

How to Feel Southern:
Mapping Affective Geographies of the American South

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ABSTRACT

The American South has long held a controversial place in the American literary and cultural imagination: not only a host of traumatic histories and national shame but also a site of fierce attachments and determined political struggle. Within such a matrix, the South is as much a national fiction as it is a geographic entity. This dissertation contends that such a fiction is often upheld through the complex, and often contradictory, feelings that the South spurs both within and without the region. While the predominance of “nostalgia” as a keyword in southern studies shows that scholars in this field have long been interested in studying the region through an emotional lens, this over-investment in nostalgia—along with its accompanying affects of guilt, rage, and shame—has stalled the relationship between southern and affect studies. The exclusive focus on such feelings privileges a white emotional paradigm, ignoring the lived experiences of the diverse communities in the region that persist despite the social and ecological catastrophes of the South. To understand fully the ongoing significance of the South as a vital site of struggle, we must turn to the work of twentieth and twenty-first century authors and theorists—such as William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, bell hooks, Honoreé Fanonne Jeffers, and Jesmyn Ward—who remap the South as a place of dynamic and often paradoxical emotions. This dissertation explores the ways that these southern feelings are intertwined with matters of ecology and historiography, underscoring the myriad inflections of emotion on the ways that the South is represented, redefined, and remembered. This play between feeling, ecocriticism, and history allows for the mapping of “affective geographies” across works that are both canonical and contemporary, carving out critical space for considering the vast network of attachments to southern land, history, and identity that inform the work of resistance and collectivity that has taken root in the South.

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INTRODUCTION

Southern Dis/Comforts

In the seminal *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing*, Patricia Yaeger introduces her expansive addition to the southern critical landscape via a turn to her own relationship with the South:

'This is a book about the South: a book driven by the pleasures and costs of my family's own southern past—lived in northern Florida, northern Georgia, and eastern Virginia. In writing it I have been mesmerized by a spectacle of regional trauma that may be shared with others but remains peculiarly my own. Like Faulkner's Quentin Compson, I feel unable to refuse a lingering passion for the South that has drawn me into this book-length affair with southern women, an affair compounded by nostalgia for moon-pie and grits, for the smell of mildew and the itch of Spanish moss, by a never-ending desire to come home to some Sunbelt town that is humid as hell, humming with summer bees, and covered with kudzu. But this longing for something like home remains in constant tension with my own dixiephobia: a horror bred from the cruelties of the autocratic, segregated ways of my childhood, with its acrid memories of "Colored Town"—our habitual route to church every Sunday (as if my father longed to connect with the hard-baked deprivations of his youth—or were we just saving gas?), and its muffled recollections of the convicts haunting the roads between Micanopee and Ocala—were they chained? Not in North Florida, not in the fifties, but I remember them chained; they were, of course, in chains.¹

This opening is intimate, bordering on confessional, as Yaeger grounds her scholarship in her youthful and familial connections to the region. Presenting *Dirt and Desire* as a work of scholarship with critical, personal, and political stakes, Yaeger must first situate her own southernness and attachment to the South. This negotiation takes place across multiple temporalities and registers; Yaeger plots an evergreen romantic landscape that stands in direct contrast to the unstable memory from her childhood. The grammars of past and present collapse within the parenthetical and oscillation of the passage's end as Yaeger's sentences embed into one another—interruptions and interjections that seek some objective, remembered truth that cannot quite be accessed. Fragmented

¹ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

by its descent into dashes and unanswerable questions, Yaeger's memory of her family is disrupted by her attempts to close the distance between historical knowledge and the fleeting remembrances of childhood. Caught between multiple temporalities that destabilize each other in turn, Yaeger marks *Dirt and Desire* as much a personal reconciliation as it is literary criticism.

For Yaeger, this reconciliation is inseparable from the affective; her prose is cluttered with the language of feeling. Her "lingering passion" for the South is accompanied by mesmerization and trauma, nostalgia and desire, longing and haunting, and, of course, the horror of her coined "dixiephobia." Bookended by the South's violent racial history and evocations of southern land, the affects that populate the opening to *Dirt and Desire* are gnarled within the historical and ecological contexts that shape them. Syntactically stumbling through her memories of a southern childhood in the Jim Crow South, Yaeger marks her southernness as an intensely felt thing—a collective of nestled emotions that play a crucial role in forming these fraught memories of the region. For Yaeger, it seems impossible to write about the South without this navigation of her own feelings.

Yaeger is not the only southern southernist who couches their work in this personal, affective approach. In *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson—who asserts her position as an "expatriate southerner, voluntarily displaced from Dixie"—employs a similar tactic in the book's opening acknowledgments:

Someone observing my life from the outside might easily have guessed that I would end up writing about the South, but the need to tell about the South nonetheless took me by surprise. In the late 1980s, I headed off to a northern graduate school intent (like countless expatriates before me) on leaving things southern behind. Born the daughter of a southern mother and a northern father, saddled with a name like "Tara," questions of southern identity had long both vexed and animated me, and I was ready for a change...The challenge it seemed was to reconcile the theories I was learning—powerful but abstract lessons for understanding the world—with my complex, messy, often ambivalent feelings about daily life in the South, a life I had willingly fled.²

² Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), ix.

McPherson frames her "complex, messy, often ambivalent feelings" toward the South as a central part of *Reconstructing Dixie*'s scholarly aims, underscoring (as Yaeger does) that writing about the South as a southerner is a deeply affective process—one of both an inevitable compulsion toward the South as well as an inert desire to distance herself from the region. McPherson's repeated attention to her movement from the South—"voluntarily displaced," "leaving things southern behind," "willingly fled," even her use of "expatriate" to describe herself—all emphasize this departure as an active, necessary choice that seems to underscore a kind of objective authority on the region. In other words, in being both vexed *and* animated by the South, McPherson highlights an intimacy with and critical distance from the region that allows her to see it fully, to understand (or at least, be able to acknowledge) the South's complicated place in a larger cultural imaginary.

A similar investment in this impossible place—"the South"—drives this dissertation. In beginning with the affective strategies that Yaeger and McPherson employ, I highlight a turn to emotion that has become ubiquitous in the work of southern studies. As writing about the South becomes so intimately intertwined with a legacy of feeling, understanding affect as a vital, yet underused, critical tool is paramount. This dissertation posits that what endures of the South is a matrix of feeling bound by not only the racial, political, gendered, and socioeconomic influences of identity, but also the attachments to the history and land that constitute its place in the cultural and literary imaginations within and without the region. To this point, the South does not exist as a cohesive, stable entity—not even as a documented region of unwavering borders—but is made multiple and mutable by the felt experiences that shape the ways that it persists.

Jennifer Rae Greeson and Scott Romine make this persistence of feeling clear in their introduction to *Keywords for Southern Studies*, where they note the collection's interest in "investigat[ing] the structures of feeling that continue to consolidate and dissolve various Souths,

remapping the gap between ‘real place’ and space as it is configured affectively.”³ Simply put, the South lies somewhere in the space between the fictional, the factual, and the felt. In tracing this affective configuration of the South across literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I seek a more concrete model for thinking through the kinds of “southern feelings” that have become the region’s legacy.

To further understand the South as an affective object, I turn to the work of Sara Ahmed. In her essay “Happy Objects,” she defines affect as “sticky,” as “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connections between ideas, values, and objects.”⁴ In other words, affect is what binds—what forges our attachments to the physical, psychological, and ideological elements of the world. Following Ahmed, my understanding of affect prioritizes the sociocultural ramifications and residues that stem from a mediation between the South as a fiction and the material experiences of those who call it home. To read the South as an affective object then is to pick apart the networks of emotion across its multitude of iterations, across the collective of perspectives that have cultivated them. In short, how has “southernness” as an affective experience of the world been shaped by the gnarled interplay between history, memory, and land that forms the experiences of those who call the region home?

Contemporary southern literature offers a productive space for thinking through such intersections. As Greeson and Romine suggest, the South’s infinite portrayals mark fiction as vital tool for understanding the South. McPherson echoes such a sentiment as she writes: “The South today is as much a fiction, a story we tell and are told, as it is a fixed place below the Mason-Dixon Line.”⁵ As Romine and Greeson draw a clear line between such fictions and affect, they make clear

³ Scott Romine and Jennifer Rae Greeson, Introduction to *Keywords for Southern Studies*, eds. Scott Romine and Jennifer Rae Greeson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 4.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

⁵ McPherson, 3.

the immersion of the cultural, historical, and literary narratives that “consolidate and dissolve various Souths”—a knot of fiction all bound up with each other. As fiction stands as a crucial part of undertaking any study of the South, literature also offers a clear site for reading the collision of the fictional and the affective in representations of the region.

Greeson furthers McPherson’s attention to the South’s fictionality—as well as underscores the South as a site of complex investments for the nation at large—in *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*:

This South that we hold collectively in our minds is not—could not possibly be—a fixed or real place. It both exceeds and flattens place; it is a term of the imagination, a site of national fantasy. Our South is created in and imbibed from our culture, and like any cultural construct, it means different things at different times to different people.⁶

Greeson delineates that to write about the South is to always negotiate between reality and fiction—a fiction that is so pervasive, so warped, so romanticized that its origin itself is difficult to pin down. The fantasy of the South—moonlight and porches and magnolias—as well as the ideological frame of the “backward South” are always in play, always in dialogue, always present in the conversation. It is known by now that neither of these Souths truly exist, but they still persist in popular memory and imagination. A more robust understanding of the relationship between the South and emotion requires venturing into this overlapping space of fiction, memory, and history that the South occupies—holding these clusters of affect up to the light and tracing out the endless refractions, questioning what they both reveal and conceal.

This relationship between the South and emotion is not unexamined in critical conversations although, as I will argue, our affective vocabularies remain underdeveloped. In many ways, this dissertation could be read as a successor to McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie*. McPherson’s work

⁶ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

establishes a useful base for my interrogation of “southern feelings.” As she explicates in her introduction:

...I push this idea of “feeling southern” further, examining the recent history and import of “southern feelings.” This book argues that popular culture provides the scripts for certain emotional paradigm scenarios, teaching us how to feel ‘properly’ southern, while also recognizing the complexity of such scenes of instruction. Mapping the emotional registers of southernness can help us to access the latent feelings supporting seemingly straightforward ways of being southern. What emotional labor do representations of the South perform, and for whom? How do emotions such as guilt and remorse figure into notions of southernness, and how have different southerners reckoned with this emotional legacy?⁷

Here, McPherson highlights the emotional aspects of a southern identity and lays a foundation for my own consideration of southernness itself as an affect that shapes how southerners may engage with the world. Most significantly, McPherson also insists upon the wielding of a particular collective of southern feelings, an insistence that is central to my own engagement with the affects that cultivate the ways that the South is memorialized in the cultural consciousness of the United States.⁸

While my work is deeply indebted to McPherson, the methods and prioritizations of our projects diverge. McPherson employs what she terms a “lenticular logic” across her deconstructions of popular southern archetypes—a heuristic that is capable of examining the labor and feelings of Black southerners that are often concealed by the white archetypes that they uphold. Despite the use of this lenticular logic, guilt and nostalgia still emerge as the key affects of *Reconstructing Dixie* as McPherson interrogates iconic southern tropes. Because McPherson’s work is interested in both pop culture representations of the South and the nostalgia industry that is omnipresent in much of southern tourism, the result is a critical emphasis on the white southern feelings that emerge from a central focus on nostalgia for an imagined South. Despite her suggestion of “a kind of affective mobility that moves beyond nostalgia, guilt, and white racial melancholia,” *Reconstructing Dixie* is

⁷ McPherson, 5-6.

⁸ As McPherson writes: “Emotions provide an orientation to the world, serving as a key nexus between cultural and political paradigms...” (33).

never quite able to fully make such a move. While stories of Black southerners are present throughout, they are never given the space nor depth of their white counterparts.

In the twenty years since McPherson's publication of *Reconstructing Dixie*, there has been little forward momentum in the critical dialogue between affect and southern studies.⁹ The most notable addition would be Scott Romine's "Southern Affects: Field and Feeling in a Skeptical Age," where Romine argues that "affect works...to produce the South as singular, totalizing, and authoritative—an object of *belief* that, to contemporary eyes, tends to appear as an object of skepticism: a fantasy believed by our credulous forebears."¹⁰ In other words, Romine suggests that it is *affect* rather than any other metric that has produced the South as a concentrated entity in conceptualizations of the past. He underscores the absence of affective tools in the field of southern studies, which have led to skepticism in the idea of a stable South—an idea that occupies much of the discourse in the field. He highlights a "deterioration of affect that has tended to dis-integrate the South, severing locution from location, and binding it to construction—that is, to representations experienced as transparently imaginative or fantastic."¹¹

Similar to McPherson, Romine's work on southern affects is defined by a turn to the past as he tracks this affective South across the earlier twentieth-century. While these scholars confirm the integral relationship between the South and feeling upon which my work rests, the scopes of their works tend to generate the same well-worn collection of southern feelings that McPherson outlines, such as nostalgia's relationship to the Lost Cause mythos or shame's tie to slavery and its aftermaths.

⁹ Although a bit obvious, it is worth noting that the contexts in which McPherson's and my own work are emerging are radically different. In the two decades since *Reconstructing Dixie* was published (and even longer since McPherson began the work as her own doctoral dissertation), much has changed, notably in terms of the South's own precarious futurity as climate catastrophe worsens. It becomes difficult to write about the South and feeling without considering the emotions that may stem from such vulnerability. Moreover, an affective study offers alternatives to southernness that go beyond its relationship to history (which is often white-centric and leads to the over-emphasis on white feelings that we see in McPherson's work).

¹⁰ Scott Romine, "Southern Affects: Field and Feeling in a Skeptical Age" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the U.S. South*, eds. Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 163.

¹¹ Ibid.

While critical work on such emotions is incredibly productive—particularly in considering the collapse of the past and the present that occurs in the complex relationship between the South and history—their predominance in the critical landscape has limited any study where feelings cannot be so succinctly defined, such as in the work of more contemporary southern authors. To this end, my work looks forward into a more contemporary archive that attends to the ways that affects shape the modern South as an *ongoing* site of political struggle across the lines of race, gender, and class, particularly in the face of existential threats of the twenty-first century.

Embracing an affective study of the contemporary South pushes the field of southern studies further as it unlocks a valuable theoretical frame through which the region can be understood. As McPherson claims:

Though southern studies is by no means a unified or monolithic category, a tendency prevails within the field to *preserve* the South, that is, to focus on those elements that unify the region rather than to pursue it in relation to national or global contexts. Such an approach always runs the risk of fixing or freezing southern culture, often at its most stereotypical moments, even in work that seeks to overturn these very stereotypes...This process tends to impose a stasis or unity on the South...¹²

Since McPherson wrote *Reconstructing Dixie*, many changes have occurred across southern studies, particularly an expansion of the field to consider the region in “relation to national or global contexts.”¹³ Yet, the stalled relationship between southern and affect studies exemplifies the

¹² McPherson, 9. This attention to the limitations of the typical methodologies of southern studies is in no way unique to McPherson’s argument. The point here also echoes Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana Nelson’s now famous call for a “new southern studies” in their preface to the special edition *American Literature* entitled “Violence, the Body, and the South,” as well as Patricia Yaeger’s aims to “dynamite the rails” of southern studies in *Dirt and Desire*. In the twenty years since these initial calls for change, such notes on expanding the field have continued to be made, notably by Jay Watson and Zackary Vernon in their separate works on ecocriticism and southern studies. As Watson writes in his brief essay “The Other Matter of the South” (2016), a collaboration between the two fields would allow for a mutual illumination, where they can “take each other to new places on southern ground” (158). As these critics make clear, the field of southern studies is ripe for more innovative and collaborative critical frameworks that can further consider and inform our conceptions of the South across a multitude of imaginaries.

¹³ There has been a particular push to consider the South in transnational contexts, particularly the relationship between the South and the Caribbean. See Harilaos Stecopoulos’s *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and US Imperialisms, 1898-1976* (2008), Keith Cartwright’s *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern Time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-creole Authority* (2013), and Martyn Bone’s *Where the New World Is: Literature About the U.S. South at Global Scales* (2018).

centrality of a static understanding of the South to much critical work on the region. As such, I argue that both fields stand to benefit from a more robust dialogue with each other.

Through an affective study of the South that emphasizes works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can unsettle the “risk of fixing or freezing southern culture” that McPherson so succinctly underscores. The collection of southern affects that I have previously highlighted—nostalgia, guilt, rage, and shame—speak to this tendency toward stasis. These feelings have resulted in a particular emotional paradigm of the South—one that both prioritizes white feelings and experiences and incubates a particular model of affect that can only be conceived through a centering of the past. We see this model at work in the passages from Yaeger and McPherson that open this introduction as these scholars temper their attraction to and fascination with the South through an emphasis on their own separation—both physical and affective—from the region that they once called home. For Yaeger in particular there seems to be a specific anxiety around admitting an affection for the South without first decrying the South’s legacy of violence, particularly as a white woman, whose proximity to such violence lives only in the fragmentation of her memories. Her mention of nostalgia for the South of her youth is undercut by an insistence on revealing—no matter how incompletely—her own witnessing of the Jim Crow era. Yaeger’s “dixiephobia” makes clear the grasp that history holds on matters of affect in the South. This centering of history as the main generator of southern feeling has led to a collection of consequences that will be explored in the following chapters, such as an inability to conceive of the feelings of Black southerners beyond the traumatic (Chapter 2) and a failure to fully grasp southern futurity in the age of climate-catastrophized precarity (Chapter 4).

As I explore the different southern feelings that emerge from more contemporary southern literary and cinematic texts—many of which were published in the last thirty years—I not only seek to expand the pantheon of southern feelings, but I also want to consider new models for thinking

about affect itself. Such work often seeks to separate affect as bodily sensations and impulses from emotions as socially-constructed categories that give language to these impulses. However, Tyrone S. Palmer has argued that “such distinctions often serve to obfuscate rather than elucidate the object of analysis, reinforcing the slipperiness and indeterminacy of affect as an analytic tool.”¹⁴ As the previous paragraphs may show, I follow Palmer in using “affect,” “emotion,” and “feeling” interchangeably throughout this dissertation. In doing so, I am able to more thoroughly explore the dynamic ways that feelings manifest across identity lines (i.e. the ways that loving the South feels differently for white and Black southerners) as well as underscore the different intensities through which such feelings can even be recognized. Moreover, because my project understands alternate metrics through which affects can be engendered and sustained (in other words, I examine other bodies, beyond the human, through which affects can be developed and circulated), rejecting the taxonomy between these terms allows me to more broadly identify and consider the feelings that populate contemporary southern literature.

Furthermore, the South offers a space to rethink and complicate this “indeterminacy” of affect that Palmer highlights. An affective study of the South reveals instead the feelings that are sustained and perpetuated across cultural and critical landscapes.¹⁵ To embrace the full potential of emotions as such a tool, we must understand them as foundational rather than abstract—as sturdy and difficult to

¹⁴ Tyrone S. Palmer, “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Journal of the Critical Ethnic Studies Association* 3, no. 2, (2017): 35.

