open fire at the final John Henry Days event, feels a sense of inevitable demise similar to Josie’s but more in tune with John Henry’s, wondering “why the mountain chose him” (281). Alphonse, like John Henry,

Whitehead’s realism relate more to the possibilities of the twenty-first-century novel to undercut melancholic attachments that situate unmediated reality in the past.

sees the mountain as a controlling agent calling him to action. As he makes his way through the fair, he looks for something to discourage him from his own quest, but he finds nothing: “Of course these people don’t know he is seeking something from them. Of course no matter how hard he tries to avoid looking at the mountain, he knows it is still there with its unavoidable message. The twin tunnels are like eyes” (282).¹⁰⁴ Alphonse feels consumed by the weight of the mountain’s “message,” which is vaguely related to his own melancholy: he collects stamps in an effort to stay connected to something real in his retirement. What starts as a hobby at stamp fairs and through stamp catalogs turns into something he can do by “log[ging] onto the internet” (285). He bemoans the progress to digital trading, which fits into his more general melancholy about progress as he stares at the mountain: “He watches the locomotive pass, and he turns to face the mountain. . . . John Henry’s tunnel didn’t stand the test of time, the roof gave in, and they built the new tunnel adjacent, according to modern specifications. Obsolete. He can’t help it; he looks up at the mountain and finally gets his confirmation of his fate” (286).

Alphonse’s melancholy leads to him indiscriminately firing upon a crowd at the John Henry Days Festival. His main complaint—that progress covers over old tracks, both literal and figurative—may seem similar to the way I have described myth. I do not want to suggest that the problem John Henry Days traces is one of properly commemorating or forgetting history. The prevailing consensus in the criticism of *John Henry Days* is that it is pessimistic about our present ability to remember and, thus, properly commemorate histories. Ramsey

¹⁰⁴ Miggs’s description brings to mind *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which used the haunting gaze of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg in a similar vein. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age participant observer, remarks upon “Doctor Eckleburg’s persistent stare,” and it is the same stare George Wilson looks into as he mutters that ““God sees everything”” before shooting Jay Gatsby (Fitzgerald 24, 160). In both cases, characters feel a grim fear that relates to the persistent reminders; Doctor Eckleburg reminds Nick of an old oculist in Queens long gone and covered up by the Valley of Ashes, and the mountain reminds John Henry, Josie, and Alphonse Miggs of the seemingly inevitable endings that await them all. These endings will consume them and cover them up.

wonders whether the South still exerts the same pressure to explain in the Black literary imaginary, concluding that the ability to tell “historical truth finally becomes a casualty of the cyber reality generated by media writers” during the rise of digital media (782). Peter Collins focuses on the commodification of the John Henry myth, particularly at the John Henry Days festival, which “festival fails to properly commemorate the past, instead seeking to commodify it” (285). For Collins, the problem in the present is not the trauma of being black, but rather a problem of forgetting what is traumatic about being black, writing that “it is marketing, not trauma, that has obscured the past. . . . Indeed, J.’s problem may be that he is not traumatized enough by history” (285). Collins’s critique keeps black writing statically engaged with its traumatized and traumatizing ghosts, which hover in the inaccessible background.¹⁰⁵ Éva Tettenborn argues that the novel meditates on lost African-American masculinities, arguing that it “reflects on the impossibility of mourning . . . African American working-class men during Reconstruction who died in pursuit of the American dream while enabling others to fulfill theirs” (273). Like Collins, then, Tettenborn reads the novel as expressing a failure in the present: the men who John Henry represents cannot be mourned because they cannot be heard from, claiming that the “African American literary melancholic figure is committed to commemorating a loss that may otherwise go unnoticed” or unheard (273). The novel, Tettenborn writes, is “profoundly melancholic” because these figures cannot be heard from or spoken through (273).

Thus, each critique examines the mystifying power of simulation in the present.

Ramsey decries the simulated South; Collins fears the simulation of mourning the

¹⁰⁵ In fact, Collins only reads possibility into the novel because it does not *entirely* banish its historical ghosts; in other words, he reads the potential of the present through “a return to commemoration” outside of the commodity—a literal viewing of history’s lost bodies *as* the present (296). The potential for existing outside of the commodity is perplexingly embodied by formless ghosts, which in their “immateriality” remind “us that we need to remember our histories” (299).

commodity enables and finds potential in the never-ending commemorative potential of history's ghosts; finally, Tettenborn claims that melancholic counternarratives—those that “[insist] on remembering a loss or injustice excluded from the master narrative of historiography”—are the only option available to contemporary Black writing (273). Given the direction of my project thus far, it's likely not surprising that I cannot find these critiques of the present, all of which tend toward melancholic refusals, entirely satisfactory. What I find compelling and interesting about these critiques is how attuned each is to the economies of melancholia I have traced. That is, each investigates how the novel stages a type of desire for a different present and future in melancholic terms. However, I want to counter the notion that *John Henry Days* finds no possibility outside melancholic circulation in the present. Its historiographic form, its fragmentary glances backward, offer insights into the way myth making has long turned the past into a time of authentic desire at the expense of the present. In turn, this form allows the novel's postmodern present to function as a time both in and out of step with the melancholic historiography it charts. The unremarkable hypermediation of postmodernity connects the novel's present to its past—even exaggerating the media reproductions of the past. However, through the media-saturated present, in which familiar stories are told and retold, J. can understand the historical form of the machine he's battling and, possibly, avoid being swallowed up by it.

It is tempting to focus on the alienating aspects of myth in the present of *John Henry Days*, particularly at the moment when John Henry is placed on a stamp, without seeing the present in a long trajectory of alienating, melancholic repetition. The novel insists that if John Henry was a real man, he was no mythic figure in his own world. However, it also complicates the idea that J.'s present is the only time in which he was turned into a heroic

myth. The novel reveals a recurring logic of myth making that American capitalism requires. One of the first interactions that reveals this logic occurs when a “song-plugger” named Jake Rose searches for the next hit song to plug in New York City night clubs (*John Henry* 198). Like John Henry, Jake seems to vaguely understand that he is a part of a system that is destined to make him fail. Another song-plugger, Danny, tells Jake in a moment of panic that they are “just two pluggers and they got a whole system of us” (204). That system, as Jake reveals, is not built to support pluggers. The “contract men” working for Tin Pin Alley have reliable work and are considered the real “artists” of the business, despite the fact that they usually “copy whatever song made it big last week” (198). The pluggers are also “at the mercy of the musicians,” and they resort to “bribing and cajoling” to encourage musicians to make their songs famous (202). Additionally, to even make himself a minor player in the industry, Jake changed his Lithuanian name from Jacob to Jake and “pruned his surname too, to a simple Rose” (202). Far from the grounded globalism that Peacock describes in the contemporary South, Jake is absorbed into an abstract American identity. He continually remarks that “this is the twentieth century” (202, 204, 205), suggesting that he can see the system that ails him without seeing a path around it.

This connection to John Henry is made clearer by Jake’s decision to repackage the John Henry ballad to fit current musical trends. He remembers the ballad while thinking back to a night he was mugged and left in the city snow. Lying in the snow, Jake hears someone walk by singing the “Ballad of John Henry.” While it “doesn’t have the syncopated push of a rag” or “the rollicking swagger of a saloon song,” Jake thinks that “it has power” (205). He remembers his own swollen head after his mugging and thinks of John Henry singing about “*an awful roaring in my head,*” convinced that hearing the man singing those lines was an act

of fate (205). While he knows the ballad is a return to an older style and won't be "a million-seller," he hopes it will show his boss his creativity (205). Yet, by continually grounding himself in his own time ("this is the twentieth century"), the novel makes clear that Jake sees his condition as new in spite of the fact that John Henry's ballad resonates with him. For Jake, being with the myth of John Henry and accepting the conditions of it is directly related to his own resigned acceptance of his position in the world. The myth contains the promise of hope through John Henry's story of resistance, a hope that seems to allow him to transcend the conditions of his life; however, he is lodged squarely in time, unable to navigate outside the mechanical system that restricts him even as it seems to offer him a faint hope of upward mobility.

It's also important to note that we see a figure much like Jake in the novel's present day in the character of Lucien, the publicist responsible for organizing the John Henry Days festival. When Lucien makes his sales pitch to the mayor of Talcott, trying to secure representation for the event, Lucien compares public relations to "the light bulb business": "What I want to do is establish the brand superiority of Talcott for all things Talcott-related. The name of your town, Talcott, Tallll-cott, it rolls off the tongue and that's half the battle. ... Talcott is full of light. ... All I ever do is release radiance" (195-196). Like Jake, Lucien thinks past the essential qualities of the thing he's plugging in—a lamp ready to release Talcott's light. Whitehead helps us see Jake as an earlier version of Lucien by placing the former's chapter immediately after, thereby establishing a relationship between the two that isn't consequential: Jake lives before Lucien but is positioned after him in the novel. When Jake describes singing a new song loudly to convince a crowd to "think it's already a hit" that they have somehow overlooked, we see traces of Lucien discussing the light that has

always been alive in Talcott (201). Importantly, then, the novel demonstrates that the mechanistic plugging that both Lucien and Jake employ is neither old or new; rather, it is a part of the fabric of American consumption, a role that shows less about the time that either lives than the place and system in which they participate. That framework directly contradicts the decline narrative that critics have consistently ascribed to the novel and complicates the notion that American consumerism is categorically different in postmodernity than it was previously. Situating the rise of print as a type of utopian model that is under attack in the digital present creates an object ideal that the novel frequently complicates. Whitehead's historiographic mapping of the recurring forms of national myth reveals that our attachments to narratives of progress survive shifts in technology, which begin to feel like superficial shifts rather than dramatic sea changes.

The Jake Rose chapter shows another in the long string of reconstructions of the John Henry myth. In this history, its reconstruction in ballad form at the beginning of the twentieth century is figured similarly to the public relations effort at the John Henry Days Festival in 1996. In the interim time between these moments, a southern blues singer named James Moses records his version of the "Ballad of John Henry" on vinyl—another media form that reproduces and reanimates John Henry. Andrew Goodman, a Chicago talent scout for American Music (named during the popularization of blues music in the 1920s), approaches Moses to record the song after hearing him perform it in a nightclub. After Moses has his night's earnings won back by the owner of a club playing poker with marked cards, he thinks that the money Goodman has offered sounds appealing and decides to record his songs. Moses struggles through the first recording session as Goodman gives him directives "[I]ike he's in charge now" (*John Henry* 256). As Collins points out, both Moses and blues rely on

performance, so both lose agency when translated onto a record for Goodman to sell (291). The fact that Moses leaves the recording session to perform at another nightclub seems to echo this point: it is through the act of performance that Moses understands music. As he plays that night, he thinks

[H]e nailed it. Like he was in competition with himself and he had to take each song higher. He was reaching for something all night and then he switched “Long Time Blues” with “John Henry” and that was what did it, he changed his mind, didn’t know why, half a second before he chased the first chord out he knew that he had hit it. He starts falling asleep and thinks, he wasn’t competing with himself, he wanted to beat the machine. The box on the second floor of Goodman’s, the diamond needle cutting his fame into beeswax. (*John Henry* 259)

Moses plays the song as a protest, allowing John Henry’s attempt to beat the steam drill to resonate with his own attempt to maintain a livelihood as he makes himself obsolete by recording his songs on vinyl, allowing people to “buy him for seventy-five cents” (259). Houston Baker argues that a blues song does not emerge out of a single artist but rather “erupts” as “a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience” (Baker 5). Indeed, Moses reconceives of the song, focusing less on John Henry’s “race and the man’s death” and more on “what the man felt waking up in his bed on the day of the race”—an experiential moment that resonates with Moses’s waking up the next day to rerecord his album for Goodman (*John Henry* 260).

If blues allows a community to interpret itself rather than foregrounding an artist’s singular talent, Goodman’s recording of Moses explores a moment when blues may have become outmoded by the recording industry that packaged an artist’s recording of their own variations and gave the impression of singularity. Like John Henry, Moses fights against a burgeoning shift in system that he cannot beat. The chapter ends as Moses “agrees to Goodman’s request and he does what he does for money: sings” (261). It’s true that Moses

realizes, as Collins points out, that he “cannot work within a system that literally molds his music into a permanent and unchanging object” (292). At the same time, Moses does not seem aware that he will be sacrificed at the altar of this new technology. He records the song and, in a sense, is not heard from in the novel again. It is because Moses, like John Henry, cannot see a path outside of the system that will use him up that he paves the way for his own defeat.

To be sure, Moses has lost his ability to make a living. Jake likely does, as well. While we only read of Jake in media res, his sheet music turns up in the hands of the young Jennifer Sutter, who we later learn to be J.’s aunt. As a young girl, Jennifer lives on Strivers Row in Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century, and her parents push her toward respectability by putting her in piano lessons. Jennifer, however, is drawn to the blues—or, rather, the way she feels while playing the blues. She finds and buys a copy of Jake’s version of John Henry’s ballad relegated to the back of a local music shop with the items the owner “can’t get rid of” (275). As she plays it, she remembers a German saying her piano teacher, Mr. Fuller, quoted: “you think you push but you are being pushed” (278). As Jennifer plays the song, she feels affectively moved: “She sings lyrics that tell a story of a man born with a hammer in his hand and a mountain that will be the death of him: you think you push but you are being pushed” (278). While Jennifer does not make the connection between the saying and John Henry’s contest, the novel has already established a clear connection: the contests between John Henry and other steel drivers, leading up to the contest against the steam drill, are primarily a way to distract the men from the ways their labor is exploited. When John Henry defiantly beats the steam drill, his act of resistance—an attempt to push back at the structures that oppress him through a feat of exceptional strength—is ultimately self-

sacrificing. John Henry thinks he has resisted the forces of exploitation, but he is actually working firmly within that logic; he thinks that he has pushed but he is still being pushed. Whitehead circles around that story and its many reiterations to show how John Henry's myth preserves a cruel formula of resistance that functions squarely within the collaborating structures of capitalist exploitation and systemic racism.

Jennifer's family strives to overcome racially subjugating forces but ends up cowing to them. When her mother catches Jennifer playing John Henry's ballad, which she calls "gutter music," she tells Jennifer, "This is Strivers Row. Do you know what striving means? ... It means that we will survive" (278, 280). Yet, as Jennifer seems to unconsciously understand, her mother's definition of survival manifests as a vague fear of being black. Jennifer knows her parents only bought the piano so their daughter "would take her place in the scheme" to attain respectability outside the borders of Harlem (276). In fact, Jennifer notices that her mother treats the piano as a decorative object, placing flowers on the piano every day after Mr. Fuller removes them (277). Even the songs themselves are only important insofar as they fit into Mrs. Sutter's design for her family. Jennifer remarks that her mother refers to the song Mr. Fuller has assigned her as "*that song*" because she "doesn't know any of the names of the composers" and that they are all "nice things to her, more nice things to have in the house" (280). Mrs. Sutter's attachment to the trappings of black respectability as a way to survive seems to suggest that she, much like Jake Rose, thinks about cultural assimilation as a type of progressive forward movement without realizing the way she is systemically pushed toward that end.