¹⁵ In her afterword to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Kathleen Stewart illuminates this omnipresence and persistence of affect: “Affect is the commonplace, labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being. It hums with the background noise of obstinacies and promises, ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points. It stretches across real and imaginary social fields and sediments, linking some kind of everything. This is why there is nothing dead or inconsequential in even the flightiest of lifestyles or the starkest of circumstances. The lived spaces and temporalities of home, work, school, blame, adventure, illness, rumination, pleasure, downtime, and release are the rhythms of the present as a compositional event—one already weighted with the buzz of atmospheric fill” (340). Stewart insists upon the value of affect as tool for thinking through the attachments we have to places and narratives and ideals, all of which are impossibly bound up in the way the South has been written and understood with in the national imaginary. As she writes: “Affect matters in a world that is always promising and threatening to amount to something. Fractally complex, there is no telling what will come of it or where it will take persons attuned” (340).

displace—highlighting their centrality to the narratives that shape the roles and perceptions of objects, regions, and people in the consciousness of the United States.¹⁶

On Affective Geographies

In his Pulitzer-winning poetry collection *The Tradition*, Jericho Brown rarely mentions the South directly. And yet, the region suffuses the text—an unnamed presence that seeps through the language and landscapes of Brown’s poems. As a collection, *The Tradition* contends with the ways in which the political embeds within the personal, as Brown turns to poetics as a method of negotiating his place as a gay southern Black man. Throughout this negotiation, Brown turns to floral motifs, as he plants the vulnerable body amidst a southern garden. We see one such example of this in the poem “The Trees,” where Brown writes:

In my front yard live three crape myrtles, *crying trees*
We once called them, not the shadiest but soothing
During a break from work in the heat, their cool sweat

Falling into us. I don’t want to make more of it.
I’d like to let these spindly things be
Since my gift for transformation here proves

Useless now that I know everyone moves the same
Whether moving in tears or moving
To punch my face. A crape myrtle is

A crape myrtle. Three is a family. It is winter. They are bare.
It’s not that I love them
Every day. It’s that I love them anyway.¹⁷

Across Brown’s work, the South appears within the landscapes that he crafts, present here in the image of the thin, branching trunks of crape myrtles. Through his attention to and conflation of

¹⁶ This particular mobilization of affect as a critical tool follows the work done by theorists such as the aforementioned Sara Ahmed, as well as Lauren Berlant, who writes in *The Female Complaint* of “the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space, a space of attachment and identification that is not saturated merely by ideological or cognitive content but is also an important sustainer of people’s desires for reciprocity with the world” (x-xi). It is this understanding of affect—the terms of one’s being and feeling themselves in the world—that guides my work here as I trace the different attachments that have been forged across southern history, literature, and land.

¹⁷ Jericho Brown, “The Trees,” in *The Tradition* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2019), 19.

their sweat and tears, Brown makes these trees emotive and bodily, mapping them within a larger geography amidst the human bodies of the unknown “we” that turn to them for relief. In this geography, Brown erodes the borders between bodies as the trees’ “cool sweat / fall[s] *into* us,” and the separation between the human and the ecological collapses. In this collapse, he plays with the role of metaphor as he expresses his desire to “let these spindly things be,” rather than subject them to “[his] gift for transformation.” The enjambment of “A crape myrtle is / A crape myrtle” draws out these undone boundaries but resists the impulse to metaphorize.¹⁸ Rather, the line operates almost synecdochally, representing a specifically southern landscape.

In an interview with Louisiana magazine *64 Parishes*, Brown connects the crape myrtles in the yard of his Georgia home and the crape myrtles of his childhood home in Shreveport, Louisiana, mapping a geography that traverses the temporal and embeds the South within the poem.¹⁹ This attention to southern land emphasizes its significance to the way that southern writers engage with and replicate the region. For even if the crape myrtle *is* just a crape myrtle, Brown still imbues it with meaning through his ending of “lov[ing] them anyway.” In his turn southern land, Brown underscores a clear triangulation between the felt, the ecological, and the southern. In other words, he suggests that southern land both affects and is affected.

This capacity to affect and be affected underwrites the basis of affect theory. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*:

In this ever-gathering accretion of force-relations (or, conversely, in the peeling or wearing away of such sedimentations) lie the real powers of affect, affect as potential: *a body's capacity to affect and to be affected*. How does a body, *marked in its duration by these various encounters*

¹⁸ The line also alludes to Gertrude Stein’s “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” from “Sacred Emily.” While the repetition in Stein’s line famously plays with representation, sound, and defamiliarization, Brown’s line resists that play between the written and the sonic. The crape myrtle can only be a crape myrtle.

¹⁹ As Brown explains: “What I love about having moved back to the South is that some of [the landscapes are] the same. There’s a poem in the book called “The Trees.” There are four crepe myrtles in my front yard, now, where I live. I can see them when I look out the big window in my living room. Often, I sit and I work there. I’m sort of gazing out of the window, meditating or ruminating. That triggers me to my first experiences with crepe myrtles, which really were with my mom and dad, working outside in the yards, all over Shreveport and Bossier, where my dad worked.”

with mixed forces, come to shift its affectations (its being affected) into action (capacity to affect).²⁰

As Gregg and Seigworth underscore, affect theory revolves around the movement of bodies in the world. In “The Trees,” Brown underscores the body’s response to a state of American crisis as he considers its reactions to the myriad violences that have rendered the body vulnerable across the history of the United States. For Brown, the vulnerability of the human body—particularly his own queer, Black body—is bound to the fate of the land that surrounds it as both have been, in Gregg and Seigworth’s words, “marked in [their] duration by these various encounters with mixed forces.” These mixed forces are plentiful and stretch across time: settler colonialism, plantation slavery, war, sharecropping, rape, gun violence, police brutality, and more recently, ecological catastrophe and erosion. With these events and encounters, Brown highlights the way that southern land is caught up in a matrix of affective attachments between the human and history.

While affect itself remains an evolving theoretical frame, one thing seems quite clear from Gregg and Seigworth’s definition: affect can be understood as an ecological and geographic thing, particularly when we, like Brown, bridge the connection between land and body.²¹ In the literary, poetic, and cinematic representations of the South that I study throughout the following chapters, the landscape of the South often stands as its own character, as it is made corporeal and unabashedly

²⁰ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

²¹ In the collection *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope*, editors Ondine Park, Tonya K. Davidson, and Rob Shields highlight the formal strides that attend thinking of affect in terms of ecologies. As they write, “Ecologies sum up the multiple ways of affecting and being affected, of multi-causal processes and contingent outcomes. But they are also nontotal and open systems, criss-crossed by flows” (6). As their collection insists, specific places are imbued with a rich relational network of affects that are integral in creating meaning. Further environmental significance is placed on this relationship between ecologies and affect in the collection *Affective Ecocriticism*, edited by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino. In the introduction, Bladow and Ladino suggest that there is much to gain from this intersection of ecocritical and affective theories: “...affect is ecological ‘by nature,’ since it operates at the confluence of environments, texts, and bodies—including nonhuman and inanimate bodies. Affect theory disrupts both discrete notions of embodied selfhood and static notions of environment, encouraging us to trace the trajectories of transcorporeal encounters that are intricate and dynamic. Material ecocriticism likewise foregrounds the unstable and processive nature of all environments and objects; however, unlike much affect theory to date, it takes environments seriously, as agents in generating and shaping affect” (8).

present. As such, in an expansion of our understanding of affective bodies to include bodies of land, we can consider encounters with the land as affective relationships that offer a way to further complicate and develop how we understand southern feeling. As Brown demonstrates, there is much to gain from thinking through this connection more rigorously, and the South, with its complex interplay between region, history, memory, and land, provides a perfect case study through which the value of an eco-affective approach can be demonstrated as we trace how such a matrix might illuminate our critical and cultural landscapes.

To encompass this intersection of feeling, ecology, and history, I use the term “affective geographies” as a heuristic and guiding frame for this dissertation.²² Such a term owes much of its development to work done in Black and abolition studies, particularly that of Katherine McKittrick and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggles*, McKittrick argues that geography as academic discipline, object of study, and metric of meaning-making is not objective as may be assumed, but rather a product of the same systems and institutions that have made the rest of the world. As McKittrick writes:

Geography is not, however, secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is...Concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social processes.²³

²² For examples of the uses of “affective geographies” in literary studies, see Naomi Greyser’s *On Sympathetic Grounds: Race Gender, and Affective Geographies in Nineteenth-Century North America* and Paul Michael Johnson’s *Affective Geographies: Cervantes, Emotion, and the Literary Mediterranean*. Greyser uses “affective geographies” to articulate the relationship between the changing physical landscape of the United States and the mapping of sympathy in spatial terms by sentimentalists during this period (2). She is attempting to connect the outpouring of sympathy that dominated early American media with the shifting understandings of intimacy across distance as the United States expanded its territory through violating violence. Similarly, my use of “affective geographies” will think through the metrics of power that dictate conceptualizations of space and the feelings that are attached to such spaces; however, my conceptualization of the term is more invested in the relationship between land and feeling—in the seemingly settled geography of the modern South that is enmeshed in a complex web of emotions felt throughout the United States. While Johnson’s text lacks a clear definition of its titular term, his major claim of the text asserts that “in Cervantes’s works, an innate and potent relationship exists between affectivity and the spaces in which it is expressed” (28). In other words, he turns to emotions in Cervantes’s texts to think through the perception of the Mediterranean. In many ways, our projects seem to resonate with one another, but Johnson is more preoccupied with tracing how Cervantine emotions reflect attitudes toward the Mediterranean than writing land as a generative site of affect.

²³ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xi.

For McKittrick, geography is irrevocably bound up in the human experience, rather than objective, soluble fact. The production of space is always an incredibly human endeavor, never detached from the sociocultural realm in which it occurs. Geography—as tool and as discipline—is then shaped by engagements with and understandings of the world.²⁴ As such, issues of borders, identity, and power are always circulating through how geographic matters are both conceived and perceived. Further, as McKittrick marks the relationship between the social and the geographic, she insists upon the ways that geographic imaginaries participate in the structural and systemic forces acting upon bodies that are raced, classed, and gendered.²⁵

This mobilization of geography as a metric for thinking about social struggle and justice can also be traced throughout Gilmore’s work. As she writes: “A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice; if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place.”²⁶ For Gilmore, this imperative is embodied in her conception of “abolition geography,” which she defines in her essay “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence” :

Abolition geography takes feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure. In other words, it’s a way of studying, and of doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves.²⁷

Gilmore’s emphasis on embodiment as a geographic matter (as well as the reverse—geography as an embodied matter) emphasizes a clear relationship between geography and affect as the space that a

²⁴ Per McKittrick: “Geography is intertwined with...languages, acts, expressions, and experiences” (xxxi).

²⁵ In such an examination of Black women’s cartographies, McKittrick allows for a more flexible understanding of geography itself: “Geography, then, materially and discursively extends to cover three-dimensional spaces and places, the physical landscape and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practices of mapping, exploring, and seeing, and social relations in and across space. Geography is also Geography, an academic discipline and a set of theoretical concerns developed by human geographers, such as the importance of the ways in which material spaces and places underpin shifting and uneven (racial, sexual, economic) social relations” (xiii). As I consider the ways that affective geographies offer a more robust understanding of the South, such flexibility will be paramount for tracing possible configurations of the region across my chosen texts.

²⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2022), 137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 491

body occupies manifests in how that body moves through and engages the world. For Gilmore, “place” refers to not only a physical location, but also an extensive spectrum of spaces, or rather, “the *range of kinds of places*—as intimate as the body and as abstract, yet distinctive, as a productive region or a nation-state.”²⁸ In her expansion of geography’s potential, Gilmore underscores the inevitable presence of the body which is so central to affect theory. My conception of affective geographies relies upon Gilmore’s capacious model for thinking about geography, as it considers both the bodies of the southerners navigating their relationship to the South as well as the bodies of land that have been shaped and signified by systems of power.²⁹

This concept can be further developed by a turn to Gilmore’s use of “worlding” in defining abolition geography. She writes that abolition geography refers not only to the experience of “being in the world” but also that of “worlding ourselves.” This concept of worlding is a vital one, as well as one that appears across multiple theoretical frames, most notably post/anti-colonial studies, new materialisms, and affect theory. For the purpose of this dissertation, I examine the use of worlding in the work of Kathleen Stewart, who closes *The Affect Theory Reader* with an afterword entitled “Worlding Refrains.” For Stewart, worlding refers to the process of *being* in the world, of feeling oneself within its surroundings and participating in the circulation of affects that forge meaning—

²⁸ Ibid., 132-133, original emphasis.

²⁹ Similar attention to the relationship between geography and embodiment can be traced across McKittrick’s work as well. As she suggests in *Demonic Grounds*: “...the racialized, gendered, sexed, classed, and imaginative body-self necessarily interprets space and place—in its imitations and its possibilities” (2). Like Gilmore, McKittrick is suggesting a model for understanding geography that underscores the affective principles inherent in the way that meaning is made and inscribed across our conceptions of space, place, and region. If, as Ahmed suggests, affect is what “sticks,” what preserves the connections between ideas, values, and objects,” such a force would undoubtedly be present in how one, as McKittrick says, “necessarily interprets space and place.” If affect offers a theoretical frame that fully embraces the felt experiences of being a body in the world, it only makes sense to trace such a frame across multiple disciplines—to see the way that it manifests across fields. McKittrick and Gilmore both emphasize the role of feeling in the production of interpretation and meaning across space, as geography becomes an affective matter and affect a geographic one. In the South, where affect and geography collide across both memory, history, and collective imaginaries, the aftermath of such a collision offers alternative ways of critically approaching southern literature and experience that foreground the complex everyday experiences of southernness.

that make sense of the network of relations that repeat and echo across time and space, informing the ways that we understand and engage what surrounds us. As she writes of such echoes:

Refrains are a worlding...Events, relations, and impacts accumulate as the capacities to affect and be affected. Public feelings world up as lived circuits of action and reaction.³⁰

Stewart writes this process of worlding as inherently affective, as based in the ways that we feel ourselves within our environment, within history, within community. For Gilmore's conception of abolition geography, it is imperative to take seriously how we register our feeling and agency in our constructed, ideological world in order to understand that the structures that shape our contemporary moment are accretions of these "circuits of action and reaction" across generations and centuries. Further, these structures then impact the ways that we can make sense of the world around us—the very ways that we *feel* ourselves as members of communities, regions, nations, and so on. Emotion then is always an active process of navigation across a multitude of temporalities and spatialities as feeling is anchored to the historic and the geographic. For my own work, the term affective geographies offers a framework that can encapsulate how the meanings that we ascribe to our surroundings are always a process of reconciliation between the physical environment, material circumstance, and affective embodiment. For while Stewart's mobilization of worlding as a model for understanding the ways that affects lodge within our processes of signification, I would be remiss not to highlight the role of the material—the ecological—in the consequences of such aggregations, especially when considering the South, where such consequences are felt within the everyday experiences of those who live there.

As such, my use of affective geographies brings southern land to the undeniable forefront. As my critical work on southern literature is informed by both affective and ecocritical lenses, I want to mobilize a theoretical framework that conjures the relationship between both approaches.

³⁰ Kathleen Stewart, "Worlding Refrains" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 339

Moreover, because this dissertation is first and foremost invested in questions of region, I see it as an undeniably geographic project. As I turn to southern fiction and poetry to carry my study, my critical work is invested in narrative representations of southern land—in tracing out the ways that the South is written and inscribed with meaning through the emotions of both characters and authors. As such, affective geographies provide a clear model for bridging and prioritizing these concerns, emphasizing rather than abstracting the relationship between the affective and the material.

In mobilizing affective geographies as this dissertation's theoretical frame, I underscore the ways that the replicated Souths of the contemporary literary canon play a crucial role in conveying attachments to the South. My work thus attends to the ecological and the discursive in its consideration of regional representations, following and diverging from previous critical work on regionalism. In *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse offer a comprehensive examination of the articulations of regions in the American literary scene. Diverging from the typical genre of "local color," Fetterley and Pryse redefine regionalism, suggesting that the tools and structures of power—rather than a naturalized geography—sustain regional divisions and identities.³¹ In their attention to the ways that "place" is purposefully and discursively constructed, Fetterley and Pryse highlight similar concerns to those that underlie this dissertation, namely my investment in the ways the South has been affectively represented across twentieth and twenty-first century southern literature and film. In suggesting that such representations emphasize the role that the South plays on a national stage, my work follows Fetterley and Pryse's own attention to the cultural ramifications of regionalism as they contend that

³¹ As Fetterley and Pryse explain: "We use the term 'regionalism,' then, to articulate the from ruled places that includes the perception that 'regionalization' is not natural; it is not a feature of geography, though topography may play some part in changing economic conditions. Rather, regionalism asserts that the regionalizing premise concerns the consolidation and maintenance of power through ideology and is therefore discourse...rather than place" (7).

“regionalist texts offer a place from which twenty-first-century readers can think again about the consequences of creating regions for either cultural or economic exploitation.”³² While my interest in literary depictions of the South question the stakes of such exploitation, a large part of my work here revolves on the other half of this equation, as I attend to the works of those authors who not only note the historical, cultural, and economic discourses of “the South,” but also establish and maintain other metrics of belonging and connection within the region.³³

Whereas Fetterley and Pryse seek to minimize the relationship between region and geography, my work emphasizes it. While the South is imagined and reimagined discursively across the texts of this dissertation, its depictions are always intimately tied to southern land. Moreover, the new collection of feelings that I track throughout these chapters are often articulated through the attachments to southern land that authors and their characters employ as the counter to their relationship with the regional South that exists in national and cultural discourses. In tracing affective geographies throughout this dissertation, I call attention to the collision of the discursive, the felt, and the ecological ways that the South is rendered in works of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

In many ways, this use of affective geographies builds on the work done by Thadious M. Davis in *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, in which she defines her titular term as follows:

My term “southscape” is intended to call attention to the South as a social, political, cultural, and economic construct but one with the geographic ‘facts of the land.’ It references landscape in broad geographical-social contexts and mediated symbolic structures. As a concept, “southscape” has both subjective and objective elements, but primarily it

³² Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 30.

³³ Fetterley and Pryse similarly note the connective potential of regionalist texts as they focus on the empathetic connection between text and reader, suggesting that “reading regionalism can bring readers ‘close’ to the experience of empathy for others” (342). While I do not discount the potential of literary works to inform and shape the emotions of their readers, my attention to feeling across this dissertation is more interested in the affective relationship between authors, their characters, and the South, as different texts contend with the complex and often conflicting emotions that constitute their attachments to the region.

acknowledges the connection between society and environment as a way of thinking about how raced human beings are impacted by the shape of the land, or what German geographers in the nineteenth century termed “*landschaft*.” My formulation of “southscape” engages, then, the natural environment and the social collective that shapes the environment out of its cultural beliefs, practices, and technologies.³⁴

Davis’s “southscapes” provide a clear articulation of the role that the ecological and the geographic must play in any comprehensive study of the South. Our central terms work toward a similar conclusion—an understanding of the ways that the land of the South is employed in the cultural and ideological practices and narratives of the region—yet the scopes of our projects diverge. Davis’s work revolves around the relationships of Black southerners in the region, and she examines the depictions of particular states (namely Louisiana and Mississippi) across her specific archive. While such relationships play a key role in my own work, this dissertation is more interested in the places in southern literary works where feeling and land collide. In defining such moments of collision, affective geographies allow us to trace the emotions that accompany and uphold the “cultural beliefs, practices, and technologies” that Davis outlines, as well as offer new models for thinking about the triangulation of geography, history, and affect in a modern South.

Ultimately, I see my turn to affective geographies as an opportunity to be more specific about the kinds of southern feelings we can trace across a southern literary landscape. As I map these geographies across my chosen texts, I am able to 1) think through the specific feelings in the South that have persisted and shaped how the South is considered on a national scale, both culturally and critically; 2) highlight the predominance of white attachments to history in determining southern affects; and 3) suggest an alternative model for thinking through the constellations of feelings, offering a more robust paradigm of southern feelings that more accurately encapsulates the variety of experiences from those who call it home. In this attention to the emotions that have shaped the

³⁴ Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2.

meaning of the South across an intersection of history, memory, identity, and land, I use affective geographies to articulate affect's sociocultural refractions across the complexities of southern time and space. Thus, I consider the South's uneven relationship to both the temporal (as a region caught between a perpetual turn to the past and a precarious future) and the ecological (as unstable geographies and borders contend with a rapidly disappearing coastline), and I uncover the ways that feelings manifest and remain across the literary imagination of the South.

In examining what can be extrapolated from this collision of the ecological, the historical, and the affective across other works of southern literature, we can unlock a more robust understanding of the forces that forge these important attachments to the South, both on an individual and a societal scale. The affective geographies that I map throughout this dissertation are able to both make material that which is often abstracted (affect, memory, history) as well as engage a more complete understanding of the conflicting—and often contradictory—attachments to the South that stem from those who have been excluded by the white emotional paradigm that typically informs conceptions of southernness. I offer an illustration of how I locate and mobilize this model of affective geographies in the dissertation's first chapter, which examines the Mississippi(s) drawn across William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006). As Trethewey interpolates *Absalom's* infamous ending—Quentin Compson's frantic "*I don't hate the South!*"—she ties her collection to Faulkner's novel, making clear the historiographic aims of each text as they navigate the topographies of unstable histories and negotiate attachments to the South across race and gender. At the center of both texts lies a turn to the role of southern land as a key to understanding the relationship between history and feeling in the South.

The second chapter uses these affective geographies to examine the work of Black southern writers in articulating their relationship to the South and southernness. Reading bell hooks's *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009) and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*

(2021), I suggest that we must understand the ways that the South can be both a site of trauma *and* profound identification for the Black southerners who call it home. Approaching these texts via the current discourse surrounding memorialization, I track a non-linear engagement with history that prioritizes the felt aftermaths of slavery and the Jim Crow era within southern Black communities. Ultimately, I suggest that both texts map Black southern affect within their central figures' relationships to southern land, crafting archives of emotion that can fully encompass the contradictions of feelings that define Black southerners' connections to the region.

While the emotional tether of "home" anchors the second chapter, the following chapter turns to the works of authors who are not from the South but are nonetheless captivated by it. I pair Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) with John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994), two texts in which the narrators must confront both their uncanny attraction to the southern towns in which they reside as well as the creeping horror that they find there. I see these works as an opportunity to think through the South's specific role in the United States as I suggest that it is Berendt's and Toomer's very estrangement from the South that allows them to mediate between a specifically southern perspective and a broader consideration of the South's place in the national imagination.

The final chapter looks to the future of a climate-catastrophized South, tracing the feelings that accompany the destruction of the Anthropocene through Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012). Emphasizing the film's interplay between real and fictional registers—the fictional South transposed onto the crumbling coastline of south Louisiana—I contend that the film generates its own collection of feelings that exist beyond the resignation of grim realism and the inactivity of blind hope in the face of the Anthropocene's ecological devastation. Using the linguistic and ecological capacities revealed by the lyric form across the film's dialogue, I underscore the film's play with temporality in the face of inevitable catastrophe, which cultivates rich ground for considering the role that affect plays in collective survival during times of apocalypse.

The dissertation ends with an examination of vulnerability as the defining affect of not only the twenty-first century South but the twenty-first century as a whole. Through an examination of Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), I track the ways that vulnerability manifests in modern American life and interrogate the expectation of resilience, particularly along the southern Gulf coast, where socioeconomic precarity is coupled with fractured futurity. In turning to Ward's work, I examine the affective frameworks traced into this matrix of vulnerability—namely what I am terming Ward's "ambivalent resilience," which highlights, rather than obfuscates, the residual violence of expected resilience. In the face of precarity, Ward suggests that the South has much to teach us about survival, about the positive feelings that can exist despite the brutal ones. This, perhaps, marks the ethos of this project—to pay homage to the messy, tangled web of emotions that define life in the South, to imagine new networks of attachment that prioritize connection and community, and to name an alternate landscape of feelings that resists the consumption of despair.

I.

**Owning the Terror:
The Fictive, the Fecund, & the Felt**

In “Pastoral,” from Natasha Trethewey’s Pulitzer-winning collection *Native Guard*, the speaker imagines herself among the Fugitive Poets, a group of southern men writing out of Vanderbilt University in the 1920s:

In the dream, I am with the Fugitive
Poets. We’re gathered for a photograph.
Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta
hidden by the photographer’s backdrop —
a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows
lowing, a chant that sounds like no, no. Yes,
I say to the glass of bourbon I’m offered.
We’re lining up now — Robert Penn Warren,
his voice just audible above the drone
of bulldozers, telling us where to stand.¹

During this gathering with the Fugitive Poets, the speaker acts as a clear mirror for Trethewey herself, dreaming the poet amidst a collective of literary figures of the twentieth century’s Southern Renaissance. The work of the Fugitive Poets marked both the emergence of the South as a literary object and the problematic idealization of southern tradition that would pave the way for the controversial Southern Agrarians.² The Fugitives’ focus on the idyllic and the pastoral is embodied in the fabricated landscape of the scene as Atlanta, the metropole of the deep South, disappears behind the painted “lush pasture.” Caught up in the tension between the real and the ideal, the speaker

¹ Natasha Trethewey, “Pastoral,” in *Native Guard: Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 35.

² This overlap between the Fugitive Poets and the Agrarians highlights the significance of Trethewey’s allusion. The Agrarians’ manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* mourns the loss of agrarian way of life in the face of twentieth-century technology and innovation. The manifesto itself has taken on a problematic afterlife, as the main vehicle for their main vision for an agrarian South revolved around a romanticized vision of the Old South that obfuscated the enslaved labor that made it possible. As southern scholar Lucinda H Mackethan explains: “Clearly, the Agrarians expected their espousal of an Agrarian program, rendered through a poetic vision of the Old South, to increase perception concerning the problems of living in a modern technological society. As a social document, *I’ll Take My Stand* has often been denied this function because of its shaky grasp of the practical matters of farming and also because of its notable inaccuracies and omissions concerning the way life in the Old South was actually lived” (580). Such troubled idealization sharpens the racialized stakes of the speaker’s experience with these men.

further traverses the southern literary landscape through an anachronistic interpolation of a familiar scene:

*Say "race," the photographer croons. I'm in
blackface again when the flash freezes us.
My father's white, I tell them, and rural.
You don't hate the South? they ask. You don't hate it?*³

These final lines, of course, recall the end of William Faulkner's infamous *Absalom, Absalom!*, as Shreve McCannon asks Quentin Compson, "Why do you hate the South?" and Quentin's answer panics across the page:

"I don't hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. *I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*⁴

The two texts become tied together by this shared affect; the feeling of not-hating is made flexible as it is mobilized across perspectives. While Quentin's feelings move feverishly inward, accelerating from declarative to exclamatory, the emotions of "Pastoral" stand external to the speaker, positioned as a question, but syntactically structured as something far more imperative. Ventriloquized into this connection between the literary and the affective in the South, Trethewey's speaker disappears from the text, offering no answer, no corrective, to the feelings cast upon her. Meanwhile, Quentin's litany grows more and more frantic as he moves from verbal response to thought, as if he must persuade himself as well as Shreve. Absented of both corrections and convincing, each text ends with an affective ambiguity as the reader is left to decipher something incomplete and unresolved.

References to Quentin's final words in Faulkner's oeuvre has become a somewhat hackneyed trope in southern scholarship.⁵ In their introduction to *Keywords for Southern Studies*, Scott

³ Trethewey, 35.

⁴ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, Norton Critical Edition, edited by Susan Scott Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 257.

⁵ Quentin's final words appear often in the work of southern southernists, whose works always seem to begin with an acknowledgment of their own complex relationships to the South. For example, Patricia Yaeger writes in *Dirt and Desire*: "Like Faulkner's Quentin Compson, I feel unable to refuse a lingering passion for the South..." (1).

Romine and Jennifer Rae Greeson name “I don’t hate it!” as one of the “Faulknerian formulas” that defined southern literary studies in the postwar era.⁶ In a more critical vein, Patricia Yaeger has detailed the limitations of prioritizing Faulkner’s works as the predominant southern texts. She argues that “...the field of southern literary studies has been dominated by a huge Faulkner industry that both overshadows and tames the terms we use.”⁷ And yet, it seems impossible to write about southern literature and affect without returning to what has possibly become the key model for southern feeling across both literary and critical imaginations. Significantly, not-hating is defined only as a negation; it is able to be moved, manipulated, and inflected across the porous boundaries of not only race and gender, but also those of history and geography. In opening with both Faulkner’s and Trethewey’s considerations of what it may mean to not-hate the South, this chapter recognizes the ways that both *Absalom* and *Native Guard* trace the affective contours of southernness.⁸

In the mobilization—or perhaps, weaponization—of Quentin’s final words within *Native Guard*, Trethewey makes clear the flexibility of affect by inextricably intertwining her exploration of southernness and her relationship to Mississippi with Faulkner’s work.⁹ The allusions to Faulkner throughout *Native Guard* offer a necessary shorthand for working through her complicated feelings

⁶ Scott Romine and Jennifer Rae Greeson, Introduction to *Keywords for Southern Studies*, eds. Scott Romine and Jennifer Rae Greeson (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2016), 3.

⁷ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), xv. While Yaeger is undoubtedly correct about the grasp that Faulkner has on the field (and in her summation that what is missing from Faulkner is “a sense of the ways race functions in the nonepic everyday”), I find it impossible to think through these southern affects without starting at what I see as the origin of many of these popularized feelings in our literary and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, as we have already seen with Trethewey and as we will see with the works of Jesmyn Ward, much of southern writing is in response to the work of Faulkner and the impact he has left upon the field.

⁸ Houston A. Baker’s *I Don’t Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South* also pairs together this poem by Trethewey and the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* as epigraphs which ground his position as a Black man from the South in the rich blend of criticism and memoir that the text undergoes.

⁹ Beyond the allusion to *Absalom, Absalom!*, Trethewey also mobilizes *Light in August* in her poem “Miscegenation,” as she compares her own experience as a biracial woman in Mississippi with that of Joe Christmas: “Faulkner’s Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name / for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi...I know more than Joe Christmas did. Natasha is a Russian name—/though I’m not; it means *Christmas child*, even in Mississippi” (36).

toward the South; they come to signify a way of engaging the racial traumas that have become an inevitable core of southern history. As such, Faulkner's literary legacy (as embodied particularly in *Absalom, Absalom!*) acts as both an obstacle to as well as an opportunity for tracking the entangled relationship between history and feeling across the geographies of the South.

But even as I argue that Faulkner's legacy may not be so easily transcended, I nonetheless share Yaeger's concern for the ways the hyper-canonization of his works may tend to limit our critical vocabularies. This chapter, in its interest in the transmission of affects between texts and temporalities, follows Trethewey in contending that there might be something productive in finding creative models for expanding out critical approaches to Faulkner (and, by extension, southern studies as a whole). As this dissertation invests in thinking through the ways that affect serves as a necessary and under-utilized tool in southern studies, it is crucial to begin with an interrogation of what has become a quintessential southern feeling.

In this interrogation, I turn to Lauren Berlant's "national sentimentality" project, particularly their work in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* and *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in America*. I am interested in the ways that the structures of feeling that Berlant outlines may help us consider the questions of power that are intimately tied to the ways that feeling operates within and across *Absalom* and *Native Guard*. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant underscores the role of affect in public and political spheres. Berlant focuses specifically on nineteenth- and twentieth-century "intimate publics," which they define as a "space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" and a "place of recognition and reflection," where "emotional contact, of a sort, is made."¹⁰ Following these refractions and points of emotional contact throughout and across *Absalom* and *Native Guard*, I

¹⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.

examine the ways that both texts foreground the felt aftermaths of encounters with the historical—as the texts’ figures, whether it be Quentin Compson or Trethewey’s poetic stand-in, must contend with the intense affects that define their own attachments to the South.

Moreover, it is this language of space and place that anchors Berlant’s definition of intimate publics and further grounds how we may consider the South and southernness in this new light. How might we take these “space[s] of mediation” and “places[s] of recognition and reflection” literally and evaluate the geographic and ecological spaces that bind these affective exchanges? How do we understand the South as this flexible thing—at once a specific geographic location, a more ambiguous ecological space, and a cultural fiction? What occurs when we intersect Quentin’s “I don’t hate it!” with the “cold air, the iron New England dark”? Or when we consider the relationship between the feelings thrust upon Trethewey’s speaker and the painted landscape of “Pastoral”? Part of my argument in this chapter suggests that in tracing these transmitted and transmuted affects across *Absalom* and *Native Guard*, we must also foreground an overlooked ecological component that plays a vital role in how these affects are narrativized, embodied, and circulated. In other words, in mobilizing an eco-affective approach, I interrogate the ways that figures in both Faulkner’s and Trethewey’s works often turn to the ecological bodies of the southern landscape in order to make sense of the experience of feeling themselves within the aftermaths of a violent and often incomplete historical narrative. In unraveling these entanglements between feelings and the worlds that engender them, this chapter takes seriously the role of the geographic— matters of space and place—in creating and conveying attachments.¹¹

¹¹ Of Faulkner’s works, *Absalom, Absalom!* provides a particular intersection with geographic matters. Throughout *Absalom*, the geography of these ecological bodies plays a significant role, both within the narrative and the paratext of the novel. *Absalom*’s publication in 1936 marked Faulkner’s first iteration of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, as he maps the space of Jefferson across both space and time—a cartographic record of different sites across his fiction. In the introduction to *Faulkner’s Geographies*, Jay Watson describes Faulkner’s use of this map: “In promoting and interpreting his own work, then, Faulkner intuitively turned to geography’s preeminent mode of knowledge production” (ix). This “mode of knowledge production” marks Faulkner’s—and by extension, *Absalom*’s—investment in thinking about the relationship between southern environment and history.

As such, this chapter sets a tone for the dissertation as a whole. Classifying both texts as historiographies, I attend to the different forms of attachment that define the texts' central figures relationships to the South as they navigate the brutal revelations of southern history. In examining the Mississippi created by both Faulkner and Trethewey in their respective texts, this chapter explores the theoretical methods that define this project. In their delineation of "southern feelings," these texts often mobilize turns to southern land, offering affective geographies that underscore the significance of the ecological in their historiographic projects. In tracking this relationship across *Absalom* and *Native Guard*, I am able to map these vital sites where the affective, the ecological, and the historical intersect. In employing this kind of affective mapping, this chapter not only navigates the emotional experiences of the historical—of feeling oneself *within* these narratives—but also critically examines the geographic turns that cultivate them as well, exploring the role that the land plays in the construction of the South's affective legacy.

History, Narrative, & Attachment

At its core, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel about narrative—both how a narrative is produced, shared, and rendered coherent, as well as the aftermath and afterlife that a narrative sustains over time. To this point, the novel branches into two tangled plotlines. The first is seemingly straightforward, telling the story of Thomas Sutpen, who rides into Yoknapatawpha County and builds a plantation with the intention of amassing wealth and power—a design that rests upon his legitimate children, Henry and Judith. Sutpen's rise is interrupted by the Civil War, where he serves as a Confederate colonel. As both the war and the novel unfold, Sutpen's past emerges, largely represented by the figure of Charles Bon, whose friendship with Henry and impending engagement to Judith threaten Sutpen's legacy. Before the end of the war, Henry murders Bon and flees. The potential reasons for the murder emerge as the novel's cast of narrators examine and re-examine this history, cycling through bigamy, incest, and miscegenation. The novel reveals Charles Bon to be

Sutpen's eldest son, born of his first wife during his stint as an overseer on a Haitian plantation. When his wife's Blackness was revealed, Sutpen cast her and the child aside, departing for Mississippi where his design could be realized, a design dependent upon the power and protections of whiteness. Bon's murder and Henry's flight, however, render him without a son through whom a legacy could be actualized, and Sutpen's desperation for a son ultimately leads to his death.

The second plotline focuses on the summer and winter of 1909, as Sutpen's history is reconstructed by several different narrators, with the familiar figure of Quentin Compson at the center. He is inducted into this history by Rosa Coldfield, the sister of Sutpen's wife and a Miss Havisham-esque figure who provides the only firsthand knowledge of the history at play. Quentin's father later adds his own knowledge of the tale, which he had received secondhand from Quentin's grandfather who had been Sutpen's only friend in Jefferson. Finally, the story is taken into Quentin's own hands as he shares the history with his roommate Shreve, and the two of them attempt to suture the fragments of this story together in their Harvard dormitory.

As the Sutpen history cycles through the novel, the text begins to blur the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined. The novel's relationship to history is a fragile one—information is passed on secondhand or is based on nothing more than fifty-year-old memories. Even the novel's big reveal—the “truth” of Charles Bon's race—comes from a conversation between Shreve and Quentin at Harvard and is never fully verified in text. As such, *Absalom* clearly plays with the relationship between history, mythology, and storytelling, mottling the brittle line between fact and fiction. Southern history, in short, becomes something fallible and incomplete, more a reflection of present ideologies than an object of absolute truth, and any attempt to simplify it is done in vain.

In many ways, the South, particularly within *Absalom, Absalom!*, seems follow Lauren Berlant's definition of an “intimate public.” As they write:

What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experiences of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging...¹²

The narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* takes up this question of a “commonly lived history” as the story of Sutpen binds Quentin to the community of Jefferson and to the South. As the characters of the novel attempt to construct a story that reflects the larger history of the South in the years preceding, during, and following the Civil War, they encounter what this history reveals about their own southernness, about their understanding of the world around them. As this history is unraveled throughout the novel, it proves the structure of this intimate public to be one that is easily destabilized—one that is markedly fraught as this “common historical experience” is showed to be incomplete.¹³ What matters in the construction of intimate publics are these questions of attachments—to history, to “conventions of belonging,” to particular narratives. These attachments then shape the way that one exists in the world, or rather, their “sensational embodied experiences of living.” Such a frame offers a helpful way through which we can understand the South, which always seems to straddle the line between actual geographic region and sociohistorical fiction. Furthermore, as Berlant’s work brings to the forefront the attachments that define the collectivity of these publics, it highlights the role that affect plays in the larger national imaginary. To this end, their insistence on the relationship between feeling and expressions of history and narrative coincides

¹² Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.

¹³ While Berlant’s work elucidates the foundational role that feeling plays in sustaining particular narratives, the South of *Absalom, Absalom!* also seems to chafe against this concept of an intimate public as much as it mirrors it. Part of this tension seems to stem from the role of the market in the construction of the intimate public, as Berlant highlights the “consumer participants,” whose induction into the intimate public is mediated by mass culture. In Faulkner’s South, the “commonly lived history” that binds white southern experiences is at odds with the circularity demanded by mass culture, as it reflects more of a fringe experience to that of the nation. It is telling that the most significant unraveling of the Sutpen history occurs when Quentin shares it with Shreve in their dorm room, as the story circulates outside of the intimate public of the South, both geographically and culturally.

with this dissertation's own contention that the South exists as not only a geographic formation or national fiction, but an affective configuration as well.