The difference between Jennifer and her mother is a one of affective realities. For Jennifer, playing the "Ballad of John Henry" makes her long for something other than mere

survival. After playing the last note, she feels like she's "in a heat" (278). The passion she feels while playing the song is preferable to the "dignity" she knows she is supposed to feel while playing "the cheerful stanzas of 'Shortnin' Bread'"—a song Mr. Fuller is training her to recite for "the Sepia Ladies Club," an exclusive social club for residents of Striver's Row (287, 270). For Jennifer, the myth of John Henry activates a desire to look beyond the ideological confines of black respectability. Like Hughes's black artist atop the racial mountain—a manifestation of all the obstacles in the face of the black artist in America—Jennifer feels most free within herself. She feels moved or pushed toward a *deeper* understanding of her historical condition while her mother only connects the music to people outside the cultural logic of striving: the "dirty men with their shirts all out of their pants, drinking the devil's liquor and stinking to high heaven when good people are going to church," the "good-for-nothing niggers who don't care about making a better life for themselves" who think "that just because they don't have to pick cotton they have no more duties to attend to" (279).¹⁰⁶

Jennifer's response to the John Henry myth and that of Jake or Moses differs because of Jennifer's ability to quickly understand the structural continuities between the world of John Henry and her own. Both Jennifer and her mother understand the ballad as a type of transgression; however, where Jennifer feels potential in acts of transgression, her mother feels failure—even death. Her mother says "we will survive" through strategic and incremental change within American hegemonies, indicating that those who attempt to upset those hegemonies will not (280, my emphasis). The ballad form, as both critics and

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer reflects that her "constrictive" clothing appeared different than that of other African Americans, who "invariably looked more comfortable," while thinking that John Henry's personified ballad "doesn't go to church and cusses, wears what it wants" (279, 278).

characters indicate, is subject to interpretation.¹⁰⁷ Each of these historiographic chapters mapping the myth of John Henry through the various reconstructions of the ballad, in fact, demonstrates how flexible the John Henry myth-as-song has been over time. Moses and Jake certainly feel an attachment that comes from the myth, which resonates with their own experiences, and yet their attachment often leads to a form of pushing that only reveals how embedded they are in systems that anticipate and even incorporate room for their energies. Their versions of the song leave them permanently tethered to the myth on its own terms, and they do not see the ways in which recording a hit record, writing a hit ballad—beating a steam drill—is not liberating. Jennifer understands this equation, albeit vaguely. We are left to wonder what Jennifer does with this understanding, but the novel leaves that story untold.

Examining the type of feeling the ballad creates in Jake, Moses, and Jennifer reveals nothing inherent about John Henry or the circulation of mythic ballad: the feeling of possibility it engenders may or may not recycle the logic of the original myth in a melancholic repetition. What makes the myth restrictive for Jake and Moses—that they feel pushed toward an action that ultimately leads to a failure similar to John Henry’s—may, in fact, make it freeing for Jennifer if John Henry’s perplexing victory is felt as a desire to function within and outside cultural logics that cannot be toppled through a singular and seemingly heroic act of defiance. Rather than proving the essential political value of the John Henry myth, then, reading the affective responses to it reveals something about the potential of art objects as carriers of myths: being with the myth affords each character a chance to momentarily suspend their everyday conditions and feel a connection to another figure in another time and place.

¹⁰⁷ Michael New, like Baker and Collins, connects this malleability to musical performance, saying “the song preexists the author at the same time that he must pull it out of the aether and assemble it himself” (243).

Among the novel's many characters who momentarily transform because of the myth, J. Sutter seems perhaps the least likely candidate to productively change. His inertial life as a junketeer offers a stark contrast to the ambition of Jake Rose, the creativity of Moses, or the dynamism of John Henry. J.'s writing career, which began with a position as an impassioned intern for a fictional New York alternative weekly, cements the deep cynicism and ironic detachment he displays throughout the novel.¹⁰⁸ After spending a few days at the internship, J. sits in an editorial meeting about a story about a mentally ill woman, Eleanor Bumpurs,¹⁰⁹ who was gunned down by police. J. listens as the newspapers editors rattle off possible headlines without the compassion and anger he expected from the newspaper's staff: "Bumpurs—I'm trying to riff on that. ... Cops and Bumpurs. Do the Bump. Bump me in the morning and didn't just walk away. ... Bump, jump, lump, stump ... The cops knock on the door and— ... Knockin' on Heaven's Door" (176). Whitehead commits to the absurdity of the riffing, which continues uninterrupted for three pages in the novel and ends the chapter. Given that J. confronted his parents about the killing earlier in the chapter, it's easy to imagine his shock as he sees journalists flippantly transform the harrowing story into newspaper content. J.'s passion for writing falls away as he fulfills the mundane and "[d]ownright corporate" task of producing content (169). He begins to understand working for a magazine as a function of the forces he wants to push against. The enthusiasm J. might have felt about journalism is quickly diminished.

¹⁰⁸ J. arrives at the newspaper excited to learn about the stories "he didn't find in the papers his parents read," to study the "secret documents" telling of "puppet governments" and "kickbacks to the mayor's pals" (171). He begins the internship the week before the 1984 presidential election, which happened to coincide with his eighteenth birthday, when he was excited to vote for the first time after reading "with deep anger the statistics of voter turnout among young adults and minorities" (171).

¹⁰⁹ In fact, the killing of Eleanor Bumpurs was a real event that took place on October 29, 1984.

In 1996, when J. heads to Talcott to cover the John Henry Days Festival for a nascent website “looking for content,” J.’s one-time passion for storytelling has long past: “All J. can think is *content*. It sounds so honest. Not stories, not articles, but content. Like it is a mineral. It is so honest of them” (21). No longer able to support his once idealistic notions about the power and potential of a well-told story, J. succumbs to content—the mountain he mines. It is not until J. climbs the literal mountain on which John Henry is said to have died that his feelings about story-telling begin to change. At the festival, J. meets and befriends Pamela Street, another New Yorker down for the festival to bury her father, who was a great admirer of John Henry.¹¹⁰ As they make their way up the mountain, they pass the urn containing Pamela’s father back and forth. J. notices that “it was heavier than he thought it would be” (371). For J., the urn contains not just ashes but also the weight of a myth that he has unknowingly embodied through his own absurd quest to continue his junket jag. J. is both perplexed by his desire to continue the streak and compelled to keep his inertia, but he begins to sense that, like John Henry, continuing his junketeering streak would transform him into a myth: a byword among junketeers used to describe his futile attempt to beat the system in which he toiled.

The experience of burying Pamela’s father contributes to his deeper understanding of the junket jag and its relation to John Henry. When Pamela asks J. whether he has enough information to fulfill his assignment, he responds with an *ars poetica* for historiographic fiction:

¹¹⁰ The novel draws a comparison between Pamela’s deceased father and John Henry. As they lay his remains to rest, Pamela wonders whether “he had to die to bring this weekend into being... The price of progress. The way John Henry had to give himself up to bring something new into the world” (378). The novel crystallizes the parallel figures—Pamela’s father and John Henry—when they carve “his initials into a gray stone” as the only marker of his grave (378).

J. Sutter said yes. He has a story but it is not the one he planned. Before he had been kidding about the story in order to get close to the woman. He had put on paper some of the things she had said the day before but now he thought what happened today was the real story. It is not the kind of thing he usually writes. It is not puff. It is not for the website. He does not know who would take it. The dirt had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling. (387)

J. feels a renewed potential in telling stories, in offering something of his experience to others. In admitting that he doesn't know what form the story will take, or if it in fact is a story, we can read a burgeoning impulse toward the type of historiographic project Whitehead took on in *John Henry Days*, a novel that is light on plot but full of interrelated stories. We read the history of John Henry's circulation, and this history culminates with the novel's nominal protagonist sensing the potential of storytelling. Whitehead writes this historiography of John Henry, in other words, not to prove something inherently melancholic about the John Henry myth, but rather to explore the variously mediated versions of the myth to see what use it can have now that perhaps it has not had in the past. The kind of story J. wants to tell is one that can only be told using a form like historiography, which reveals through its encyclopedic collection of stories the ways in which myth mutates as it moves through various media. The multiple forms of myth underpinning the novel is reflected through the literary strategy of historiography, which enables Whitehead to pull together these concordant stories and realize the potential of the John Henry story in the twenty-first century to help us better understand the ways our core attachments to old stories might alternatively keep us melancholically reliving the past or dynamically transforming the present.

After J. experiences his realization, he returns to the hotel faced with a choice. He can leave with Pamela or he can continue his junketeering jag. That J. thinks the future events

“loom over him and he is in their shadow” signals a connection to the motif of the mountain that Whitehead consistently develops and returns to (387). In fact, J. contemplates his decision with a new awareness of its clear resonances with John Henry, remembering the night before when he “had been in the parking lot with the other men” talking and drinking “to keep away the darkness, the vastness outside the streetlight. The mountain and all that it meant. The talk was the only defense they possessed against the great rock within themselves” (387-388). The passage parallels the last of the five John Henry chapters. The night before John Henry’s fabled contest, he listens to men as “their talk swirled into one talk about the contest” (384). As J. thinks about his contest—his “challenge he had made to himself”—he bumps into Alphonse Miggs, who is on his way to the stamp ceremony where he will open fire (388). Ironically, it was Miggs who saved J.’s life when he was choking, because it would be Miggs who would be responsible for ending it if J. attended the unveiling of the stamp.