Furthermore, looking at *Absalom* and the South through this lens expands the different metrics through which we can think through intimate publics. I am particularly interested in the moment of imprecision in Berlant's definitional work: the ambiguity of the "narratives and things" that express this history. In the South, where the geographic, historical, and affective collide, the "things" that are tied to history abound. In turning to *Absalom, Absalom!*, which stands as a quintessential southern novel, I want to highlight the novel's under-studied ecological component as one such thing; the text emphasizes a turn to the land that offers a robust understanding of the elements of embodiment and attachment that make up an intimate public. Across the text, history acts not only as a story that must be told and retold, but also as something that takes root within and affects the bodies of those who must bear witness to it. However, my interest in this kind of affective historiography is not only defined by the human bodies—namely those of Quentin and Clytie, who stand within the novel as the two figures who hold the entirety of this history—but the ecological bodies that surround them as well.

In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Berlant actually suggests this connection between land, history, and attachment, positing that "to choose to create a national landscape out of a plot of land is to participate in a history-making process that involves the continual re-creation of invested 'spaces' for different generations who live in the same territory."¹⁴ In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the landscape acts as both site and signifier, existing in the narrative as an active presence that is indivisible from the history that it facilitates. As each of the narrators cycle through the history of Sutpen, they often turn to ecological metaphors that shape the way that the history—as well as their

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 47-48.

attachments to this history—can be understood. As the novel intertwines issues of environment and embodiment, of the fecund and the felt, it both challenges the ways that we can measure and map southern feeling as well as reveals its own structural limitations.

Absalom's Ecologies of Embodiment

The body stands as a stark site in the topography of *Absalom, Absalom!*—a site where boundaries are often and easily exceeded, collapsed, and confused. In her introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of *Absalom*, Susan Scott Parrish underscores the novel's fraught borders:

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, by contrast [to Faulkner's previous novels], though there are tonal, generational, gender, and geographic differences between the character-narrators, it is rather easy to get disoriented. Wait, you say to yourself, is this the third-person disembodied narrator or one of the characters? Is Shreve speaking or Quentin thinking? How many previous speakers are embedded in the speaker currently telling the story? Faulkner himself changed his mind on these matters without necessarily adjusting the language to signal a different speaker. These blurred bounds of telling convey how narrative travels in a community, but it requires the reader to be unusually alert in sensing subtle markers that distinguish points of view.¹⁵

Parrish's description of *Absalom* marks the novel itself as something geographic, something that requires careful navigation to avoid becoming lost as the narrative travels from character to character, from South to North. Moreover, as Parrish attempts to explain Faulkner's convoluted prose, she highlights the ways that the individual body is made permeable in the novel as the borders of between characters blur together.¹⁶ In *Absalom*, the body destabilizes as the “sensational, embodied experiences of living”—to borrow Berlant's phrase—are bound up in the impossibility of a coherent historical narrative, moved and manipulated across spatial and temporal lines.

¹⁵ Susan Scott Parrish, Introduction to *Absalom, Absalom!*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Susan Scott Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), xi.

¹⁶ Beyond the challenges of distinguishing these differences between characters' thoughts and speech within Faulkner's prose, the novel will occasionally and more explicitly collapse the boundaries between bodies throughout the text. Reflecting on his and Shreve's telling of the Sutpen story, Quentin thinks: “Yes. Maybe we are both Father.... Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us” (178-179). Another such moment occurs across time, as Quentin and Shreve collapse the temporal and spatial difference between themselves and Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon: “So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve: four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry...” (227).

This unstable embodiment becomes clear through Quentin's experience in the novel. Quentin, whose position in the novel is already ghostly and strange as his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* looms over the events of *Absalom*, must confront his southernness as he leaves the South, must face the other "narratives and things" that bind him to the region.¹⁷ Removed from Mississippi, the South stands for Quentin as a site of entangled attachments that have shaped his understanding of the world and himself. The novel winds its way to that final proclamation of feeling (or non-feeling, depending on how we consider the negative state of *I don't hate it!*), transcending temporal, spatial, even bodily borders. As Quentin moves through the novel, he grapples with his own embodiment of southernness and the way that his relationship with the region has shaped his understanding of the world and himself. Scratching beyond the surface of the story that connects him not only to the other narrators but also to the South itself, Quentin is bound to an affective process that unmakes him, that leaves him uncontrollably shaking at the novel's end; he is unable to reach a coherent ending for this history, and the structures to which he has been tied begin to crumble.

In *A Place Like Mississippi*, Ralph W. Eubanks speaks to this kind of temporal warping, explaining that through *Absalom*, Faulkner "reveal[s] how the past is a living force, one that frames and shapes our sense of the present."¹⁸ For the characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* the "living force" of

¹⁷ Quentin's induction into the story of Thomas Sutpen hinges upon his acceptance to Harvard and his impending departure to New England. As Rosa tells Quentin, "Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard they tell me...So I don't 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...you can write this and submit it to the magazine" (5). It is interesting that this story of Thomas Sutpen (and the South at large) is something inherited by Quentin as the grandson of Sutpen's only friend, but also something that depends on his leaving the region. Part of Rosa's request in sharing this story has more circulatory aims as she fantasizes about the futurity of this story as something shared beyond the South. Significantly as well, Rosa's speech here is preceded by a moment of affective attachment that ties Quentin to this story and the South at large. In ruminating on the ruin of the Sutpen's family, there's a note of this death passing "*without regret...save by [Rosa]*" (4, original emphasis). This moment of regret is succeeded by an addition: "*(And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson*" (4, original emphasis). In tracing Quentin's relationship to this narrative, I would be remiss to ignore the novel's attention to these moments of affective binding.

¹⁸ W. Ralph Eubanks, *A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey Through Real and Imagined Literary Landscape* (Portland: Timber Press, 2021), 17.

the past suspends them within this story that they must tell and retell as they attempt to reconcile what they know of the past with the reality of the present. For how else could Shreve and Quentin make sense of Bon's murder if not a turn to a white supremacist ideology that underpins the world in which they live?¹⁹ Their conclusion for the story hinges upon this ideology, in which it is miscegenation, not incest, that poses the greatest threat to Sutpen's design; it is Bon's Blackness, not his paternity, that condemns him die. Whether this past is true or verifiable does not matter; the history of Thomas Sutpen and his failed legacy only matter insofar as their ability to suggest meaning in the present. Yet, as the characters can only repeat the same history over and over again, the present moment is shown to be one of suspension, of stasis. In this suspension within history's fallibility, the novel calls into question the "conventions of belonging"—per Berlant—that constitute the characters' (in particular, Quentin's) attachments to the South. In attempting to make sense of the history and ideals upon which his southernness rests, Quentin becomes trapped in this cycle of reiteration. In confronting his inheritance of a violent and incomplete story, he can never truly leave the South and its past behind—a cycle proven to be an intensely felt experience.

Stuck within this endless circulation of narrative, Quentin remains constant in the text, experiencing the story as both audience and narrator; in many ways, he is the figure responsible for completing the tableau of the Sutpen history, shading in the spaces left blank by Rosa and his father. As Quentin moves through the novel—shifting from being told this story, to telling it, to creating

¹⁹ In her essay, "The Unbearable Whiteness of *Absalom, Absalom!*," Julia Stern writes: "As creatures of their own historical moment, forty-five years after the Southern surrender at Appomattox, Quentin and Shreve craft a Thomas Sutpen who fixates on racial purity" (652). For Stern, the Thomas Sutpen at the center of the novel is as much a fiction as the text itself, as his motivations and desires throughout the novel are speculations, tinged with the feelings and the ideological constraints of the text's collection of narrators. The question of race that occupies the latter half of the novel as the narration cedes to Quentin and Shreve is also a product of these fictions as well. Stern highlights that Charles Bon's Black identity is never actually confirmed by the novel: "Readers receive the most definitive information on this subject from Quentin and Shreve: they imagine Sutpen announcing it to Henry during their brief meeting at the war's end. The dramatic tableau, of course, is completely fabricated" (653).

it—he makes clear the affective aftermath of his position in this kind of excessive narrative. When Shreve interrupts with attempts to “play” with the story, Quentin becomes both teller and listener:

“Wait, I tell you!” Quentin said, though he did not move nor even raise his voice—that voice with its tense suffused restrained quality: “I am telling” *Am I going to have to hear it all again* he thought *I am going to have to hear it all over again I am listening to it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever...*²⁰

In his assertion that it is he who is “telling,” Quentin separates from his own body as “his voice” transforms into “that voice,” marked as something “tense suffused restrained,” affectively distanced from the urgency of his first interjection.²¹ But if the act of telling cleaves him, the act of listening consumes, trapping him within the panicked litany that follows. Quentin’s internal stream-of-consciousness collapses the boundaries between telling and listening as his spoken words bleed into the torrent of his thoughts; he makes clear that to do either is to do both—and to do both is to be engulfed. As Quentin spins into conscious reverberation, he echoes the structure of the novel as a whole: one of constant obsession and repetition.

Even in his dorm room in New England, Quentin is snared within these overwhelming attachments, forced to struggle with the South that follows him ideologically and experientially, demanding confrontation. At the possibility of having “*to never listen to anything else but this forever*,” the history of Sutpen, of the South, becomes not just a narrative of the past but a felt experience in the present—something that will always be occurring within him. The novel metaphorizes this experience of southernness early on. As Quentin situates his introduction to Sutpen’s story within a

²⁰ Faulkner, 189.

²¹ This motif of division is established early in the novel: “...he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and people with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts with had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South...” (4). This scene between Quentin and Shreve enacts these “two separate Quentins” on a bodily level as Quentin marks his own role as one condemned to tell this story as well as one forced to always listen it.

larger frame of southern history, the text makes clear the affective and bodily strain that such an experience enacts:

Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts, still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever itself which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it has been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence.²²

In this scene, Quentin's engagement with southern history serves as a kind of mapping, a spatial and geographic project. As his body becomes a hall, a barracks, and a commonwealth, it acts a site and vessel, where the boundaries of the individual are again proven fraught, and the embodied experience of southernness is marked by one's capacity to house, to remember, to hold. In tracing out these sites of history, the text uses Quentin's body to map out the affective intensity of his relationship to the South. These spaces that the novel demarcates also highlight the limitations of the history with which he engages, the narrative upon which his southernness hinges. The spaces mapped signify a South embodied by a Lost Cause mythology, a whiteness that has shaped Quentin's attachments to the region. The empty hall suggests both a memorial and an aborted domesticity, a house left to the dead rather than the living. Meanwhile, the barracks and the commonwealth made of Quentin's body anchor him to the Confederacy. The problematized embodiment suggested by this passage goes even further, as the specific history signified by these ghosts morphs into something feverish. In this configuration, the body stands as the inflamed site of this historical—where the past is contained, experienced, lived.

To this point, the play with metaphor in this passage complicates the bodies that we may examine in the novel. For what is *Absalom, Absalom!* if not a novel about the body—what they

²² Faulkner, 6.

signify and make legible, how they can be read, the ways in which they are shaped by social and ideological forces? In making the historical bodily, the text suggests a broadening of how we may read its investment in the affective, as these embodied experiences connect to not only the social and historical, but the ecological and geographic as well. As the story of Sutpen is constructed across the novel, the South must be created over and over again as well, setting a scene through which the historical, cultural, and ideological aspects of the tale can be rendered. How then does *Absalom* deal with this excess of human, historical, and ecological bodies that convey an incomplete story that is defined by that which cannot be verified? How is the novel still, despite all of its expansiveness, affectively limited by the whiteness and Lost Cause ideologies that define not only Quentin's engagement with southern history, but the text's as well? What are the politico-affective stakes in determining what bodies generate feeling, which bodies are included and excluded from the intimate public of the South? In mapping out the different bodies, both human and nonhuman, that shape the novel's affective capacities, we can think critically about the novel's formal and felt limitations, calling into question the coherence of a text that has become so central to any configuration of southern feeling.

"A pervading everywhere of wistaria"

For Quentin, the South exists as both the physical site of his home—the region that he leaves, even as he is burdened with its history—and an affective wound that cannot scab over, cannot properly heal.²³ His southernness becomes something that he must always explain as he seeks some kind of meaning in the region's legacy. Yet, as he and Shreve discuss this history between

²³ Merle Williams mobilizes this language of wounding in her essay "‘Bullets in the Dining Room Table’: The (Im)possibility of Mending Wounds in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" (2013). As she writes: "There is no shortage of physical, psychological, and social wounds in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*...The entire text seems permeated with traumatic upheaval, loss, and the corrosive self-alienation of the principal characters" (25).

them, he finds that there are some things that cannot be explained—a dynamic revealed by Shreve’s attempts to understand Quentin’s southernness and relationship to southern history:

“I just want to understand it if I can and I don’t know how to say it better. Because it’s something my people haven’t got... We don’t live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves... and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago?

“You can’t understand it. You would have to be born there.”²⁴

This passage is often cited in *Absalom* criticism as “You would have to be born there” circulates as one of the “Faulknerian formulas” that Romine and Greeson highlight in *Keywords of Southern Studies*—an aphorism that (similarly to “I don’t hate it!”) both reveals the South as a generator of complex, innate, and specific sensations as well as obfuscates the meaning that can be gleaned from such experiences. While Quentin’s insistence on the South as an insular and inscrutable thing is significant, I am more interested in what the configurations in Shreve’s line of questioning may suggest in how we think about the relationship between southernness and feeling throughout the novel. In Shreve’s questions, he reveals a southernness that echoes the novel’s earlier imagery of “stubborn back-looking ghosts, still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever itself which had cured the disease.” The Lost Cause dominates how southernness can be understood—only in terms of the Civil War, the Confederacy, and whiteness. Even as the novel paints this kind of nostalgic whiteness as intrinsic to southernness, it offers a critique as it frames this formulation in the language of loss and lack, in the imagery of “defeated grandfathers” and feverish bodies. Yet, while the novel quickly unravels the history that revolved around this whiteness, it formally cannot go beyond the revelation of its inadequacy; it can access neither an alternate nor a

²⁴ Faulkner, 245-246.

complete version of this story. In short, it either cannot or will not tell the story without whiteness at the center; it cannot fill in the lacunae of its own history.

As Shreve attempts to address the gaps in his own understanding, he imagines Quentin's southernness in terms of both the affective and the ecological. Framing the Lost Cause and the "indomitable anger and pride and glory" that it engenders in terms of "something you live and breathe in like air," Shreve again replicates the dynamics of Quentin's earlier relationship with southern history—as something constant, inescapable. As the simile ties this history to the very atmosphere of the South, it becomes something that is taken into and sustains the body.²⁵ In this turn to more ecological language, Shreve's questioning not only examines attachments to southern history but also begins to create a physical South that houses them, that makes them possible.²⁶

In housing such histories, this construction of the South via this turn to ecological language also reveals a more troubling aspect of how such affective geographies function in discourses of southernness. Take, for example, this scene in which Mr. Compson employs an overtly literary style as he tells Quentin about the graves at Sutpen's Hundred:

²⁵ Teresa Brennan examines a similar conceptualization of the atmosphere to introduce *The Transmission of Affect*. Beginning with the idea of "feeling the atmosphere," she writes: "The 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate sui generis: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes" (1). For Brennan, the transmission of affect marks a "process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect" (3). Shreve's line of questioning not only emphasizes the atmospheric and ecological elements of the South in this kind of affective transmission, but also marks it as a kind of racial and regional inheritance, which distinguishes white southerners from other groups.

²⁶ In her work on "Faulknerian space," Hortense J. Spillers pays particular attention to the ways that the topography of Faulkner's works are transmitted to the audience. Focusing specifically on Quentin's role in both *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*, she outlines the different practices that frame the ways that space is conveyed through the narrative: "...we could say that Faulknerian narrative stakes out the figurative and material resources of the topographical along its various lines on stress; our purpose in this writing is to examine some of those moments of Faulknerian spatial practices in their demonstration of *topoi* as 1) psychic location, 2) material ground of identification, and 3) the site of creative intervention. Interestingly, Quentin combines in his fictitious agency all three varieties of the topographical—the intrapsychic, the locational, and the inventive" (537). As Spillers suggests, the way that space works in Faulkner's novels is not solely a geographic endeavor. Instead, the geographic is enmeshed both the "psychic," which suggests a possible affective dimension, and the creative, which speaks to larger narratives that influence the ways that space is approached, understood, and constructed in the transactions between character and character as well as text and audience. As the South stands in Faulkner's works as *the* central topographical, spatial, and geographic entity, examining the narrative's construction of the region requires a blend of all of these practices.

It must have resembled a garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde: the late afternoon, the dark cedars, with the level sun in them, even the light exactly right and the graves, the three pieces of marble (your grandfather had advanced Judith the money to buy third stone with against the price of the store) looking as though these had been cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who with the passing of twilight would return and strike them and carry them, hollow fragile and without weight, back to the warehouse until they should be needed again; the pageant, the scene, the act, entering upon the stage...²⁷

With his direct invocation of Oscar Wilde's crafted settings, Mr. Compson layers his narration with a literary landscape, succinctly revealing the thin line between the reality of the history that he is sharing and fabrications of fiction and theatre. In both, space must be narrated and built in order to flesh out the world that has led to "the pageant, the scene, the act." The scene's only moment of historical fact—that Quentin's grandfather loaned Judith Sutpen the money to pay for Charles Bon's headstone—is relegated to the parenthetical, bookended by these moments of conscious scene-making. The land is both a marker of place and a fabricated part of a performance; it plays a central role in the way such space constitutes meaning. It is the production of the setting then that becomes the focus of the passage, as the cedars, the sun—the graveyard's very topography—actively inform the rendering of the historical. As such, this scene invokes a South that is and is not; the region is marked in the physical setting, in the specific materiality of the land, but the passage's allusion to Wilde underscores the role that literature plays in sustaining affective attachments to historical and cultural narratives. While this passage is fairly inconsequential in the crafting of the Sutpen story, it provides a helpful model through which an affective geography begins to take shape.

This scene suggests that more attention to the southern landscape within the novel may be warranted. In examining the interactions with the land that occur within the Sutpen story, we can begin to map the complex role that it may play across the in the novel's historical and affective project. Even Sutpen's very introduction to Quentin is defined by his relationship to the ecological. As the text explains: *It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen...Who came out of nowhere and without*

²⁷ Faulkner, 132.

warning upon the land...and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—*tore violently*.”²⁸ Scraped from the earth, Sutpen’s Hundred becomes a geographic wound through Rosa’s interjection makes explicit violence of both the plantation and Sutpen himself. The land becomes a marker of the ways that history can be narrated, suggesting the different affects that shape attachments to the region and its history.

Mapping *Absalom*’s affective geographies then hinges upon a closer examination of the novel’s investment in crafting the southern landscape, an investment that begins on its opening page. The novel starts with Quentin’s first conversation with Rosa, in which he is introduced to the Sutpen history. However, before this conversation can even begin, the text first sets the scene:

There was a wistaria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away...There would be the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and over-sweet with the twice-bloomed wistaria against the outer wall by the savage quiet September sun impacted distilled and hyperdistilled...²⁹

The repetition of “wistaria” in this scene initiates a pattern of repetition that occurs across this text as wistaria appears again and again, both in the South and outside of it. This “twice-bloomed” wistaria anchors the scene, offering an embodiment of the text’s play across geographic, affective, and temporal planes. Wistaria ties the text to the South; its misspelling, which mimics a deep southern accent, embeds an interplay between the ecological and the social—an interplay that is only compounded by the bodily experience that wistaria facilitates in the text, one that overwhelms in its intensity and repetitions. Across the novel, wistaria is defined by its echoes, not only blooming for the second time in the summer of 1909 but also accompanying the story of Sutpen as it is told again and again. In its repetition, wistaria synecdochally delineates the way that southern land is mobilized

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

throughout the novel, highlighting it as an integral part of the way that history is remembered and shared.