The novel ends as J. contemplates his choice, standing in an open door “deciding, as if choices are possible” (389). This final moment in the novel, a final choice in the face of seeming compulsions, can be read two ways. First, one can read J.’s final *as if* as a clear indication that the choice to leave is unavailable to him. In the scholarship I glossed at the beginning of this chapter, that was the prevailing reading. John Updike’s remarks about the end of the novel in his review leverage much of his frustration on the conclusion which calls on J. to act: “Well, if choices aren’t possible, why is he taking up space in the middle of a work of fiction? The novel’s nominal hero decided to battle a machine and won, losing his life in the process. J. has his qualities, but he’s no John Henry” (Updike). Updike gets one thing exactly right. J. is no John Henry. The novel invests much in that contrast, all the while

suggesting that the two are faced with a similar set of circumstances. John Henry chooses action where J., to this point in the novel, has chosen passive observation. Perhaps writing a story like Whitehead's historiographic novel lacks the heroism of racing a steam drill, and perhaps the novel teaches us that seemingly heroic acts may lack the transformative power that a deeper understanding of concepts such as myth, heroism, and melancholia might. But it is precisely because *John Henry Days* traces a genealogy of unconscious attachments to the John Henry myth that J. is left able to consciously understand how he and we might be transformed.

CONCLUSION POSTSOUTHERN OPTIMISM

I liked the idea of falling out of a cave. I permitted myself a veiled optimism here, that one can in fact fall out of a cave, i.e., despair and depression, when aware of themselves as such, can be closest to life.

— Walker Percy / *The Paris Review* / 1987

In scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place. Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment.

— Lauren Berlant / *Cruel Optimism* / 2011

Postsouthern Melancholia has examined the circulation of melancholia as an aesthetic and ideological concern in twenty-first century fiction of or about the South, arguing that fiction marked by the region's place within the nation often operates through a currency of loss—even if (or precisely because) the presumed loss is an abstract, immaterial fantasy in the twenty-first century. I have argued that we should read the circulation of melancholic aesthetics as a constitutive property of twenty-first century postsouthern fiction while maintaining that such fiction warns against the recursive, melancholic attachments it circulates. Rather than separating texts into camps, I want to suggest that much twenty-first century postsouthern fiction offers a counterweight to the melancholia it problematizes (11).¹¹¹ This alternative to melancholia these texts put forth is not best described through Freud's formulation of mourning, in which one can specifically identify who or what has been lost, leaving the subject's ego "free and uninhibited again"—able to actively re-attach (245). As we have seen, melancholia is used to describe a condition in which "one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost," or even if anything has been lost at all (245). This last

¹¹¹ Seth Moglen uses that sort of model in *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (2007), in which he argues that there are "two modernisms" that alternatively espouse melancholia or *mourning* as operative modes of being in the modern world (11). This project has avoided postsouthern fiction that seems less critical of melancholic nostalgia, but, of course, some texts find a home in the misty, sentimental southernness to which this project is diametrically opposed.

point is important: if southern fiction was once characterized by a specific relationship to what we might term a perceived loss event—such as the loss of the Civil War, the decline of agrarianism, or the rapid gains in social justice of the mid-twentieth century—then twenty-first century postsouthern fiction has seen the condition of southernness decoupled from any traumatic event and abstracted over time. Michael Kreyling correctly claims that these southern loss events exist somewhere between history and memory in the present, and that transference produces melancholic attachments to the idea of vexing loss—a perpetual drive without a destination. The fiction I have examined attempts to name and describe this abstract sensibility, a condensation of melancholic residues, in order to untether the region’s contemporary ego from narcissistically circulating around something like the Lost Cause many times removed.

In other words, I have made the case that the notion of loss is so non-specific and abstract in the twenty-first century South that *mourning* such a loss with specificity is an impossible alternative to melancholia. Indeed, Jon Smith is right to describe the project of maintaining attachments similar to those I have described in terms of melancholia as self-sustaining fantasies, attempts to feel southern by “feel[ing] something, even something ... seemingly unpleasant” (*Purple America* 3). The alternative to melancholia that these texts introduce could perhaps be better understood as postsouthern optimism, an affect explored in depth by many recent critics, and one that I will describe as an attempt to feel southern without feeling melancholic.¹¹² Where melancholia forecloses the possibility of new

¹¹² A scattershot of such work would include Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Michael Snediker’s *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (2008), Anne Potamianou’s *Hope: A Shield in the Economy of Borderline States* (1997), José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), and Mitchell Breitwieser’s *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (2007).

attachments, optimism leaves those pathways open without necessarily assuring that the next thing will be better.

Perhaps no one makes this point better than Lauren Berlant, who advances the notion of “cruel optimism” in her eponymous book. *Cruel Optimism* (2011) is instructive for this project, as it identifies how the urge to feel optimistic can itself be a cruel trick. Berlant’s definition of “cruel optimism”—“a relation [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”—shares similarities with my figuring of postsouthern melancholia (1). Berlant draws a fine distinction between melancholia and cruel optimism: “This phrase points to a condition different from that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject’s desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has invested her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24). Without equating the two, I want to focus on the similarities between cruel optimism and postsouthern melancholia, as both are categories that describe a refusal to attach to a new idea or thing that leads to types of death. That is, if Berlant is right in her claim that “[a]ll attachments are optimistic,” the circulation of melancholia identifies how persistently we attach abstract loss to the South, perhaps because of what it makes dialectically possible for wider national exceptionalism as well as retrograde regional exceptionalism (23). One can be optimistic about the nation if one continually quarantines reactionary melancholia to the region. Furthermore, mapping the circulation of melancholia in published fiction suggests that unbroken attachment to loss is a lucrative enterprise in and of itself. That sort of optimism is cruel because it arises out of mental misdirection: in order to preserve a national whole one must construct a regional other.

John Henry Days provides a site for examining postsouthern optimism, precisely because much of the optimism in the novel is cruel. The novel explores the continuum between melancholia and optimism by cautiously vacillating back and forth, showing the way optimistic attachments to the myth of John Henry can both preserve and explode conservative attachments in both the nation and the region. In its openness—its embracing of uncertainty but also possibility—the novel’s ending demonstrates how the availability of a new choice allows readers to imagine an alternative to the hopeless repetition that typifies melancholia. That is, each text I have examined critiques melancholic attachments by focusing on characters that cannot identify the psychic economies in which melancholia circulates. In the process, each text entertains a type of optimism—a momentary lifting of the melancholia that typifies southern literature—even if those opportunities often appear foreclosed by the end of the text. In *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train*, Sonny’s position in the global marketplace complicates the idea that the South is disconnected and displaced from global networks, but he ultimately enjoys his melancholic symptom by making the sepia-toned, Super 8 homage to his pre-merger hero, Bear Bryant, who also stands in for pre-merger ideologies; in *The Celestial Jukebox*, Boubacar calls into question the way we have typically read the post-South only as a repetition in a novel about the Global Mississippi of the present, but he eventually gets unwillingly interpolated as a post-9/11 Muslim in America while other characters choose melancholic refusals of their present; finally, in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Not Sidney Poitier becomes the very person his name defines him against, suggesting that the novel seriously questions whether Not Sidney can negate his socially prescribed roles by parodying and revising the texts that control his identity. Even in their eventual foreclosures, bringing these texts together helps us identify the formation of an

optimistic aesthetic register for postsouthern literature. *John Henry Days*, importantly, ends with its protagonist facing a choice to either continue a quest that may be “an obstacle to his flourishing” or to reject the logic of such a quest. At the novel’s close, J. has been trying to successfully complete the longest string of consecutive days at public relations events, surpassing the record holder who, after a nine-month junketeering binge, was “devoured by pop” and never heard from again (*John Henry* 111). While J. understands this possible fate at the start of his streak, it is not until he becomes familiar with the story of John Henry that he has the opportunity to think about his jag as a slight variation on a familiar theme. J. learns that following through in his quest, as John Henry did, would bring at once both honor and death—a cruel compromise. The fact that the novel ends without foreclosing the opportunity for J. to choose another path indicates that *choice* is a type of optimism Whitehead holds onto in defiance of myth, history, and melancholia. It is this open ending that I read as a suggestion that postsouthern fiction about the circulation of melancholia also circulates optimism-as-choice about not just the past or the future, but the present, which is the only time in the novel’s plural chronology when characters can access such a choice and understand its implications.

Indeed, Whitehead’s optimism is deeply related to J.’s ability to make sense of the history of the John Henry myth as well as its contemporary manifestations. The novel suggests that its many other characters are unable to approach the understanding that J. eventually does. The figures of Jake and Moses, in particular, display versions of the cruel optimism that Berlant describes, as both cannot see how the things they desire keep them from flourishing. Moses makes his recording, in part, to attain the fame that other blues musicians already have. He recalls being asked to play songs audience members heard on

blues records and thinks, “Those guys have got something and it ain’t nothing Moses ain’t got” (254). Ultimately, he chooses to let Goodman’s machine record his performance, cutting into his future stage bookings in the process. Jake’s belief in his own potential—reflected sharply in his statement about plugging, “you gotta believe it’s a hit or else they’re never gonna believe it”—leads to his assimilation and eventual consumption (201). Like Bobby Figgis, the junketeers’ record-setting cautionary tale, Jake Rose is devoured by pop. Berlant describes the threat of deferred violence toward which this kind of unremarkable, everyday cruel optimism leads as a “livable impasse” that Jake and Moses both experience (91). In the cases of Jake and Moses,

[I]t is as though the most sublime threat of all to the sensorium that must make an ordinariness out of what could be shattering trauma is the revelation that, in the singular present that is the zone of an ongoing life, one has only been loaned a name and biography and personality and meaningfulness, and that that loan could be recalled not just by death but by the cruel forces of life, which include randomness but which are much more predictable, systematic, and world-saturating than that too. (Berlant 91)

In other words, the trauma of cruel optimism is blunted by the predictable everydayness of oppressive systems. Moses and Jake are, indeed, saturated by the systems they attempt to use but, predictably, cannot drastically change. Like John Henry’s short-lived victory, Moses is likely to be viewed as an exceptional relic, a holdover from the “authentic, antimodern populist world” of performed music (*Purple America* 47).¹¹³ Jake and Moses each find the value of their labor eclipsed by the systems in which they toil precisely because they do not understand the futility of the forms their resistance to those systems take: they each embrace

¹¹³ Collins’s discussion of Moses’s lost art form, in fact, is aligned with nostalgia for these worlds that are recorded over: “Moses’s music, when no longer a live performance, loses *something* of its personality” (291, my emphasis). Without staking too much on the validity of this claim, it’s important to note the way Moses’s lost art falls into a similar kind of nostalgia to that of pre-commodity fetishism, when the means of production were less abstract for the consumer.

a type of optimism that they take from the myth of John Henry, but they fail to see how the action that optimism enlivens is self-defeating and cruel.

Importantly, the novel positions their failure as partially a function of living in a time that shrouds the cruelty of their optimistic resistance. That is, as *John Henry Days* moves forward in time, we can see incremental changes in the way characters think about their resistance to the forces that prevent their flourishing. John Henry, the character furthest back in time, sees no path outside of the race that claims his life. Before the contest, he stares “into the heart of the mountain” and realizes he is alone and doomed: “There was no one to hear him but himself. He walked down the road with his hammer in his hand” (*John Henry* 386). He feels a form of melancholia, which compels him to carry out an act that he knows will end in his death. Jake Rose frequently mutters to himself that “this is the twentieth century” as he talks about finding “a million-seller,” as if to suggest that the conditions he’s up against are naturalized and unavoidable (204, 205). Moses at least understands that making a record takes away his earning power, and it is not until he performs the “Ballad of John Henry” that he decides to make the record: “that was what did it, he changed his mind, didn’t know why ... he wanted to beat the machine. The box on the second floor of Goodman’s, the diamond needle cutting his fame into beeswax” (259). In that moment, Moses experiences what Berlant describes as an affective event, or a moment when he allows himself “to continue to be changed by an event of being with the object” (Berlant 32). The type of change he experiences is, of course, cruel. Jennifer is the first of the novel’s many characters who is able to *better* understand the conditions that prevent her from flourishing through the affective event of being with the John Henry myth, which she experiences after stumbling upon the cast-off sheet music of Jake Rose.

But what do these stories, each of which turns on an affective event of “being with the object,” reveal about the various optimistic potentialities of the myth, and what do they teach us about the potentials of the twenty-first century postsouthern novel to suspend the melancholic aesthetics of southern literature and take regional literature to a new place (Berlant 32)? Examining the type of feeling the ballad creates in Jake, Moses, and Jennifer reveals nothing inherent about John Henry or his ballad: the feeling of possibility it engenders may or may not be a cruel form of optimism. What makes it cruel for Jake and Moses—that they feel pushed toward an action that ultimately leads to a failure—may, in fact, make it freeing for Jennifer if John Henry’s perplexing victory is felt as a desire to function within and outside cultural logics that cannot be toppled through a singular and seemingly heroic act of defiance. It can be cruel if the political context and consequences make it so. Rather than proving the essential political value of the John Henry myth, reading the affective responses to it reveals something about the potential of art objects as carriers of myths: being with the myth affords each character a chance to momentarily suspend their everyday conditions and feel a connection to another figure in another time and place. Whitehead’s postsouthern novel opens up pathways for readers to understand themselves in relation to the John Henry myth specifically as well as myth generally. More importantly, it exposes the melancholy inherent to extending myth without unpacking the structures of feeling that makes the myth appealing. Finally, it connects those structures of affective attachment to the myth itself and, in the process, transforms it: being with the myth of John Henry after reading *John Henry Days* short-circuits the melancholic machinations under which the myth has operated. We can see John Henry’s short-lived victory in its optimistic potential, for it is precisely his failure—his inability to fundamentally change the structures

that demanded his sacrifice—that enabled his transformation into myth. Whitehead’s novel transforms the meaning of the myth; rather than celebrating John Henry out of glib nationalism, we can find potential in the knowledge that reexamining the myth provides.

Postsouthern optimism, like melancholia, is a product of literary strategies. The aesthetics of postsouthern optimism evince an alternative ethic to the familiar reactionary politics of melancholia. The strategies I have traced throughout this project connect the South with the globe and looks for continuities between the nation and the region. Just as I began by discussing the wistful, melancholic nostalgia for which southern literature is famous, postsouthern optimism emerges in spurts, and it is not free of doubt or suspicion. In her reading of an untitled poem by John Ashbery, Berlant, too, describes the way optimism (as opposed to cruel optimism) grows out of *momentary* interruptions.¹¹⁴ The poem, Berlant argues, attempts to turn affective senses into “theoreticians” capable of interpreting the structures that prevent non-bourgeois attachments from happening (36). She connects that affective work, importantly, with genre, writing that Ashbery’s lyric “opens up an opportunity” to be suspended from the familiar world:

Attending to the heterosonic and heterotemporal spaces within capital in which an event suspends ordinary time, sounds and senses can change, potentially, how we can understand what being historical means. Because Ashbery’s speaker is confident, because he has the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of his flesh, I believe, he can stand detaching from the promise of his habituated life and can thrive in the openness of desire to form, as heady as that might be. (36)

Berlant proposes that a radical affective event has the potential to shift our understanding of everyday cruel optimism. The genre of the lyric interjects as a form through which this

¹¹⁴ Berlant argues that the poem is “about being open to an encounter that’s potentially transformative” without necessarily paving a clear path for transformation (35). The poem describes an encounter between men that can temporarily lift the structures of bourgeois American values, which instrumentalize “social relations in terms of the rules of the market” (33).

meaning is delivered to us in the present—when the lyric has a history—and across time—when the generic import and meaning of the lyric has frequently evolved. For the meaning of this meeting to extend past a carnivalesque suspension, which would not transform the present but merely pause it, the affective potential “would have to be able to extend the moment to activity that would dissolve the legitimacy of the optimism embedded in the now displaced world” (36).