To this end, wistaria is not bound to this wooden trellis outside of Rosa Coldfield's crypt-like home—it is not even confined to the geographic borders of the South. When Mr. Compson writes to Quentin of Rosa's death, the arrival of this letter collapses the boundaries of region as "...that dead summer twilight—the wistaria, the cigar-smell, the fireflies—attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room, across this strange iron New England snow."³⁰ Blooming against the "strange iron New England snow," wistaria arbitrates an engagement with southern land that facilitates an intense affective experience between Quentin and this history of which he is intrinsically a part. As wistaria transcends both the limitations of time and space, it tangles with this narrativization of history, facilitating, for Quentin at least, a bodily experience of engaging with this story. For Quentin, this history becomes sensorial—not solely a story that he has been passively told, but something that he actively feels, something that lives in his body.

This turn to southern land at these critical junctures of the narrative—where any kind of historical coherence and stability seems to be rendered particularly fragile—also seems to offer a weird claiming of the land of the South by the novel's cast of white characters. Even going back to Shreve's suggestion that the history of the Civil War has become part of the air that Quentin and other white southerners breathe, the land stands to anchor their attachments to the region, to offer a new metric through which their southernness can be articulated. In framing the intangible, affective aspect of southernness as something "in the air," Shreve naturalizes a specific and white kind of

³⁰ Ibid., 141. In a passage that echoes this one, we see wisteria at the collapse of not only spatial boundaries (between the North and the South) but temporal ones as well, the past and present bleed together for Quentin: "He (Quentin) could see it, as plainly as he saw the one open upon the open textbook on the table before him, white in his father's dark hand against his linen leg in the September twilight where the cigar-smell, the wistaria-smell, the fireflies drifted, thinking *Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long*" (115). In a Harvard dorm room in 1910, "wistaria-smell" and its accompaniments fold time in half, as this moment for Quentin becomes enmeshed in the September 1909. The sensorial overload that follows—a feeling that echoes throughout the text—highlights this relationship between history (time), land (geography), and body (affect).

being southern. As he makes this brand of southernness atmospheric, Shreve conceals the concerted transmission of the ideological, discursively mapping it into a southern ecology.

As such ecological and geographic elements are manipulated through language, they reflect political structures of identity that shape attachments to the South. In other words, the crafted landscapes are made political and become significant sites in *Absalom*, where the fault lines between southern history, narrative, and myth are either concealed or brought to light. As the South is constructed and reconstructed throughout the novel—as the different narrators give shape to the land that informs their narrative—the geography of the region is used within the structures of feeling and power that define the characters' attachments to the region. The affective geographies that we can trace across *Absalom* offer a productive complement to Berlant's concept of intimate publics, expanding what we understand to be bound up in both the felt experiences that determine relationships between communities and the world around them as well as the ways that affect shapes the multitude of bodies that make up the South.

Owning the Terror

The complexity of *Absalom's* form stems from the issue of race and its relationship to southern history, as characters in the novel's present must contend with a history that hinges upon Black pain without ever fully allowing for its expression nor addressing the structures that depend upon it. The novel's form is defined by its exclusions, as the silences of the figures most central to the history and its aftermaths are inaccessible to the reader. Where the truth cannot be confirmed, the text produces an onslaught of fiction, memory, and conjecture to fill the history's omissions, but only serve to rupture and confuse the narrative.³¹

³¹ This overproduction of language mirrors some of the qualities of sentimental texts that Berlant outlines in *The Female Complaint*. As they underscore: "Why and how do specifically kinds of collective but individually experienced pain get turned into modern forms of entertainment? How do we come to terms with the aesthetic conventions of excess...in processes of natural cultural normativity and critique, especially insofar as these dramas are depended on to express the true suffering and true desires of ordinary persons?" (11). What is *Absalom, Absalom!* if not a text invested in the aesthetics of excess, of attempting through an onslaught of language to give shape to illegible, unknowable pain? The

In its attempts (and inability) to fill these gaps, the novel's structures tie into the political critiques of *The Female Complaint*. As Berlant writes: "Sentimentality from the top down softens risks to the conditions of privilege by making obligations to action mainly ameliorative, a matter not of changing the fundamental terms that organize power, but of following the elevated claims of vigilant sensitivity, virtue, and conscience."³² In other words, Berlant is skeptical of the ways that sentimentality substitutes action with feeling, often making individual that which is structural and transforming political ailments into personal feelings of pain and suffering that may be empathized with as a show of humanity. While *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a novel that beckons empathy, it is a text in which characters seek to make legible that sociopolitical rot that defines southern history and the South's racial legacy. Yet, that legibility is fully fabricated because of its critical exclusions in the novel's very form. Its structure is born from who can and cannot narrate the story, as the only living character who may be able to tell the whole story is silenced throughout the text.³³

Up to this point, I have spent most of this chapter considering Quentin's role in *Absalom, Absalom!*—the curator of a history that demands to be told and retold, bound to it through its obsessive repetitions. Yet, in his memory of his trip to Sutpen's Hundred in September 1909, Quentin makes clear that he is not the only character forced to embody the novel's historical and affective weight:

murder of Charles Bon, upon which Sutpen's downfall hinges, is circulated and recirculated throughout the novel, as more and more characters and plots are employed to fully make sense of it. Parrish explains this excess as the novel's "long gusts of almost unstoppable speech." She posits that "Faulkner makes the reader experience the trouble of inheritance and of historical reckoning by manifesting it in a troublesome reading experience" (xi). I would add that the very structure of the novel—its centering of whiteness—is what actually generates this excess, particularly as the novel cedes control to Quentin and Shreve's narrative inventions. Even as the novel recognizes the problem of race, it cannot structurally soothe it, turning instead to this onslaught of circuitous prose and overwhelming feeling. The pain at the heart of the novel can only be glimpsed but never rendered fully legible.

³² Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 35.

³³ These silences of the narrative are only further compounded by Shreve's presence in it. Even if Shreve is unable to understand the South, he is still allowed to intervene in the construction of this historical narrative. He is given access to the story in a way that the novels Black characters—namely, Charles Bon and Clytie, Sutpen's other mixed-race child—are not. Even as the novel seems critical of the contradictory and hypocritical elements of the role that race plays in Sutpen's history, it formally cannot decenter whiteness.

Then he could move and turned to see the tiny gnomelike creature in headrag and voluminous skirts, the worn coffee-colored and doll-like hand above her head. Then he was not watching here but watching the match as it burned down toward her fingers; he watched quietly as she moved at last and lit a second match from the first and turned...He remembered it, lying here in the Massachusetts bed and breathing fast now, now that peace and quiet had fled again. He remembered how she did not say one word to him, not Who are you? Or What do you want here? but merely came with a bunch of enormous old fashioned iron keys, as if she had known all the time that this hour must come and that it could not be resisted, and opened the door and stepped back a little as Miss Coldfield entered....Miss Coldfield turned on the step and struck Clytie to the floor with a full-armed blow like a man would have, and turned and went on up the stairs. She (Clytie) lay on the bare floor of the scaling and empty hall like a small shapeless bundle of quiet clean rags. When he reached her he saw that she was quite conscious, her eyes wide open and calm; he stood above her, thinking, 'Yes. She is the one who owns the terror'.³⁴

In Quentin's memory, Clytie—who stands in the text as a constant yet peripheral presence—is recognized by Quentin as a keeper of knowledge—both of what has been and what will be. While Quentin's role in the text as a central authority of Sutpen's history stems from his imagined fabrications and secondhand storytelling as he scripts over the story across the constraints of time and place, Clytie is the novel's only true witness, an archive of firsthand knowledge that has resulted in her position in the text as "the one who owns the terror."³⁵ Significantly, Quentin highlights that Clytie seems unaffected by this "terror"—which he marks as an affective state unbound by the geographic as it follows him to Harvard, where he is "breathing fast" and devoid of "peace and quiet." As Quentin affectively traverses the spatial divides between the South and New England, Clytie collapses past, present, and future. For Quentin, her lack of affect seems to stem from this temporal collapse, from her position of the text as the perpetual witness to the history and its aftermaths that have unfolded among them.

³⁴ Faulkner, 250-251.

³⁵ It is worth noting that this tie between Clytie and terror actually happens in a previous chapter, by Shreve instead of Quentin. Interrupting the disembodied omniscient narrator's telling of Henry and Bon in the war, Shreve begins to talk about Quentin and Rosa's visit to Sutpen's Hundred: "And you couldn't stop [Rosa] either and then you saw that Clytie's trouble wasn't anger nor even distrust; it was terror, fear...she didn't tell you, it just came out of the terror and the fear after she turned you loose" (238-239). Beyond the terror becoming a matter of assignment, something that collapses Clytie into Quentin's own affective state by a character who was not present for, but has gained access to this memory because of his whiteness, Shreve's explanation here also makes the terror a kind of affective and epistemological device, and it is this feeling that unlock for Quentin the missing center of Sutpen's story.

Despite Quentin's entangling of Clytie with the horrors of southern racial history, her own interiority is absent in the novel.³⁶ The full expanse of what she has seen and born witness to is unavailable to the novel's readers, and the affective weight of what it means to "own the terror" is out of reach. The possibility of some kind of objective truth in the novel's engagement with history is intertwined with her inscrutability. Rather than fully realized character, she becomes pure signifier, set to unlock the final parts of the Sutpen story for Quentin. For it is Clytie who must unlock the door to reveal Henry's Sutpen's waxen figure; it is Clytie who links both the haunted past and doomed futurity of Sutpen's story—her own body acting as one of the iron keys that she carries.

Critical attention to Clytie's body and embodiment appears across much of the scholarship on her position in *Absalom*. In her exploration of the novel's dependency on racial politics, Thadious M. Davis writes: "Throughout the work, Clytie is the felt Black presence that pervades the South. She *embodies* this presence much more than Charles Bon..."³⁷ Similarly, Deborah Clarke, in her study of the novel's "notmothers," suggests that "Clytie, protector and avenger, figuratively *embodies* the forces which defeat white patriarchy and literally sets in motion the final stage of the fall of the house of Sutpen."³⁸ While the two authors seem to be at odds in considering the amount of power that Clytie can actually access within the novel's ideological constraints, both are still concerned with the political work that Clytie's body is being asked to do.

³⁶ Thadious M. Davis makes sense of this lack of interiority across the novel's Black characters by underscoring the division between the historical and the mythical. As she writes: "The Negro in this novel is not one myth, but a series of myths by which Faulkner shows how the Negro fits in the white world, either figuratively or imaginatively, and suggests the missed possibilities of his belonging in that larger world...Faulkner's narrative strategy (accretion of materials filtered through layers of time and individual perceptions), combined with the absence of a black narrator among the four rendering the story, retards any immediate recognition of the Negro's significance. Because of a complex interplay between the Sutpen legend and the four narrators, the novel relies in general upon an oblique apprehension of 'fact' and 'truth,' and upon the discernment that neither is absolute. The treatment of the Negro follows this pattern" (*Faulkner's 'Negro'* 180).

³⁷ Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 197-198, emphasis added.

³⁸ Deborah Clarke, *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 130, emphasis added.

Richard Godden also takes up this question of bodily labor in *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* as he examines not only the labor implicit in Clytie's status as a slave, but the textual and metaphorical labor that her body undergoes:

Rosa's "sister's house" is neither Sutpen's nor Ellen's as Rosa enters it. It is Clytie's to such a degree that the body of the slave and the body of the house become coterminous, rendering Rosa's attempt to reach Judith's bedroom a latent act of bodily penetration...Rosa's perception of the house as a body is clear from a network of allusions; it is a "*skeleton*," capable of speech, whose architecture grows from Clytie's form.³⁹

While Godden examines this intertwining of Clytie's racialized body with that of Sutpen's Hundred through a Marxist and psychoanalytic lens, I am concerned more with the spatial ramifications of such a conflation. In his reading, Godden makes the "dark house" of Sutpen's Hundred bodily, as the line between spatial, environmental bodies and the human body becomes blurred.

This blurring can be traced through Quentin's memory of the house. In *Absalom*'s final chapter, he describes approaching it:

But they reached it at last. It loomed, bulked, square and enormous with its jagged half-topped chimneys, its roofline sagging a little; for an instant as they moved, hurried, toward it Quentin saw completely through it a ragged segment of sky with three hot stars in it as if the house were of one dimension, painted on a canvas curtain in which there was a tear; now, almost beneath it, the dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh.⁴⁰

Following Godden, it is tempting to read these final lines—"a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh"—as a condemnation of moral degradation and spiritual rot implicit in the house as a product of enslaved labor. While such a reading is compelling, I am still interested in the way that Quentin flattens the house against the ecological space surrounding it, and in that same move personifies the house into a kind of warped embodiment. The plantation—which has already been marked in the text as a site of ecological violence—festers in its own rotten

³⁹ Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82-83, original emphasis.

⁴⁰ Faulkner, 249.

decrepitude as well as shapes and shades the surrounding environment as the “dead furnace-breath of air” surrounding Quentin and Rosa reflects the “slow and protracted violence” that the house represents. The history that the novel has unraveled across all its echoes and revelations suffuses the land itself as Quentin synecdochally turns to the wood of the house as a bridge between body (i.e. “flesh”) and history (i.e. “a smell of desolation and decay”). Rather than examine the house as a cohesive, stable structure, Quentin uses its most basic ecological element to collapse the divide between human and non-human bodies. In conflating wood with flesh, Quentin makes the house an ecological bodily object—affecting and affected by the history embedded within it.

Significantly, Quentin precedes this image of Sutpen’s Hundred with a turn to Clytie.

Attempting to assuage his own terror at the prospect of what awaits them at the plantation, Quentin considers the risk of knowing what Clytie does:

“I just know she is somewhere watching us,” [Rosa] whimpered. “I can feel her. But if we can just get to the house, get into the house——” The drive seemed interminable. He knew the place. He had walked from the gate to the house as a child, a boy, when distances seem really long...yet now it seemed to him that the house would never come in sight: so that presently he found himself repeating [Rosa’s] words: ‘If we can just get to the house, get inside the house’, telling himself, recovering himself in that same breath: ‘I am not afraid. I just don’t want to be here. I just don’t want to know whatever it is she keeps hidden in it’.⁴¹

What Clytie keeps hidden in the house is inseparable from what has become hidden in *herself*. The “terror” owned by Clytie and the terror seeped into the decaying wood of the house are one in the same as both become structures forced to bear the affective weight of Sutpen’s (and the South’s) racial history. While Godden suggests the relationship between Clytie and Sutpen’s Hundred as one of ownership via racialized exploited labor, the affective depth of such a relationship needs further unraveling. Rosa marks Clytie as a felt presence (to borrow Davis’s language), as an affective charge that acts upon her and Quentin as they approach the house. For Quentin, a similar felt experience seems bound up in the ecology of the plantation itself, of which Clytie is a significant part. As the

⁴¹ Ibid.

ecological and the emotional become intertwined in the space of Sutpen's Hundred, Quentin maps the bodies that are intrinsic to understanding the affective processes inherent in engaging with the historical.

Such bodies play a central role in the South crafted across the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*—a South that persists in a larger literary imagination. As *Absalom* traces history across its collective embodiments, the novel offers a model for understanding southern history beyond narrative—instead, as a matrix that networks the ways that the historical is informed by the interplay between the affective and the geographic. In turning to the role that Clytie plays in the novel, I want to underscore the ways that the affective geographies that I trace across this dissertation not only offer a material heuristic for thinking through this matrix but also call into question which bodies are often made to uphold this historical and affective weight. Because the novel cannot fully address the structural and ideological problems that affect both the novel and the South as a whole, Clytie's body gets folded into the work of signification within Quentin's narrative. While Quentin and Clytie stand as the novel's centers of knowledge, only Quentin is granted any sense of interiority, while Clytie stands largely as a historical, political, affective, and ecological symbol, existing only in the removes of the memories of different white characters in the novel and mapped within the affective geography of Sutpen's Hundred and the "terror" it holds.⁴² In other words, even though Clytie *owns* the terror, the novel denies any further understanding of whether she *feels* it as well.

Affective Geographies in *Native Guard*

If *Absalom, Absalom!* sketches the triangulation of history, land, and body that shapes attachments across a southern literary canon, highlighting the role that the geographic and ecological

⁴² In her essay, "Who Owns the Terror in *Absalom, Absalom!*?: Quentin's Marriage and Clytie's Fire," Carole Anne Taylor notes a similar aspect of the novel's final chapter: "The Clytie who remains doomed to tragic mystery in already narrated stories appears in Quentin's figural consciousness in similar language and yet his and a textual narrator's final version reveals an affective agency that distinguishes his engagement from their sloughing off of terror onto the tragic mulatto" (130).

are made to play in the charged dynamics of belonging that define life in the American South, Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* brings this matrix into sharp relief. As the introduction to this chapter underscores, the two texts are affectively tied as Trethewey both uses Faulkner's work as a cornerstone for thinking about dominant (i.e. white) southern feelings and narratives as well as takes up a similar historiographic project to that of *Absalom, Absalom!*. As *Absalom* is defined by its gaps and silences—many of which revolve around the novel's Black characters—*Native Guard* gives voice to a buried Black history in Mississippi. As her poetics operate as a kind of navigation, Trethewey maps affective geographies that not only tie elided history to the southern environment but also mark her own southernness as an ecological and geographic project. The affective weight demanded by Black bodies across the landscape of *Absalom* becomes explicit in the poems of *Native Guard*, as Trethewey traces the structural violence that has defined her experience in the South across time and space, marking it as an integral element of any configuration of the South.

To this end, Trethewey actually opens the collection with a poem entitled “Theories of Time and Space,” which instructs the reader to

head south on Mississippi 49, one-
by-on mile markers ticking off

another minute of your life. Follow this
to its natural conclusion—dead end

at the coast, the pier at Gulfport where
riggings of shrimp boats are loose stitches

in a sky threatening rain. Cross over
the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand

dumped on the mangrove swamp—buried
terrain of the past.⁴³

⁴³ Trethewey, 1.

Enjambed, each line bleeds outside of its structural borders, mirroring the poem's own lack of containment across temporal and spatial planes. Mapping the "buried terrain of the past" as a facet of the journey across the Mississippi landscape, the poem breaks history free from narrative conventions and instead suggests something more experiential, something that is inseparable from the "minute[s] of your life." In its turn to the ecological, the poem plays with the imposition of a human geography onto a natural one, making explicit the ways that the "man-made beach" dumped over the tangled roots of mangroves—the swamp itself embodying the very interconnectedness upon which Trethewey insists—reflects the manipulations of history that have shaped and continue to shape her relationship to both Mississippi and the South at large.

Throughout *Native Guard*, Trethewey makes clear that uncovering this "buried terrain" is a deeply personal experience, one that requires not only her experience in the South, but also that of her mother and those of the titular Louisiana Native Guard. In *Southscapes*, Thadious M. Davis refers to Trethewey's position in *Native Guard* as occupying an "apertural space," which "locates the poet persona within the space of the page as an encompassing knowledge site, enabled by focus and frame to isolate and magnify her subject and to move backward in time."⁴⁴ In other words, Davis underscores Trethewey's poetic method as an intense observation of the life of her subject—which at times includes Trethewey herself—across a fluid temporality.