The optimism that Jake and Moses feel, then, could only be legitimized by the type of action it enlivens after the affective event ends. For both of these characters, the experience of being with the “Ballad of John Henry” only temporarily suspends the conditions of the present; in fact, it leads to the production of a new object that delivers the ballad to others without the promise that hearing it will change anything at all. These new ballads extend the possibility of the affective event for others, but one must wonder whether they “dissolve the legitimacy of the optimism embedded in the now displaced world” (36). In *John Henry Days*, the potential of the ballad of John Henry is dependent on the time in which a ballad is heard or made. By showing incremental progress first through Jennifer, who is able to see the way the ballad might suspend her “habituated life,” Whitehead suggests that the movement toward the present is not *only* a narrative of decline: it also brings clarity to the machinations of cruel optimism in a culture dominated and defined by media representations (Berlant 36). For Jennifer and J., being with the ballad and the myth of John Henry produces a form of optimism that feels historical in the wide context of *John Henry Days*; the transformative power of the ballad and the myth is at least partially a function of their relationship to time, history, and genre.

Put another way, Berlant's claim, that the optimistic thrust of Ashbery's poem is largely a function of the way it interacts with genre, deeply resonates with the way I have argued that postsouthern literature in the twenty-first century is lodged in an aesthetic history in which melancholic models of southern identity have proliferated for so long that the historiographic novel, for instance, is particularly equipped to take apart those melancholic attachments and propose alternatives. Whitehead's historiographic fiction represents one literary strategy, but *Postsouthern Melancholia* has explored others that partially take apart melancholic attachments. Brad Vice's literary sampling, Cynthia Shearer's transnationalism, and Percival Everett's revision/parody each bring the postsouthern fiction into contrast with the aesthetics of melancholia. The twenty-first century postsouthern fiction I have discussed, in short, textualizes a feeling of optimism through its dismantling of melancholic attachments. This optimism is neither naïve nor banal: it is an outgrowth of understanding postsouthern literature's relationship to southern literature writ large, and it accounts for a cultural shift away from North-South binaries and places the region in global economies, migratory patterns, and shifts in print culture. These changes are each bound to the genres in which they are delivered. Vice's stories build gradually away from Carl Carmer's world and enter into the near future. Shearer's novel weaves together a global cast of characters, connecting them through Boubacar's transformative potential for Madagascar, Mississippi. Everett deconstructs the postsouthern search for the real, and his novel, like Whitehead's, identifies the seeming powerlessness of characters who choose to search for the so-called real.

The notion that postsouthern literature must continue these familiarly melancholic inquiries is illusory; choices are possible. Whitehead points out, in fact, that *John Henry*

Days “has two possible endings, and readers fall into one of two camps deciding whether J. can galvanize himself and move on” (“Post Office”). The second way to read the novel is to believe that J. has been affected by his experiences in Talcott and that he “feels full of a *something* ineloquently promising, a something that reveals, at the same time, a trenchant *nothing* about the general conditions of optimism and cruel optimism” (Berlant 36). Reading J. as choosing to leave his toiling against the machine of his time behind is reading the novel as enabling optimistic attachments, which break the cycle of melancholic repetition the novel so clearly and exhaustively investigates. The novel ends with J. thinking about his own contest as a previously unexamined challenge that he took for granted as a part of his “habituated life” (36). This alone moves J. out of the cycle of attaching to cruel optimism—a cycle that is not altogether different from the cyclical attachments to melancholia this project has traced. The novel cautiously puts forth the possibility that the recursive historical attachments to John Henry, which have often been cruel, might not be reproduced once more.

If twenty-first century postsouthern literature presents openness to alternative aesthetic forms—alternative modes of identifying oneself as “southern”—its presence proves that the South continues to offer a home turf for scholars interested in asking questions about how literature might remain useful. This literature imagines specific postsouthern locations as well as affective modes of identifying with them without resorting to melancholic clichés about the authentic difference of the U.S. South, imagining its own distinctive aesthetics that are not bound to cliché. Even this modest beginning enfolds a multiplicity of affective strategies, motives, and pleasures. Looking back at the preceding chapters, we can see that the texts themselves share a noticeably different ethic at their core: they grapple with pragmatics of the world beyond the South’s traditional borders—both physical and literary.

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APPENDIX AN INTERVIEW WITH PERCIVAL EVERETT

Percival Everett's fiction tackles many terrains, both physical and figurative. He is the author of 18 novels, three short story collections, three poetry collections, a novella, and a children's book. He sets his fiction all over the United States—from the pacific northwest (*Suder*, 1983) to the rural southwest (*Assumption*, 2011); from the deserts of Wyoming (*Wounded*, 2005) to the urban and rural southeast (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, 2009) and the likewise varied northeast (*Erasure*, 2001)—so our discussion of his work as *regional* is perhaps both appropriate and slightly misleading. As Everett remarks early in our discussion, “Any good literature has to be regional, because it has to be set in a place.” It just so happens that his work is set in many different places. His academic career has taken him from the University of Kentucky to the University of Notre Dame, and now Everett has placed himself in Los Angeles, where he teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California.

Focusing on physical place offers only a partial view of Everett's storytelling. Much of his work investigates questions of mistaken identity and the struggle to define the one among the many. His latest novel, *Percival Everett By Virgil Russell* (2013), takes these questions to their extreme, examining familiar themes—love, pain, and guilt—in a narrative that causes readers to wonder whether the story is being told by a father or a son and, further, if the story is about the father or the son. For Everett, the answers to these questions are nearly always more complicated than the already dizzying questions.

Our conversation moves around these topics, and we circle back to race—a concept that seems unavoidable for both Everett and his readers. As Everett points out, “[Race] has less to do with my work than it does with the people who are discussing it. And that's

interesting to me. If they are aware of that, then it becomes even more interesting.” His work often strikes a balance between asserting the political urgency of art and refusing to identify its own politics, revealing the complexity of sometimes oversimplified political discourse. Everett evades questions about his own stance or interest in categories like race, letting his work speak for itself. This balance is perhaps best exemplified by Everett himself in his 2004 introduction to *The Jefferson Bible* in which Everett imagines a conversation between himself and Thomas Jefferson that struggles to mediate between Jefferson’s intellectual contributions to American democracy and the duplicitous racism of Jefferson’s foundational philosophies: “So, I have shamelessly used this opportunity to make some kind of political statement, though even I am at a loss to coherently restate it” (31). Indeed, Everett’s writing resists obvious political coherence without sacrificing an energetic political edge, embracing the subtle contradictions that others attempt to quietly efface.

During his thirty-year writing career, Everett has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Fiction, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award, and the Dos Passos Prize. In 2014, he was awarded a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts to continue his work on a novel about a World War II submarine. Everett has not sacrificed humor to garner such high acclaim. As Madison Smartt Bell notes, “Everett’s serious and realistic books have their covert strain of dark humor, and here the wit is out in the open, as agile and as cutting as Mark Twain’s.”

We met in a Los Angeles café in 2013 to discuss his work’s regional resonances as well as its categorization more broadly. In the edited conversation that follows, Everett and I touch on many of his texts but focus most on his 2009 novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*.

* * *

Matthew Dischinger: Could we start by talking a bit about regional literature?

Percival Everett: Sure. Any good literature has to be regional, because it has to be set in a place. Not that that's the defining feature of it, I don't think that that's true. But any novel that thinks it's not regional ... well then it's *USA Today*.

MD: Do you think about yourself as a regional writer?

PE: I don't think about it. Setting is important to me. Place is important. But I don't write out of any loyalty to a place, I write because that's where a story happens to be set.

MD: Place is often this kind of multivalenced word. Social constructions, space, particularly in a place like the South. Place can mean "in one's place" as well as a physical place.

PE: How does that differ from any place in America?

MD: What do you think?

PE: Of course it doesn't. Socioeconomic racial spacing and placing exists in the south side of Chicago—of course one could argue that the south side of Chicago is an extension of the South—but it's true of any northern urban area. It's always a matter of masks, a Fanonian thing.

MD: It sounds like what you're saying is that, for you, you're trying to tell a story that happens to be set in a place. So it doesn't feel like you're putting on a mask?

PE: I'm writing about places I know. When I write about the contemporary West, those get called Westerns and I don't know why. They're not westerns. They're set in the contemporary West. That's where they happened to be.

MD: Do you mean *Assumption*?