⁴⁴ Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 61. Davis continues to define the Trethewey's use of the apertural space as such: "[Trethewey] manipulates an apertural space so that it is sometimes a slit, torn or sliced with the violence of a blasé, as in poems venturing into the abuse a mother suffered. As other times, the apertural space is a gap between the inside and the outside of structures or relationships. It is the disjunctive space between a daughter's love and trauma, or the resistance measured in the space between a white photographer and black women refusing to be passive objects of his camera. At still other times, the apertural space is the hole through which the liminal is made possible. It is the means of accessing a mixed-raced woman in the Storyville district of New Orleans and her transformation in front of a camera, or tracing the black Native Guards show by Confederate soldiers and refused burial by Union officers" (61-62). For Davis, understanding Trethewey's poetics through a turn to the work of the cameras and photography offers an enriching model through which to understand "her insistence on memory and the historical past and its intersection with the subjective present" (62).

In organizing these subjects across time, space, and perspective, Trethewey divides *Native Guard* into three sections, structurally ensuring the knotted nature of the personal and the historical in her work. The first, which focuses on the life and death of Trethewey's mother, both outlines Trethewey's own origins as well as provides an account of the Jim Crow South and the lives of Black women that is focused through her mother's individual history.⁴⁵ The second section turns to the experiences of the Louisiana Native Guard, a regiment of Black soldiers who fought for the Union Army during the Civil War, whose legacy acts as the central terror of the text, from which every other trauma stems. For Trethewey, the significance of the Native Guard lies not in their actions during the war, but in the treatment of their deaths. As Trethewey writes in the notes of the collection:

During the battle of Port Hudson in May 1863, General Nathaniel P. Banks requested a truce to locate the wounded Union soldiers and bury the dead. His troops, however, ignored the area where the Native Guards had fought, leaving those men unclaimed. When Colonel Shelby, a Confederate officer, asked permission to bury the putrefying bodies in front of his lines, Banks refused, saying that he had no dead in that area.⁴⁶

The image of these abandoned corpses pervades Trethewey's work as the poems face what has been signified by these "putrefying bodies" that reveal in their unburial a violent history seeped into the land of the South. Bookended by Trethewey's attention to the body of her mother and her own biracial body, the unveiled history of the Louisiana Native Guard marks the struggle inherent in Trethewey's navigation of her own southernness.

This navigation becomes clear in *Native Guard*'s final section, as Trethewey attempts to reconcile the violence and ostracization faced by her interracial family with her own identification with the southern spaces that she occupies. This section opens with the aforementioned "Pastoral"

⁴⁵ As Davis highlights: "It is difficult to resist reading the mother in Trethewey's poems as emblematic of the South, racialized as black and abused yet offering a homespace to shape the daughter's subjectivity" (*Southscapes* 70). While such a reading clearly underscores the work that Davis's apertural space accomplishes as a critical frame, it also speaks to my own interest in thinking through the ways attachments to the South and southernness are at once marked as spatial and affective.

⁴⁶ Trethewey, 48.

and ends with the aptly-titled “South,” which locates Trethewey firmly in a Mississippi geography. In “South,” Trethewey returns to the South and crafts a landscape that has grown out of Black pain and has been a site of intimate documentation and remembrance. As the poem opens:

I returned to a stand of pines
bone-thin phalanx

flanking the roadside, tangle
of understory—a dialectic of dark

and light—and magnolias blossoming
like afterthought: each flower

a surrender, white flags draped
among the branches. I returned

to land’s end, the swath of coast
clear cut and buried in sand:

mangrove, live oak, gulfweed
razed and replaced by thin palms—

palmettos—symbols of victory
or defiance, over and over.

For Trethewey, to write the South—to write *herself* in the South—is always an ecological and geographic venture as she attaches her return to the land of the region. As she cultivates the southern landscape across the poem, Trethewey also writes it as a site of attachment—a network of affects produced by the land’s history that continue to shape how that history can be explained, understood, and felt. Take the opening line: “I returned to a stand of pines / bone-thin phalanx / flanking the roadside, tangle / of understory.” As Trethewey places herself amongst the trees lining the southern highway, the trees themselves are made bodily as they are made an inextricable part of this history to which she responds. The “bone-thin phalanx” that peoples the roadside plants a dual-image of both a military formation distinguished by a close crush of the bodies of soldiers as well as the bones that make up the hand. From the poem’s opening, southern land is reenacting not only the history that Trethewey is pulling to the fore—that of Black soldiers sacrificed and left to rot—

but also the telling of such a history, recreating a skeletal hand that must write, that must hold such a story. The poem continues with such interpolations—the “tangle of understory,” the magnolias that blossom into white flags of surrender on the branches, the play between palms and palmettos—as history, land, and body are seamlessly interwoven across Trethewey’s poetic geography. The attachments to the South that facilitate her return all stem from this matrix as she writes herself as a necessary part of this ecology, both as the biracial woman who remembers the South’s racial violences and the poet whose control over language and metaphor makes the erased so unavoidably present and seen.

In “South,” Trethewey’s interest in bodies is multi-fold as she writes her own biracial body, marked by Mississippi’s law that deemed her parents’ interracial marriage illegal; the bodies of the Louisiana Native Guards who were abandoned in death and left to putrefy under the southern sun; and the body of the land that connects all these bodies across time and space and memory. If the opening lines places Trethewey’s body firmly amongst the body of southern land, the rest of the poem insists upon her place at the locus of the historical, ecological, and affective:

... I returned
to a field of cotton, hallowed ground—

as slave legend goes—each boll
holding the ghosts of generations

those who measured their days
by the heft of sacks and lengths

of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
still sewn into our clothes.

I returned to a country battlefield
where colored troops fought and died—

Port Hudson where their bodies swelled
and blackened beneath the sun—unburied

until earth’s green sheet pulled over them,
unmarked by any headstones.

Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
 are named to honor the Confederacy,

 where that old flag still hangs, I return
 to Mississippi, state that made a crime
 of me— mulatto, half-breed — native
 in my native land, this place they'll bury me.⁴⁷

Trethewey's "I" here is significant—an I in motion, in an act of perpetual return after return—as it stands amongst the site and land of the deep South.⁴⁸ Trethewey's I stands within a triangulation of land, history, and memory; the first two stanzas mark those that history has elided—the generations of enslaved people in cotton fields and the Louisiana Native Guard of Black soldiers abandoned in death by a white commander. In both of these returns, Trethewey maps her return across the landscape, crafting a geography of place, history, and ecology—not only the cotton field but the boll, not only Port Hudson but the "green sheet" of grass grown from an unmarked mass grave. Trethewey lists first these places and people that are forgotten, effaced by the memorials to the Confederacy that populate Mississippi.

And still, Trethewey lays her own claim to Mississippi, to the South. In her final return, she marks the violence enacted upon her and her family—the white supremacist laws that wrote her parents' marriage as illegal and "made a crime" of her birth. And yet, she returns to Mississippi, claiming her own nativity—that she is "native in [her] native land." In this way, she asserts her southernness as innate, mapping an affective geography that stands in defiance of the mechanisms of white supremacy. This final line also marks a shift by Trethewey from I to me, from subject to object as she underscores her own conscription into the violences and silences that have shape her very understanding of the world. This tie between Trethewey and southern history is made clear in

⁴⁷ Trethewey, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Davis also notes the impact of returns: "The repetition of 'I returned' punctures the landscape with the litany of emotion and of what is within both the sight line and the insight of the poet...The final use of return shifts from past to present tense and concludes of the material body and being of the poet" (*Southscapes* 75).

the rhyme upon which the poem ends—the only exact rhyme in the entire poem which links the final “me” to “Confederacy,” reifying the weight of history that she shoulders in her return to the South. This final “me” also tethers Trethewey to the Black soldiers of the Native Guard as she juxtaposes the burial of “me” with the unburied corpses that “swelled and blackened beneath the sun” until time and earth covered them.

This cross between burial and unburial highlights the ambiguity of the poem’s ending. For how do we read Trethewey’s preeminent burial in Mississippi, her native land? We could read it as Trethewey’s claim over her southernness—her claim of Mississippi—coming full circle as she writes Mississippi as her inevitable fate. However, such a reading ignores the poem’s—as well as the collection’s—preoccupation with burial: the bodies left unburied during the Civil War, the predominant modes of history that buried these stories as well as the death and subsequent burial of Trethewey’s mother in “Graveyard Blues.” Furthermore, the burial at the end of “South” is marked by a lack of clarity—who are the “they” that will be burying her? Does this burial cement a sense of belonging—some emotional tether to a homeplace—or does it stand as another thread in the tapestry of violence that she has woven together?

Significantly, this ambiguity further ties *Native Guard* to *Absalom, Absalom!* as both texts end on this lack of resolution, in which the affective conflicts at the center of the texts are left to the reader’s interpretation. Throughout *Absalom*, the stress of putting together a coherent history seems to yearn toward a kind of catharsis, desire to make sense of this history with its gaps and contradictions and ghosts that will not be put to rest—to break free from the cycle of retelling and be released from the southern history into which Quentin has been woven.⁴⁹ He cannot even

⁴⁹ In one of his lectures at the University of Virginia, Faulkner spoke on Quentin’s position in *Absalom*. “Every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he’s actually telling his biography—that’s all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself. Quentin was still trying to get God to tell him why, in *Absalom, Absalom!* as he was in *The Sound and the Fury*” (ctd. in Fulton, 8). For Quentin, acting as both author and audience of Sutpen’s story is also an act of introspective navigation which centers upon—as the end of the novel makes clear—his attachment to the South and its history.

imagine or narrativize a version of this history that can cleanly end, that will stop the echoes of this story from following him; he is left only with a notfeeling—an incomplete, negative affect that is neither love nor hate—as he remembers a South that is neither completely real nor completely fictional. Meanwhile, even though Trethewey is able to construct more complete history, *Native Guard* still leaves the reader to grapple with the affective aftermath of Trethewey's mapping project. In this suspension between text and audience, both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Native Guard* leave us to interrogate what comes after these intense confrontations with southern history—to question what other complex feelings may stem from the collapse of history, body, and land across southern literature, to examine what attachments can be reclaimed, and to see if other futures can be imagined.

II.

“Even in a place of sorrow, even in a place of joy”: At the Intersection of Blackness & Southernness¹

During the summer of 2020, the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board voted to rename Lee Magnet High School. This occasion marked the second time the school had changed its name, following a 2016 decision to officially drop “Robert E.”² The 2020 name change was met with much national attention, following a viral video in which Black community leader Gary Chambers, Jr. denounces white school board member Connie Bernard for online shopping during the meeting. In his speech, Chambers condemns an interview that Bernard had given the previous week, in which she suggested that Robert E. Lee was actually a benevolent slave owner and that any discomfort with the name of Lee High stems from a lack of historical knowledge.³ As a corrective to this dominant white-washed history, Chambers clarifies a relationship between history and power as it appears throughout monuments and memorials across the country. Calling attention to which histories that have been upheld, Chambers says to Bernard: “You don’t *give a damn*, and it’s clear. But I’mma tell you what the slaves—my ancestors—said...since you don’t know history, sister...Robert E. Lee was a brutal slave master...And you sit your arrogant self in here...while the pain and the hurt of the people in this community is on display. ‘Cause you don’t *give a damn*.”⁴

¹ An adapted version of this chapter first appeared in *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures*, Volume 76, Issue #2, 2024, pages 147-171. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

² Charles Lussier, “The same, yet different: Close vote officially cuts ‘Robert E.’ from Lee High School,” *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), June 16, 2016, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton-rouge/news/education/article_d1f019b1-dbf7-514a-b6d1-dbbe480355b3.html. As a note, Lee High was established in 1957 and named after a Confederate general with no real ties to Louisiana, beyond the Confederacy.

³ Bernard: “I would hope that [the students and parents uncomfortable with the name of Lee High] would learn a little bit more of about General Lee, because General Lee inherited a large plantation and he was tasked with the job of doing something with those people who lived in bondage to that plantation, the slaves, and he freed them” (Lussier).

⁴ Alexia Rowan, “East Baton Rouge School Board Members get Told Off By Citizen Gary Chambers in Powerful Speech,” YouTube, June 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEUNnvGA-1g>.

Chambers's refrain of "give a damn" that echoes through this reproach of Bernard appears again at the end of his speech. Highlighting the work of Baton Rouge's Black community, he remarks: "It's been folks in this community who *give a damn*." Facing Connie Bernard's sanitized history, Chambers uses this phrase to divide Bernard and the other white members of the school board from the Black community of Baton Rouge, slating these groups into those who "give a damn" and those who, like Bernard, do not—a rhetorical move that highlights the complex affective stakes that are at play in the discourse surrounding cultural memory and history. If Bernard's inability (or perhaps, refusal) to "give a damn" evokes a nostalgia for a romanticized version of the southern past, Chambers instead prioritizes feelings that collapse the distance between past and present. In asserting a history that centers the experiences of the Black community, Chambers makes clear the necessity of understanding the emotions that accompany and elucidate such experiences. He traces the affective contours of this imperative to "give a damn"—to acknowledge what he names the "pain and hurt of this community" that arise from historical retellings that elide Black suffering, retellings that crystallize the past into something static and separate from the contemporary moment. In this way, Chambers's speech enacts what Jeffrey Insko identifies as the "ever-present now," a mode of engaging with history that examines how the past persists into the present, challenging the myth of linear, historical progress.⁵ As nostalgia depends upon this myth, its predominance as both the critical mode of southern scholarship and as a primary southern affect has subsumed other affective structures that may consider a more dynamic relationship between past and present—a relationship that more clearly encompasses the complex and often contradictory feelings that Black southerners have for the South.

⁵ Jeffrey Insko, *History, Abolition, and the Ever-Present Now in Antebellum American Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

To this point, the feelings embedded into Chambers's speech are not limited to pain and hurt. Within the affective network of "giving a damn," Chambers also highlights a sense of belonging that is often erased in the context of southern Black communities, whose relationship to the region is often defined solely through the alienation engendered by the trauma of slavery and its Jim Crow succession. Towards the end of his speech, Chambers asks a seemingly simple question that suggests that a reconfiguration of the relationship between Blackness and southernness must be in order. Addressing the board, he inquires: "When do we, as Baton Rouge, stop living in 1856?" With this question, Chambers defines himself within a collective Baton Rouge community, declaring the stakes that he and the rest of the Black community have in the city—stakes further compounded by his ending assertion that "We built this joint for free."⁶ Throughout this speech, Chambers's frustration and anger are clear—denoting typical emotions that we might associate with the experiences of Black southerners—but something else lingers in his words. Chambers suggests a commitment to and identification with Baton Rouge, both actions that include a collection of emotions that can be attached to Black southern life—emotions that have been erased by the white affects that take up so much space in both our critical and cultural consciousnesses.

This erasure becomes clear in much of the scholarship done at this intersection of affect, history, and southernness. This scholarship, as seen clearly in the work of Tara McPherson, often centers white nostalgia in an effort to probe the dangerous political feelings that stem from this and other affects tied to the Lost Cause. However, as McPherson's "lenticular logic" contends, focusing on nostalgia limits the potential for any other possible modes of being and *feeling* southern, particularly when that southernness intersects with Blackness.⁷ As seen in Connie Bernard's

⁶ Chambers's rhetorical imagining of a collective Baton Rouge is a significant reclamation of a city that ranks 31st out of 113 U.S. cities (as well as 22nd out of 221 metropolitan regions) in segregation, per the statistics compiled from 2020 census data by The Roots of Structural Racism Project, conducted by University of California, Berkeley's Othering & Belonging Institute.

⁷ McPherson defines a lenticular logic as a "schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only connection of one of the images can be seen at a time" (7). To this point, I

insistence of a sanitized version of Robert E. Lee, nostalgia—in its inherent romanticization and fantasization of the past—subsumes any other potential affective registers, and (whether consciously or unconsciously) excludes complex Black feelings toward the South and its history.⁸ As Chambers suggests, if we turn our attention to Black experience and feeling, the terms and histories that emerge will be radically different. But how might we make space for such feelings? How might we allow them to breathe when our attention to white nostalgia (amidst other typical “southern feelings”) has sucked all the air from the room?

My work in this chapter is interested in the alternatives to nostalgia that occur when we both embrace other modes of history beyond linearity and center Black relationships to the South. I prioritize the work of Black southerners who have been excluded from discussions of southern identity and whose feelings have been subjugated to a white emotional paradigm within the limited criticism that has been done on southern affects. On the rare occasion that Black southern affect is even considered, the feelings examined largely stem from a stale vocabulary and collection of feelings: fear, frustration, anxiety, haunting. These feelings are, of course, a historically-motivated product of the South’s legacy of violent white supremacy, but the failure to encompass and articulate a robust understanding of Black southern affect not only results in the alienation of Black southerners from the region but also defines Black experience solely by trauma, anger, and horror. As Chambers demonstrates, such feelings do not tell the whole story—that the South can exist as both a site of trauma *and* profound identification for Black southerners. The complex, contradicting

suggest that an over-emphasis on nostalgia, particularly as it pertains to the Lost Cause ideology, can center whiteness in critical conversations about southern affects.

⁸ Nostalgia is often written as a passive sense of longing, but as this example with Connie Bernard makes clear, nostalgia’s ability to overwhelm and consume can be used to uphold white-washed versions of history, as well as further elide the experiences of marginalized people, particularly in the South. Bernard’s insistence upon this nostalgic version of Robert E. Lee as a southern gentleman requires an active and purposeful denial of other historical models and a refusal to look further than a single, static version of southern history.

emotions that stem from such a paradox are rarely acknowledged, let alone examined, in a critical capacity.⁹

In its prioritization of these paradoxical affective realities, this chapter builds upon the work done by Thadious M. Davis in *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, in which she articulates the particular politics of exclusion that have denied Black southerners access to a cohesive sense of origin and regional identity.¹⁰ Throughout *Southscapes*, Davis marks the ways that Black southern authors “use their spatial location to imagine, create, and define new and unproscribed subjectivities.”¹¹ I suggest that a significant aspect of such subjectivities are formed affectively—that feeling plays a crucial role in mapping the matrix of social, ecological, and historical experiences that shape the identities of Black southerners. Yet, as Gary Chambers illustrates, to be both Black and southern is to be forced to navigate an emotional landscape that struggles to conceive of the contradictions of attachment between racial and regional belonging.

In beginning with Chambers’s speech, I am underscoring these affective tensions that challenge our prior understandings of southern identity. While examining the full spectrum of Black southerners’ emotions toward the region could easily fill a dissertation of its own, I narrow my focus to two texts centered on the affects embedded in the act of returning to the South: bell hooks’s

⁹ Or rather, this complexity of feelings is often seen as a defining feature a southern identity (we can, as always, return to Quentin Compson’s emphatic “I don’t hate the South!”) but often only as a phenomenon of southern whiteness. In addition to nostalgia, McPherson claims that “guilt emerges as a central aspect of twentieth-century southern feeling” (6). These emotions are always entangled in feelings of shame, loss, and anger, and each emotion is felt keenly by McPherson’s catalogue of white southern figures. This central guilt, however, is always *white* guilt, and while McPherson claims that her strategies for navigating the treacherous terrain of southern affect “refuse to deploy encounters with blackness as mere fuel for the emotional texturing of whiteness,” her work still focuses on whiteness and the potential trajectories of white feeling (6). McPherson, like myself, is a Louisianian ex-pat (or as she says, “voluntarily displaced from Dixie”), and we are similarly interested in negotiating and navigating her own feelings toward the South within the affective structures that she delineates. Her work is populated with first-person pronouns—namely an all-encompassing “we” that she uses to deploy descriptions of complex southern feelings—which mark *whose* feelings she is attempting to articulate. Who is included in this “we”? And who, more importantly, has been excluded?

¹⁰ As Davis so succinctly explains: “...whites in the South became simply “southerners” without a racial designation, but blacks in the South became simply “blacks” without a regional designation” (*Southscapes* 29).

¹¹ Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4.

Belonging: A Culture of Place and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*.¹² Both texts ask the following question: what does it mean to go home—to long for home—when home is also a space of innumerable and collective horror? These texts demand a departure from nostalgia as the origin of all southern emotion and articulate the different affective forms through which Black southerners return to both the physical region and the history of the South. By centering the affective contradictions between hate, affection, and longing that define these texts' engagement with the South, this chapter will trace and archive modes of feeling that offer a more robust understanding of the emotions that emerge at the intersection of Blackness and southernness, cultivating an affective space that reimagines the role of emotion in engaging with memory and history as well as maps a more salient geography of Black affect in the South.

Nostalgia and *Belonging*: bell hooks's Black Southern Affect(s)

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks introduces the circumstances that facilitated her own turn to theory:

Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.¹³

¹² In *Southscapes*, Davis emphasizes the significance of the act of return in thinking about the relationship between Black southerners and the region. Emphasizing the return migration of many Black southerners to the South in the last few decades of the twentieth-century, Davis writes: “The focus of return and the South as home is a reversal of the movement most prominent for three quarters of the twentieth century. While anthropologists and sociologists may see the increasingly frequent pattern of black return migration as a flight from the hardships of urban life, I suggest that it is also a claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with difficulty and the memory of pain, provides a major grounding for identity, particularly when in the absence of a distinct racial binary it has become harder to formulate identity within the nexus of community” (35). I have chosen two texts that look closely at this relationship between identity and the “memory of pain” that Davis outlines here and attempt to give language to the feelings that stem from it.

¹³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59. hooks's language here echoes that of Houston A. Baker, Jr., in *Turning South Again* when he explains: “*Writing* was our global explanation and prediction of what could happen to our black bodies under contradictions of southern maleness. It was our *theory*” (6). For these Black southern scholars, theory is inexplicably tied to emotions that stems from the very experience of Blackness itself and often overlooked in the annals of a universal affect theory.

hooks's language here is riddled with feelings that we easily recognize—pain, desperation, desire—as well as those that are not easily distilled into a single word, such as feelings of healing and clarity or a lessening of hurt. Affect is intrinsic to the work that hooks seeks to accomplish through her theory; it is both motivator and method. Theory itself becomes an affective practice: a mode of liquefying and making sense of the whirlwind of feelings that have lodged themselves within the body. For hooks, emotion is clearly a foundational tool for understanding and engaging the world around her, yet we rarely see her included in conversations surrounding affect.¹⁴

hooks's absence from current discourse on the function of feelings further highlights the absence of Black affect that has been so succinctly identified by Tyrone S. Palmer, who writes that there exists a “fundamental disconnect between the perception of Black hyperemotionality and irrationality, and the reality of Black feeling” as Black emotions are often categorized as “inappropriate, exorbitant, and themselves gratuitous.”¹⁵ Such a failure of perception inhibits affect theory's universalizing aims and emphasizes its inability to account for the impact of Blackness on the very formation of feelings. As Palmer states in his survey of the current field:

...how does one account for affect theory's lack of interrogation of the particularities of blackness and its circulation within affective economies? [...] As it stands, affect theory as an academic discourse has yet to substantially account for the problematic of blackness, the particular affective dispositions that emerge in reaction to processes of racialization and racial subjugation, or the ways in which affect serves as an exploitable tool of racial domination and anti-blackness.¹⁶

For Palmer, the experiences of Blackness are defined by emotions that have been unrecognized within the current conversations surrounding affect within the academy. This particular lack has

¹⁴ *All About Love: New Visions* (2001) is probably one of hooks's most direct theorizations of feeling. In the introduction, she notes: “When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of love in any movement for social justice” (xviii-xix). While there may be many reasons for this resistance to hooks's work on love, I include this quotation to underscore hooks's own insistence on the importance of her work on emotion.

¹⁵ Tyrone S. Palmer, “What Feels More Than Feeling?: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

stemmed from attempts to present affect as a universalizing metric for making sense of the intimate, intrinsic relations between the human and the world.¹⁷ As Palmer so succinctly argues, though, this universalizing impulse of the academy has rendered an understanding of affect through a white lens that cannot conceive of Black emotion. In other words, when emotion is understood through a paradigm of whiteness, the nuances of Black affect that stem from racialization are lost and misconstrued.

As Palmer's work serves primarily to challenge and destabilize academic conceptions of affect theory, the question of where to go from there remains. In response to the dearth of critical work done on Black southern affect, I turn to bell hooks's work as both an example of Black feeling and a theorization of it. In her 2009 book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks addresses the matrices of affect and Blackness as they pertain to her own relationship to the South—specifically the hills of Kentucky where she grew up and eventually settled, living there until her death in 2021. hooks frames her relationship to Kentucky as both fraught and vital, something that cannot be easily understood by those outside the South:

Often critics would talk about my southern roots, never naming a specific location for those roots. To some extent this failure to focus on Kentucky was linked to assumptions about whether Kentucky really was the “South.” I would tell people that growing up black in Kentucky we experienced our world *as southern*, as not very different from other southern places, like Alabama and Georgia. It may very well be that the culture of whiteness in

¹⁷ In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant examines this universalizing impulse through what they call the “culture of true feeling.” As they write, “The culture of true feeling has no inevitable political ideology...Its core pedagogy has been to develop a notion of social obligation based on the citizen’s capacity for suffering and trauma. This structure has been deployed mainly *among the culturally privileged to humanize* those subjects who have been excluded from the formal and capaciously social aspects of citizenship, embedded seemingly intractably on the bottom of class, racial, ethnic, and sexual hierarchies” (35, emphasis mine). This true feeling—which could also be understood as sentimentality or sympathy—would ideally strengthen community building, affectively solidifying the bonds between the self and others. However, this configuration of emotion casts the central ability to feel squarely within the realm of those whom Berlant names “the culturally privileged.” Citing James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Berlant traces the ways that sentimental politics often fail to result in concrete action that deconstructs the hierarchies that deny citizenship to certain subjects: “But as Baldwin asserts, the humanization strategies of sentimentality always traffic in cliché, the reproduction of a person as a thing, and thus indulge in the confirmation of the marginal subject’s embodiment of *inhumanity* on the way to providing the privileged with heroic occasions of recognition, rescue, and inclusion” (35, original emphasis). In other words, a culture of true feeling—an over-dependence—not only substitutes feeling for action but reconstitutes the hierarchies that cultivates the dehumanization of unprivileged subjects in the first place. As Palmer solidifies, this reconstitution also takes place in the realm of feeling itself, as Black subjects are rendered affectively illegible.

Kentucky has characteristics that would not be seen as distinctly southern but certainly the sub-cultures black folks created and were formed by what is meant to be black people in the South.¹⁸

Through her insistence that she and her fellow Black Kentuckians experience the world *as southern*, hooks highlights the contours of southern identity—adamantly underscoring its shape, its limits, its multiplicity. Moreover, she wrests *southernness* from the grasp of whiteness. Like Gary Chambers’s remark that “We built this joint for free”—which suggests an investment in the region that white southerners will never be able to access—hooks asserts that the ability to see the world *as southern* is intimately tied to Blackness. She reclaims a relationship to the region that has so often been denied her, revealing a rootedness in the South that writes her southernness as a mode of engaging with the world.

This engagement—experiencing the world *as southern*—is always an affective process. Sara Ahmed explains that to understand affect, we must begin with the “messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near.”¹⁹ *Feeling* then is subjective, shaped by the relationship between body and world. Subsequently, hooks’s assertion that she moves through the world *as southern* suggests that southernness itself must be understood as a sensation (or collection of sensations) that gives way to an emotional experience that is determined by the bodies that experience it—bodies that are always scripted by social and ideological forces. This knowledge, as Palmer reminds us, immediately denies a universalizing understanding of affect and requires that we examine feelings through a more specific lens. As such, Black southernness, as hooks asserts, much be viewed through its own complex matrix of history, identity, and emotion.

¹⁸ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 22-23 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 30.

With such intricacies of feeling, Black southerners are not only affected by the South but simultaneously impact how the South can be understood. To illustrate, hooks suggests that her relationship with the region radically challenges how we see both southern identity as well as notions of property and land ownership:

While my early sense of identity was shaped by the anarchic life of the hills, I did not identify with being Kentuckian. Racial separatism, white exploitation and oppression of black folks were so widespread, it pained my already hurting heart. Nature was the place where one could escape the world of man-made constructions of race and identity. Living isolated in the hill, we had very little contact with the world of white dominator culture. Away from the hills, dominator culture and its power over our lives were constant. Back then all black people knew that the white supremacist State with all its power did not care for the welfare of black folks. What we had learned in the hills was how to care for ourselves by growing crops, raising animals, living deep in the earth. What we had learned in the hills was how to be self-reliant.²⁰

Looking back to her childhood, hooks offers an alternate mode of experiencing region, a mode that is divorced from white imperialist notions of property and borders. She explains that as a child, she found solace in “the anarchic life of the hills,” locating her source of identity in those hills, rather than in the state of Kentucky itself. As she explains throughout *Belonging*, the hills were a great equalizer, where self-reliance was privileged over other markers of identity, such as race or class.²¹ When hooks highlights the “man-made constructions of race and identity,” she is also implicitly bringing our attention to similar man-made constructions of borders and property. hooks’s conception of Kentucky—of *home*—is based on land rather than lines, challenging our very conception of the South, which often begins with the demarcation of an invisible Mason-Dixon Line.

I bring our attention to hooks’s relationship with the land because it highlights her imperative to consider the South beyond a tie to statehood that is not only limited by the constraints

²⁰ hooks, 7-8.

²¹ Per hooks: “In the hills of my girlhood, white and black folks often lived in a racially integrated environment, with boundaries determined more by chosen territory than race. The notion of ‘private property’ was an alien one the hills belonged to everyone or so it seemed to me in my childhood” (8).

of whiteness and colonization but also binds the South itself to the legacy of the Lost Cause and secession.²² hooks is pushing back against this inexplicable tie between the South and the Civil War that appears to consume all other possibilities for engaging with the region. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, McPherson asks, “How does our melancholic fixation on this war block other modes of memory and feeling, locking us into precise and often limited models of thinking history?”²³ For McPherson, this “melancholic fixation” refers to white nostalgia, which, as we have seen, gets concretized through Civil War memorials and retellings of Civil War history, eclipsing not only other feelings about the South but also other ways of defining southernness. Yet, in hooks’s insistence on an alternate mode of understanding the South, she sketches an identity that is based on a relationship to southern land, filtering her experience of the world through the ecological. If that which is man-made is the site of borders, property, and racial violence, the natural world, for hooks, was a balm—an alternate site for community and feeling. She sketches the emotions that are engendered by these interactions with the land as fundamental to her experience of southernness, mapping an affective geography for her reader that is not overwhelmed by the nostalgic.

Moreover, throughout *Belonging*, hooks is wary about her work being subsumed by this nostalgia. As she writes:

Writing about the past often places one at risk of evoking a nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes. Locating a space of genuineness, of integrity, as I recall my past and endeavor to connect it to the ideals and yearnings of the present has been crucial to my process. Using the past as raw material compelling me to think critically about my native

²² hooks also explains the ways in which the drawing of borders can be used as a scapegoat to avoid the condemnation of history: “In public school in the city we were taught that Kentucky was a border state, a state that did not take an absolute position on the issue of white supremacy, slavery, and the continued domination of black folks by powerful whites. In school we were taught to believe that Kentucky was not like the deep South. Not matter that segregation enforced by violence shaped these institutions of learning, that schools took children regularly to the Jefferson Davis monument, to places where the confederacy and the confederate flag were praised. To black folks it seemed strange that powerful Kentucky white folks could act as though a fierce white supremacy did not exist in “their” state” (9). The use of state lines to defer is a time-honored practice in the U.S.’s grappling with its white supremacist legacy. We see it in the demarcations of the North versus the South, and here in the border states versus the slave states—the South versus the deep South. Such attention to borders only serves to elide the central role of anti-Black violence within the conception of “America” and its national consciousness.

²³ McPherson, 100-101.

place, about ecology and issues of sustainability, I return again and again to memories of family.²⁴

Through this attention to nostalgia, hooks rejects an idealization of the past by flattening the timeline that shapes our understanding of history. In many ways, this kind of flattening of time foregrounds Insko's ever-present now, as hooks writes her temporal space as something circular and interwoven rather than a direct, progressive line. Rather than casting her feelings toward home solely in the past and attempting to recreate such emotions, she mobilizes the past in an effort to articulate its persistence into and impact on the present. hooks's emotions are active, antithetical to our conceptions of nostalgia as a static feeling that paralyzes the one feeling it within a romanticized fictional past.

Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* provides further clarity on the typical function of nostalgia, as she defines it as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed...a sentiment of loss and displacement, but...also a romance with one's own fantasy."²⁵ Boym's definition perfectly encapsulates the nostalgia generated by a southern identity entrenched in the Lost Cause, in a version of the South that looks back at the tradition of the antebellum period with a longing that ignores (or perhaps, less generously, does not even care) about the fact that this fantasy—this memory—was all predicated on the labor and exploitation of the enslaved. Boym specifies this nostalgia as "restorative nostalgia," which "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past."²⁶ Restorative nostalgia seeks to revise history, to eclipse the violence that made it all possible.²⁷

²⁴ hooks, 4.

²⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

²⁶ Ibid, 41.

²⁷ As Boym further explains, those who feel this kind of restorative nostalgia "do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories" (41).

While this restorative nostalgia is absolutely antithetical to hooks's project, Boym offers a second nostalgic framework that seems a bit closer. She defines this "reflective nostalgia" as "more about individual and cultural memory" rather than restorative nostalgia's emphasis on constructing a mythical past.²⁸ For Boym, reflective nostalgia is less interested in the concretization of a linear historical narrative than the play between different experiences and versions of history itself. At first glance, this appears to lend itself to hooks's affective framework throughout *Belonging*—an engagement with the past that is somehow always in process, marked by multiple returns that engage the same moments, again and again and again. As she writes:

Merging past and present, it charts a repetitive circular journey, one wherein I move around and around, from place to place, then end at the location I started from—my old Kentucky home. I find repetition scary. It seems to suggest a static stuck quality. It reminds me of the slow languid hot summer days of childhood where the same patterns of life repeat over and over again. There is much repetition in this work. It pans all my life. And it reminds me of how my elders tell me the same stories over and over again. Hearing the same story makes it impossible to forget. And so I tell my story here again and again and again. Facts, ideas repeat themselves as each essay was written as a separate piece—a distinct moment in time.²⁹

Through these returns, hooks examines the kaleidoscopic past of both her own life and the life of the Black southerner, holding these stories up to the light and tracing out the infinite refractions that scatter throughout the present moment. In many ways, the method sketched here seems to act within the structure of Boym's reflective nostalgia, where the past "opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development."³⁰ In *Belonging*, hooks approaches the past from all angles, attempting to make sense of overarching histories and sociocultural forms that have structured, structure, and will structure her relationship to the South. She cannot warp the past or turn history into mythology because history for herself and other Black southerners *remains in*

²⁸ Boym, 49.

²⁹ hooks, 3.

³⁰ Boym, 50.

the present.³¹ It is present in the economic, social, carceral, and geographic experiences that write the Black southerner's life. Revisiting the past is always a challenge, a confrontation. Or as hooks says, it is "scary" to find the remnants of the past echoing throughout the present, to find oneself stuck in this particular loop.

However, it is hooks's insistence on ending in Kentucky that marks her divergence of Boym's paradigm of reflective nostalgia. For Boym, home is a place—both physical and emotional—to which one cannot return, explaining that

[Reflective nostalgia] is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself...Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is "enamored of distance, not of the referent itself."³²

The perpetual deferral of homecoming plays as central a part in the affective structure that Boym is mapping here as hooks's inevitable homecoming plays in hers. Grappling with the contradiction of an impossible desire for the South, hooks writes her separation from Kentucky as having an adverse effect on her spirit and concludes that

Healing that spirit meant for me remembering myself, taking the bits and pieces of my life and putting them together again. In remembering my childhood and writing about my early life, I was mapping the territory, discovering myself, and finding homeplace—seeing clearly that Kentucky was my fate.³³

³¹ hooks's attention to repetition here very much anticipates Jeffrey Insko's presentist methodology in *The Ever-Present Now*. As he writes, "My readings challenge historicism's proprietary regime, identifying ideas, concepts, and texts that persist over and in time, that lie dormant and recur, or that echo and reverberate across decades or centuries" (11). hooks's tracing of these echoes is, of course, more intimate, as her much of her primary sources throughout *Belonging* are her and her family's experiences.

³² Boym, 50. It is worth noting here that Boym's theoretical work on nostalgia stems largely from her studies of post-communist cities in Eastern Europe and her own experiences emigrating from Leningrad, knowing that once she left, she could never return home. Her work centers on a home that is rendered irrevocably out of reach and can only be accessed through the affective—through nostalgia. With that being said, her theorizations on nostalgia are not divorced from the South's relationship to the Civil War. As she writes: "Civil War battlefields have been turned into nostalgic sites where history might be buried but the "experience of battle" can be thoroughly recreated. The attention to detail is great: every element of the uniforms and type of gun is catalogued with utter precision, to make the experience of the battle 'as real as possible.' Everything short of killing" (37).

³³ hooks, 8.

The distance needed in reflective nostalgia's merging of the past and present collapses in hooks's own engagement with history. For hooks, returning home is not impossible—it is unavoidable. The affective structure that hooks operates within stems from this desire to return to a home that is always there—a home that has not been lost to her but is instead a site of generational, racialized trauma. Developing a vocabulary to encompass these feelings must understand not only the stakes of this trauma but also the ways in which hooks rewrites the South as a site of healing, a place that can allow her to construct not only a cohesive self but also claim a sense of home.

Moreover, ending with an invocation of “fate” allows this recovery to transcend the confines of human history and violence and become a cosmological inheritance. hooks wills Kentucky to herself, offering a further complication not only to Boym's nostalgic paradigm but to our typical configurations of the South and southernness as well. She asks us to reimagine *whom* we see as truly southern, to challenge *whom* has authority in claiming the South as home. hooks maps an alternative network of the feelings that we associate with the South as well, drawing the new contours of the emotions that erupt from this clash between race and region.

Throughout *Belonging*, hooks attempts to give shape and language to this desire for home that leads her back to the South. The affective geography that she maps is naturally a complicated one, replete with emotions that tinge the world around her—emotions that are twisting around and against one another, often contradicting themselves, with little hope for reconciliation. After moving from the hills to the town as a child, hooks was confronted by the realities of racial segregation and violence, and she refers to leaving the hills as her “first deep grief.” She eventually leaves Kentucky for Stanford University, searching for freedom from the demarcations of race. Yet, this division from her home had more adverse, confusing effects that lead to her sharpest description of the affective structure that she found herself within:

My college years began that process of *feeling split* in my mind and heart which characterized my life in all the places I moved to: California, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Ohio, New York. At

heart I saw myself as a country girl, an eccentric product of the sense and sensibility of the Kentucky backwoods and yet the life I lived was one where different ethics, values, and beliefs ruled the day. My life away from Kentucky was full of contradictions. The issues of honesty and integrity that had made life clear and simple growing up were have visibility and meaning in a world where the values and beliefs I wanted to make the foundation of my life had no meaning. Still and all, I did not feel that I could come home. The self I had invented in these other worlds seemed too unconventional for Kentucky, too cosmopolitan.³⁴

In this passage, hooks outlines an emotion that I find essential for the work of this chapter: “feeling split.” Instead of a specific emotion like rage or guilt or joy, hooks employs “feeling split” to encapsulate a specific sensation that occurs throughout her separation from Kentucky. This is not homesickness, which would suggest a sense of longing for one’s place of origin, but instead a feeling of incongruency. hooks finds herself out of joint with her surroundings but also feels like the version of herself that stems from her new life as an academic could also be out of joint with Kentucky. Her southernness is at odds with every other place in which she finds herself, but she also fears the changes that occurred to that southern identity once she left the region—that she has been somehow irrevocably changed, no longer able to feel at home in the one place where she has felt belonging. Further, this sense of home is at odds with what she knows about the South. “Feeling split” becomes a matrix of the complex emotions that stem from the impossible desire for the South, a desire that our typical affective vocabulary for thinking through the connections between Blackness and the South cannot succinctly encompass.