PE: Yes, *Assumption* or even *Watershed* (2003). Now *God's Country* (2003) is a western

because I'm playing with the form of the Western. The Western, to me, is a very precise genre. Precisely defined. Being placed in the West ... I mean, is a movie that's set in Los Angeles in 1997 a Western?

MD: Maybe if Quentin Tarantino directed it?

PE: (laughing) Yeah, I suppose so.

MD: But then that's a genre. That's more genre than place.

PE: Again, the only thing that makes *Assumption* a Western is that it's set in the West. There's none of the stuff of Westerns in it.

MD: So there you feel like it's more of a setting.

PE: See I don't use the term. I'm always curious about terms.

MD: Yes, we're throwing the terms. Speaking of terms, could you talk a bit about your background with southern lit or even what you think of as southern lit? Is that a specific referent for you? What's your background with that material?

PE: I don't know if I think about it a lot, but one of the things that's hard to deny or miss is that when you start listing important American novelists, that list is really South heavy. And not just the usual suspects, but people you wouldn't think of. Tom Wolfe. ... And then you get things that are considered southern novels, that really aren't southern novels, and they're really awful. It's a great film—*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)—but it's so poorly written that it's kind of embarrassing.

MD: And it's archetypal.

PE: Yes!

MD: You probably don't want to pick on any contemporary writers, but someone like Kathryn Stockett—

PE: Now I don't even know that name.

MD: She wrote *The Help* (2009).

PE: Oh, *The Help*, oh yeah. I haven't read it. That whole genre is the same novel every time: Young white girl befriends young black girl and young white girl grows up to tell young Black girl stories.

MD: And learns a valuable lesson in the process!

PE: (laughing) Yes.

MD: I know you've left out the heavy hitters, and maybe you don't even have to talk about Welty, Faulkner, O'Connor, etc.—

PE: These are writers who've had an obvious influence on my own work—probably O'Connor more than Welty. Even Katherine Anne Porter.

MD: Sure. That's what most people seem to think of as the canon of southern lit. It seems like it's Modernist centric.

PE: I think that's probably right. I guess the generations after that, people like Allan Gurganus, Richard Bausch, and even people like Richard Ford.

MD: Although when Richard Ford talks about himself he says he's not a southern writer.

PE: Right, but no more than I'm a southern writer. I'm from the South so I get claimed by the South. A lot of my work is set in the West, so I get called a Western writer. Most of my books sell in the Northeast. Go figure all that stuff out.

MD: And Europe, right?

PE: Yes.

MD: With contemporary writers, do you think the label still applies?

PE: It's useful if you're going to do it in a way to subvert the category or the notion of categories. It's a vacuous marker to say that someone is a southern writer. The implication is that their concerns as a writer and a person are going to be different than a person somewhere else. And I don't think that that's true. If it's being used as a marginalizing tool, and often those things are, when we call something folk art or when we call something African American literature the implication is that there's a mainstream literature against which you must set these things.

MD: And it seems like a contradictory gesture. In an attempt to expand the canon, you just reify the canon and talk about these texts as only interacting from the outside.

PE: I agree with you. It's like the *New York Times*. It's a regional newspaper, or it *should be* a regional newspaper. The fact that it is not hurts it as a newspaper. Nobody wants a national newspaper, because you end up with *USA Today*. The best newspapers are the ones that embrace the place in which they are set and also offer national and international news. The same is true with literature. You can't write an everyman's story. You write a particular person's story who's from a particular place, who either lives there or is visiting another particular place.

MD: The stuff that tries to be representative of everyone is rightfully problematized.

PE: All it can spawn is intellectual fast food. It's like the interstate system. Why are so many McDonald's and Burger King's on the freeway? Because people want something familiar. They're afraid of a region.

MD: And maybe the South still operates that way—as a place where we can displace national anxieties.

PE: We do that to other regions as well. For example, that awful killing in Wyoming—Matthew Shephard. This stuff happens in New York, but no one ever thinks to vilify the city of New York as a homophobic city. It's very easy to vilify the entire state of Wyoming as being homophobic because of one tragedy.

MD: Is that maybe a function of being on some kind of periphery? That it becomes symptomatic or exemplary?

PE: Well, the victors get to write history. After the Civil War, the South is behind. Racism didn't disappear in the North after the war, but you don't have to feel bad about yourself if someone else is worse. You know, Randy Newman actually has a wonderful song and it's on the Louisiana album—"Rednecks"—and it's got a great refrain. I won't sing it but I'll let you go find it. It starts out "Last night I saw Lester Maddox on a TV show." Newman's a wonderful storyteller. He's very smart. And he's a southerner—a southern Jew. It's kind of a weird erasure that we have with southern intellectuals. People like Fritz Hollings in South Carolina. Southern liberals are pretty good liberals.

MD: Speaking of South Carolina politics, I've read about the incident in the state house in 1989, in which you, protesting the presence of the Confederate flag, walked out of the state house after you were asked to speak.

PE: They asked me if I would address the legislature. I said 'yes' but I knew that I wouldn't, because I knew the flag was in there. So I simply stood up and said, "Because of the symbol of exclusion, I can't talk to you." And I sat down.

MD: And that moment seems to have influenced your story "The Appropriation of Cultures." It seems to theorize on the artifice and importance of the Confederate flag. Can you talk about that relationship?

PE: It's about symbols in general. The story is pretty obvious so I won't mention the story. I will say that I have since changed my mind about the flag. I think it ought to fly over the state house. In the same way that if I come to a field and it's full of land mines I appreciate a sign that says "land mines."

MD: Maybe it's a little more honest to leave it up.

PE: Yeah.

MD: Do you see the story as a sort of activist approach to social change?

PE: It's pretty obvious that if you appropriate something, you can change it. In the same way that once you hear a white car salesman rapping about his new sales, it takes some energy out of the form.

MD: (laughing) Did you see recently that Kanye West was putting the flag on t-shirts? When he talked about it, he seemed to have a similar attitude to your protagonist, Daniel. He sort of wondered about what appropriation means. I guess I'm asking if you think that's effective, or if it makes sense. Ultimately, it's a question about the ability of art to change something that exists inside and outside of art, like the Confederate Flag.

PE: Well, you can appropriate the symbol because it has some meaning for you. As a symbol of exclusion, as a symbol of oppression, it works to take it because you've had an experience with it. It means something different when I fly it.

MD: So is it on your truck?

PE: I did have a license plate.

MD: Here in California.

PE: Yes.

MD: Wow. Well maybe this is a good time to transition to *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, which is also in some ways about revision of important American symbols, the effort to change what something means by putting it in a different context. You've said before that when you were writing that book was that you watched these movies over and over and then you felt like you could "own" them. Do you think you exerted control over the movies?

PE: I didn't want to regurgitate the stories of the films. I wanted to be free to have the stories mean something different. And at first the meaning begins with the fact that I've chosen a particular film. So already the meaning is different, I've already owned it in a certain way. But the owning simply means tearing it away from my recognition of it as something else in the world.

MD: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Like how Sidney Poitier movies are recognized or operate?

PE: It's not so much the movies, but the fact that there's a body of them that have Sidney Poitier—this acceptable black figure. If the movies had been different, it could have been the same novel.

MD: Would you say a bit more about why you chose those movies, though? Sidney Poitier, as you say, was a palatable Black actor—

PE: Not a *The*.

MD: Right! The first.

PE: But again, I was not interested in Sidney Poitier. I was interested in the name. None of the novel has to do with Sidney Poitier. It has to do with the fact that there existed a character who assumed that place.

MD: So what is that place?

PE: The fact that a culture can assign a station of acceptability to one member of a group and feel good about itself. Think of these Republicans that we have now. I can just hear it following these elections, to Black America: “But you’ve had your President.” Hopefully it won’t come to that, but it wouldn’t be a remarkable thing for them to say. It’s what we expect from them.

MD: Yes, that’s another issue of acceptability. But, just returning to the novel, you have Not Sidney placed in all these situations that are similar to movies in the Sidney Poitier canon. It seems like incrementally he’s making changes. It’s a rise and fall. He sees an opportunity to do something different. I’m thinking of the scene that’s a revision of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, where he tells the family off. It’s something Sidney Poitier would have never been allowed to do in that movie. And then Not Sidney identifies with the domestic worker. He has this moment of triumph. But then the next chapter starts, and he thinks, “Maybe I made a mistake. Did I like that girl?” It’s sort of a seeming climax.

PE: You tell me, I don’t know!

MD: (laughing) For you, thinking about something like revision, which is sort of a popular mode in postmodernism—I’m not sure if *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* fits that—

PE: Revision of what?

MD: A previous text.

PE: I often wonder why that’s considered postmodern, when you have one of the quintessential modernist texts being *Ulysses*, which is a revision of the Telemachus story.

MD: You’re right. It’s a move that we could situate more broadly in the twentieth century. It seems like currently—and I’m thinking of other recent novels like Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, which is a direct revision of *Gone With the Wind*—there’s a presumption that

revision enacts some sort of social change. Do you see it that way? How do you see revision operating in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*?

PE: I would say *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* does not depend on the existence of these films. I could have made up films for a character that fit the bill of Sidney Poitier. I could have described “Harry Jones” as the Acceptable Black Actor and then made up movies. The films don’t add anything to the understanding of the novel. They add a layer of interest and, because they are stories they have meaning. But that could have been supplied by fictitious movies.

MD: It does seem more powerful though that they’re out there.

PE: Maybe.

MD: And you have revised characters, too. Like Ted Turner, who’s hilarious in that novel. It’s hardly even a caricature.

PE: I didn’t know anything about Ted Turner.

MD: You nailed him!

PE: That’s what everyone says. I didn’t know him at all. He gave a billion dollars to the UN, so I was kind of impressed by that.

MD: Even Ted Turner—the character—brings up something similar to revision. When he talks about re-airing “Different Strokes,” he mentions making the show meaningless by repeating it over and over and over again. There are these moments in the text when you see characters theorizing on repetition. Maybe that’s a better word than revision. Is that something you try to play with in your own writing?

PE: Yeah. I would think I think about it and play with it, but I would never say any work is meant to do it. I have pretty strict rules about interpreting my own mission or my own works.

It's not my place. I'm a writer. I make novels, and then I stand away and let the novel do the work. What I think it means, what I want it to mean, it's not only useless, but it's pointless. It doesn't affect it. It doesn't matter.

MD: Whenever I teach this novel, we always end up talking a lot about the character Percival Everett and the Philosophy of Nonsense course he teaches. What do you think that extra layer—the author within the text as a character—does to something to authorial intent?

PE: If you remember the name on the front of the book when you get to it, then it has a dual effect. One is a chilling effect, where it will pull you out of the text. The other is antithetical to that. It brings the text into a circle, into perhaps a reality that you haven't imagined. And how it works, how effective it is at doing either one, I don't know. Basically for me it's just a matter of play. Whatever it does, it does.

MD: I really like that. In a way, that's when it always becomes a metatextual conversation in class. They may not have seen Sidney Poitier movies, and they don't always know who Ted Turner is. Then, when they see Percival Everett as a character, even if they haven't read your books before, they know they're reading one then.

PE: Well, there are no tricks. You're holding a book. You're not going to forget that. You don't really duck when something falls. It's not like when people first saw *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903 and he shoots a pistol in the end at the audience and men fainted and women screamed. It's not that. It would be great to achieve that.

MD: In the last scene of the novel, Not Sidney receives an award as Sidney Poitier, and no one can tell that it's not Sidney Poitier. I think I just got that joke. How would you categorize that last moment with Not Sidney?

PE: Not my job.

MD: Do you see the book messing with expectations of readership?

PE: I'm just an old cowboy. ... Sure.

MD: (laughing) A lot of your protagonists seem to struggle to narrate themselves—often against a society that seems to already know them. I'm thinking of Monk in *erasure* trying to narrate the so-called Black experience through his own experiences versus through the expectations of readers or publishers, and Not Sidney tries to narrate his own sense of himself against this very specific figure. Is that issue—the issue of explaining oneself to others—a theme that you find yourself returning to, or is it fundamental to the way you think about writing?

PE: I never think about it.

MD: In both of those texts, race is sort of foregrounded this way—maybe more so in *erasure*.

PE: Race surfaces when race surfaces, but the characters don't define themselves through race any more than I do. That's a cultural imposition. Skin color is a descriptive attribute that you use when it's necessary. Somebody's just taken your wallet and the police are standing there, you say he was six feet tall and had brown skin. That tells them who to look for. Or if he's five eleven and had light skin. That's just logic, a physical description of someone. There's no race associated with it any more than you can look at someone from across a football field and say, "There's an African American man." No, there's a brown man. He could be from Guyana. What does it mean? So it's not a racial description, it's a physical description.

MD: It seems like your characters are wrestling with that very issue.

PE: It can become a cultural imposition, given the racism of the culture or of other people. But why should it be any more? The presence of a black character in a novel written by a

black writer becomes racial, but the presence of a white character in a novel written by a white writer does not. There's something strange in that logic, and that's obviously because it's false. If I write about a black character, that's nothing to do with race. That's the color of that character. To assume that it has something to do with race by virtue of that character being black, is good old fashioned American racism.

MD: Is that an experience, maybe without being specific, that you've had trying to write and publish novels?

PE: Oh sure! I have a friend who is a painter and when he was in graduate school, and if he didn't put a black person in the painting, that's all anybody would talk about. "There are no black people in this painting!" And it was a painting of trees!

MD: Well that's problematic.

PE: It's crazy is what it is. Not surprising to any of us. Very sad.

MD: You're established at this point as a writer, but is that something you still wrestle with?

PE: Well I'd be stupid if I thought I was not going to attract attention sprinting through Beverly Hills. And I would be afraid of the way the cops would respond to me. And I'd be afraid for one glaring reason. So I'm not an idiot about it. This is America, this is the world we live in.

MD: Of course. Shifting gears, I guess I wanted to talk a little bit about parody. There's a really funny line in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and I think it's Ted Turner who says it: "Once you leave Atlanta, you're in Georgia." You didn't shy away from pointing out the absurdity of the rural South. There's "Peckerwood County" as this fictional county outside Atlanta, and this small town in Alabama, "Smuteye"—

PE: Which is actually a town name.

MD: Really?

PE: Oh yeah. It's actually a thing, smuteye. It's eaten in Mexico.

MD: (laughing) In some ways, it's a very parodic novel. Is parody a strategy, an affect—how would you describe parody?

PE: It depends on the work. Sometimes it's a springboard. Sometimes it's a tick in the novel. It just happens. One thing that's necessary for it, to do it, is to understand the source of the parody, and to understand it in a way that's not cartoonish. I teach theory to graduate students and I teach them to make fun of theory. You can't do it unless you understand it, and you can't really understand it unless you give it a chance.

MD: That makes a lot of sense for me, about theory, because it's so hard.

PE: It's not that hard. That's the thing. Especially when you're dealing with the French, when you realize that half the time they're not serious anyway. They're having fun. They're playing with their own ideas. It's self-parodic.

MD: Do you think your novel works that way?

PE: I think that all works necessarily do that. Just as a reader can't forget that he or she is reading a novel, I don't forget that I'm writing one. I tend to be ironic. It's in my nature. Even though I have things that I believe pretty strongly, I don't like earnest stories. I like them if the earnestness is actually ironic.

MD: So what you're saying is you don't like Jonathan Franzen.

PE: (laughing) Not at all. To quote one of my big influences, Twain: "With a little editing, it's a pamphlet."

MD: So it sounds like parody is part of your ethos.

PE: It could be. I'm not the one to say. I'm more concerned with a couple of philosophical issues, logical ones. One of them is: 'a = a' is not the same thing as 'a is a'. That's usually where every novel starts.

MD: Do you think it's telling that that fundamental equation often gets mapped through race?

PE: See that has less to do with my work than it does with the people who are discussing it. And that's interesting to me. If they are aware of that then it becomes even more interesting. The critical work of any work of art has to understand that the work itself is seldom the only source of the criticism.

MD: Do you mean the criticism itself?

PE: Yes, the criticism necessarily is criticism not only of the work that it portends to be, but also of the mission of the critics. And so, in that way, any work constructs, as another level of art, the critic that is criticizing it.

MD: I think we just call that academic branding.

PE: In a way, but it's only branding if you know you're doing it. And when you miss the point, that's what's kind of wonderful.

VITA

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