It is tempting to read such an impossible longing through the lens of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, in which cruel optimism denotes an attachment in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”³⁵ It would make sense to think about the relationship between Black southerners and the region as an inherently harmful desire. Moreover, for Berlant, optimism itself is also invested in the act of return:

³⁴ Ibid., 15 (emphasis added).

³⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1

Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world become different in just the right way.³⁶

Berlantian optimism—like Boym’s restorative nostalgia—contends with fantasy. While nostalgia marks a fantasy for which one can only long, optimism exists through the return to a particular fantasy. In the structure of cruel optimism, hooks’s desire to return to Kentucky—the inevitability embedded into her assertion that “Kentucky is my fate”—can be understood as a (whether conscious or unconscious) longing for a sense of wholeness that has been denied her by the country’s legacy of white supremacy; it suggests a sense of home that can only exist within the fantastic.

And yet, a reading of bell hooks through this lens of cruel optimism still feels incomplete. Suggesting that the South exists solely as an obstacle to the flourishing of Black southerners ignores the rich communities formed by Black southerners as well as denies them the sense of origin—of belonging—that is so vital in hooks’s writing.³⁷ Moreover, understanding this relationship to the South as cruel optimism requires us to act within a paradigm that writes the South as a scapegoat for national failures, as the only region that acts as an obstacle to Black flourishing—an act that both elides the institutionalization of racism throughout the United States and erases the potential for healing and collectivity that hooks insists upon. The South is limited to a manifestation of the

³⁶ Ibid., 2.

³⁷ This question of origin also appears in Davis’s *Southsapes*. Davis defines a reclamation of a southern identity by Black southerners as a type of racial justice—as “the recognition of the exclusion of a major aspect of self from the conception of identity and the determination to achieve redress by communal positionality within the landscape of the South” (26). In other words, part of the calculus of justice that we must consider when examining the relationship between blackness and southernness is this recognition of a regional identity that facilitates the formation of communities. For Davis, this uprooting that divides Black southerners from a particular regional identity is an attack on the very understanding of the self as it leaves them without a connection to a larger relationship to a homeplace. As she examines this kind of racial justice within the “return migration” of Black Americans to the South that has been taking place since the 1980s, she notes the desire for this kind of relationship: “This process involves the recovery of a later modern black identity that is rooted in the South as grounded manifestation of the ever-desired ‘homeplace’” (19).

traumatic—an affective structure that only seeks to understand the Black southern experience through a lens of horror and fails to encapsulate a more complete understanding of Black emotion.

While cruel optimism might account for the contradictions within Black southern affect, it cannot fully encompass the radical multiplicity and potentiality that is latent in hooks's writing. As hooks returns over and over again to her southern upbringing—to the stories of her family in Kentucky—she is attempting to carve out an archive of Black southern experience that not only confronts the reality of the South's history of violent exploitation and racism but also acknowledges that there is something more that occurs at the intersection of southernness and Blackness. For hooks, making sense of the contradiction of desire in her feelings toward the South always marks an active emotion that engages with the material realities of her experience, which cruel optimism's dependence upon fantasy cannot accommodate, highlighting the need for an affective structure that first and foremost prioritizes a Black perspective.

To this end, we could also see hooks's attempts to give language to the affective experience of being both Black and southern as an echo of a kind of Du Boisian double-consciousness. While hooks does not mention W.E.B. Du Bois by name, her mobilization of “feeling split” as an affective model for articulating the intricate relationship between Black southerners and the South parallels Du Bois's own sociological attention to the feeling of understanding oneself as a raced subject. As he writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁸

Du Bois makes clear that woven within the Black experience in the United States is this divide within the self that espouses these “unreconciled strivings”—strivings that, like hooks's “feeling

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

split,” suggest an intense affective experience that is intimately tied to Blackness. hooks’s split-ness clarifies an affective network stemming from Du Bois’s double-consciousness, describing the particular collision between this “peculiar sensation” and southernness as she gives language to the ways such a sensation has shaped her understanding of the world and herself. Moreover, “feeling split” adds another layer to Du Bois’s “two-ness” as hooks considers not only the contradictions that originate from being both Black and southern, but also brings to the fore the ways that such “warring ideals” irrevocably impact one’s own sense of origin. As such, hooks’s “feeling split” presents an alternative frame through which we can write Black southern affect.

Further, through this structure, hooks theorizes an emotion that is both active and present, similar to Du Bois’s own emphasis on an affective experience that “one ever feels.” “Feeling split” is always happening; it is an omnipresent sensation that becomes a part of her experience as an uprooted Black southerner. It is a feeling with an impossibly heavy demand—it is an interjection of both the violence of southern history as well as a desire for home and community that find themselves endlessly at odds with each other, which hooks describes as detrimental: “Like many writers, especially southerners, who have stayed away from their native place, who live in a state of mental exile, the condition of feeling split was damaging, caused a breaking down of the spirit.”³⁹ With this statement, bell hooks radically reverses our typical structures of understanding Black affect, where it is the South that is a source of immense pain, ultimately responsible for the “breaking down of spirit.” Here, hooks is attempting to explain the essential affective ties that construct an identity with region, with place, with home—ties that, in hooks’s formulation at least, seem inseverable. “Feeling split” is fundamentally an articulation of a constant yearning for home, to feel like one belongs in the place that is inextricably tied to their sense of self. Of course, so much could be true for most people who move away from home. Within the frameworks of race and

³⁹ hooks, 15.

region that hooks is writing, however, “feeling split” is also coupled with the trauma of white supremacy and the burden of southern history that have sought to exclude her from a stable feeling of belonging.⁴⁰ This assertion of an irrevocable southern identity is then not only an act of intense emotion but also an act of resistance.

hooks succinctly sums up the ethos of *Belonging* in a seemingly simple question: “Why when Kentucky means so much can’t you go home and stay home?”⁴¹ This question—a response to her maternal grandmother’s asking, “how can you live so far from your people?”—outlines the affective double bind that “feeling split” must operate within. As such, hooks’s “feeling split,” along with Gary Chambers’s “give a damn,” begin to sketch out a frame to encapsulate ways to give form to the tensions, contradictions, and potentialities that are woven into Black southern affect. In the approximations that “feeling split” and “give a damn” provide—as they attempt to name a *way* of feeling—affect exists within the present, as the verb encapsulates entire collectives of emotion. To feel split or to give a damn makes the emotions networked within them active—they are *doing* something; they are negotiating between the opposing forces of trauma and affection, of horror and longing. Moreover, through this verb structure, this negotiation is *always happening*; the tensions inherent in this amalgamation of race, memory, region, and history are never fully resolved but instead embedded into one another.

Further, as hooks has already highlighted, this negotiation’s always-ness insists upon a non-linear experience of history. The present tense of these feelings-as-verbs challenges a nostalgic

⁴⁰ hooks addresses this relationship: “Much of my life away from Kentucky was lived in a trance state, as though I was always there and not there at the same time. Working to heal, to be whole, has been a process of awakening, of moving from trance into reality, of learning how to be fully present. Leaving home evoked extreme feelings of abandonment and loss. It was like dying. Resurrective the memories of home, bringing the bits and pieces together was a movement back that enabled me to move forward. All my trance states were defenses against the terrors of childhood. When I left home, I took with me unresolved traumas. Carrying the voices of my ancestors within me everywhere I called home, I carried remembered pain and allowed it to continually sweep me away. This sensation of being swept away was like spinning.” (18)

⁴¹ hooks, 17.

understanding of the past as fixed and lost, and by centering a more dynamic timeline—a *la* Insko's ever-present now—we can cultivate a necessary vocabulary to articulate the affective structures that are present in both hooks's writings and Gary Chambers's speech: affective structures that make concrete the active relationship between emotion and memory that necessitates the Black experience in the South. In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe underscores the centrality of activity to this matrix of memory and history:

What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death? It means work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living.⁴²

Here, Sharpe makes clear the labor of remembering and maintaining memory that has become part of the Black experience. She highlights the vitality of these cross-generational relations as those who remain are not only tasked with necessitating tenderness and ease for those dying but must also remember those who have died in a world that seeks to erase them completely. In Sharpe's formulations, emotions—which we have already noted as active and present in both Chambers's speech and hooks's *Belonging*—are bound up in the work of memory. At the intersection of Blackness and southernness, the negotiation between desire and trauma, between affection and pain, reifies the labor of remembering a past threatened to be erased by a historical impulse to forget.

And yet, Sharpe also reminds us that this affective work of memory is also intertwined with celebration, with love—a feeling present in both Chambers's and hooks's words but never fully brought to the light. With this presence in mind, I turn now to Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, a text that not only interrogates the role of love the relationship between Black southerners and the South, but also weaves a rich tapestry for thinking through the other

⁴² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 10.

possible forms of feeling that lie at the intersections of Blackness and southernness, of memory and history.

Love in the Time of (Historical) Anxiety

Similar to hooks's memoir, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* traces the triangulated relationship between individual, place, and history. Jeffers's 2021 epic follows the life of Ailey Pearl Garfield, a young Black girl in the 1980s and 90s whose family is from the Deep South. While she lives north in an unspecified urban space known only as 'The City, the text traces her annual return to the fictional town of Chicasetta, Georgia, where her maternal family—who are descended from enslaved people—still reside.⁴³ The text operates as a *bildungsroman* as the reader watches Ailey grow from a young child to a successful historian. Interspersed throughout Ailey's narration are divergences into the past, as Jeffers also crafts the lineage of Ailey's ancestors, from the indigenous Creek tribe who lived on the land we know as Georgia to an African woman enslaved and kidnapped across the Middle Passage.

Love Songs and its subsequent acclaim speak to the same sociopolitical discourse that surrounded the naming of Lee High School: a discourse through which history as both subject and discipline has very much been called into question. In this current cultural moment—a moment when critical conversations about the role of enslavement in the foundation of the United States is met with fierce pushback and legal interference—Jeffers's first foray into the novel form is seen as a fresh, brave attempt to encapsulate the “truth” about an American past and present. As *LA Review of*

⁴³ The two central settings of *Love Songs*—Chicasetta and The City—are fictional spaces within a very real geography of the United States. Jeffers explained in an interview on NPR's *Political Rewind* that her family is from Putnam County, which encompasses Chicasetta in the book. Chicasetta itself is a fictional depiction of Eatonton. More interesting perhaps is Jeffers's refusal to locate the City throughout the text. All we understand is that City is where Ailey's father is from, it is located in the North, and it is home to Mecca University. Mecca seems to be an allusion to Howard University nickname as “The Mecca,” but the only concrete evidence of the location of The City is a mention of the “Gold Coast” neighborhood where Ailey's paternal grandparents live, and names an affluent neighborhood of Black residents in D.C. (see Neil A. Lewis's 1985 article in the *New York Times* “The Shifting ‘Gold Coast’”). However, the refusal to name it as such is a purposeful choice by Jeffers. Without any geographical specificity, the City becomes synecdochal for an urban North contrasted with the rural South. Jeffers presents the two as diametrically opposed.

Books’s Chris Via remarks: “In its most general form, the question at the heart of *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* is: How did we get to this place as a country?”⁴⁴ The novel is understood as a much-needed intervention into not only fiction but also history as it focuses on stories of colonization and enslavement that center the Black and indigenous people that have suffered at the hands of the white supremacist state.

Intertwined with this engagement of history is also an interest in understanding and depicting affect, particularly as it applies to the relationship that Ailey and her family have with the South. The novel—as the title demonstrates—insists upon an ethos of love even despite the overwhelming presence of centuries of trauma. *Love Songs*’s form theorizes this conflict as the text attempts to negotiate between alternative modes of writing Black southern feeling. Ailey’s first-person narration is disrupted by “Songs” that detail her familial history, speaking to that larger untold and undocumented history of enslavement and displacement in the South. These songs interpolate the text’s titular figure—W.E.B. Du Bois—and make clear the presence of both immense pain and impossible desire. Jeffers actually begins with an epigraph from *The Souls of Black Folk*:

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet a once I knew them as of me and of mine.⁴⁵

At once, we can recognize the ways in which Jeffers offers a revision of the emotion at the core of the purpose of “Songs” within her text. In citing *The Souls of Black Folk* and titling her book *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Jeffers writes her text as a palimpsest that affectively reimagines and revises the writings of Du Bois that lie beneath and within it. Notably, Du Bois remarks that his sorrow

⁴⁴ Chris Via, “The Question is My Breath: On Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’s ‘The Love Songs of W.E.B. du Bois,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 23, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-question-is-my-breath-on-honoree-fanonne-jefferss-the-love-songs-of-w-e-b-du-bois/>.

⁴⁵ Du Bois, 167. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021), 1.

songs “came out of the South,” casting them as southern residue, relics of a history that was—at the time of Du Bois’s writing—more of a recent memory that had yet to be fully documented and discussed. While Du Bois has named them sorrow songs, *sorrow* still seems to limit his full emotional engagement with them. He writes that they “have stirred [him] strangely,” a phrasing of feeling and action that we can recall from bell hooks’ “feeling split.” We find again affect that is remarkably complex—affect that can only approach the very description of the act of feeling without ever finding satisfaction in the emotion’s naming.⁴⁶

In writing them as “sorrow songs,” Du Bois makes legible the pain of slavery and its aftermaths, casting sorrow as the central affect of the Black South. Yet, Jeffers’s recasting of these songs as “love songs” suggests an alternative affect to examine in the legacy of Black southerners’ relationship to the region. The title is both a revision of Du Bois and a reclamation of the South, reimagining and rescripting the emotional center that ties Black southerners irrevocably to home. If love can be understood and prioritized as a Black southern affect, however, the question of reconciliation still remains: How is it possible to love a place that is responsible for so much pain—for so much sorrow?

The text’s insistence on the presence of both pain and love not only introduces the text’s aesthetic strength but also underscores its aesthetic burdens. For while *Love Songs* has been rightfully celebrated for its attention to suppressed stories, it can only expand larger and larger in its effort to carve out space for them. Physically and figuratively, *Love Songs* is massive, spanning nearly 800 pages and attempting to not only capture a more complete history of settler colonialism and slavery, but also trace their refractions in the modern world. It encapsulates police violence, rape, child sexual abuse, colorism, microaggressions, Jim Crow, sharecropping, miscegenation, drug abuse, revolution,

⁴⁶ Paul E. Kirkland has also highlighted the tensions within Du Bois’s affective register: “Rather than a contrast between the hope of optimism and the spirit of tragedy, the distinct contribution of black folk to America might be a source for tragic joy in cheerful sorrow” (432-433).

and so on. The text exhausts itself attempting to make it all *fit*. We can understand the size of the text and its relentless revelations as a symptom of its own anxiety: *how* can you make known that which has been so violently repressed and buried? The novel wants to make everything visible, to make sure that nothing goes unmentioned. In *Love Songs*—just as we saw in Baton Rouge—the conflict is between two memories, two versions of history: the one that is taught and made visible (a story of America as an exceptional beacon of freedom and equality in the modern world) and the one that has been buried, ignored, and violently repressed (a story of America that centers the endless exploitations, forced labors, and horrors that allow the first version to exist).

The novel's affective project, which hinges on being able to tell of both trauma *and* love, is bound up in this over-production of stories that have been silenced. To encapsulate the sheer complexity of Black southern affect, a more complete history must be shared—a history that encompasses the sheer weight of the traumatic. This weight manifests throughout the text's proliferation of characters and conflict as a way to approach the reality of displacement, enslavement, and the violent systems that stem from both. As such, the text formalizes the residual aftereffects of this legacy of trauma in the South as violence reverberates throughout the generations at the heart of *Love Songs*. In creating her own stories with the aim to reveal the true violence and reality of a repressed history, Jeffers must not only recognize those specific violences but also recreate them. And so, even as Jeffers attempts to capture all these untold stories, to make sure that none fall through the cracks of history, the result is either an overwhelming collection of abuse that muddies what should be clear and sharp or a recreation of the violence against the bodies of the Black women and girls at the center of the text.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This question of the recreation of violence recalls Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*: "...how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response of such displays?" (4).

This violence manifests most clearly in the rape and sexual abuse that constitute the key traumas of the text. The bodies harmed in these scenes are more often than not the bodies of children—young Black girls used by men in power. We learn through Ailey’s narration that she was molested by her paternal grandfather (known as Gandee in the book) as a child—a grandfather whose key descriptors center on the light skin that determines his proximity to whiteness. As the story continues, it is revealed that her elder sisters Lydia and Cocoa suffered the same abuse. Gandee’s violence is mirrored in the perversions of Samuel Pinchard, the slaveowner from whom Ailey’s maternal family descends and on whose former plantation her family still lives. Pinchard’s role in *Love Songs* is a microcosm for the violence, lies, and theft of colonization, all of which he performs in a grotesque pageant. Pinchard preys on young enslaved girls, and the novel details his rape of these girls, repeatedly scripting the violence against their bodies. The text, of course, doesn’t revel in these scenes—if anything, the novel is hyper-aware of the horror it is recreating—but it does not seem to be able to avoid coming back to them. Like its proliferation of characters, the novel also multiplies these scenes of racialized and gendered subjugation; it cannot tell its history without returning to them. The bulk of the novel attempts to navigate this inescapable presence—to locate other modes of understanding and writing history that avoid being consumed by the traumatic, that can access the alternative modes of feeling upon which Jeffers’s project insists.

Throughout *Love Songs*, the text negotiates this problem by turning to the land as an alternate metric through which a relationship to the South can be conceived. Throughout the novel, southern land takes center stage and is used to configure both generational and individual trauma as well as the potential for love and other emotions that run through the text. We see this network most clearly in a scene in which Ailey and her classmates visit the site of a slave auction that lies less than a mile away from Routledge, the historically Black college that they attend. Their professor Dr. Oludara tells the story of their college’s founding by a Black woman named Adeline Routledge, and

she asserts that history and traumas live on through the land that witnessed them. Dr. Oludara explains that while clearing the land for the school, Mrs. Routledge came across this particular site:

And the one of her students found the spot. The place where the blood of slaves had soaked into the ground. It was darker than the rest, even though this land is a red dirt place. After all those years that bloody spot was there. That was a horrible moment, and after Mrs. Routledge cleared this area, she decided, it was full of too much pain. Her schoolhouse needed to be someplace else on this piece of land. She left this spot alone, so it could heal. And that's why there are no campus buildings here.⁴⁸

There is much to say about this moment, but before I begin, I want to offer another passage from the same scene. In detailing the legacy of this specific site, Dr. Oludara must also tell a larger history of gendered violence against enslaved Black women and girls, and this attention to the sexual abuse of young girls triggers a visceral response in Ailey:

When Dr. Oludara walked closer to use, something hit my chest. I caught my breath and when I exhaled, I began to weep. I thought of the little slave girls, and of the little girl I had been. The secrets I kept about what happened to me, so no one would think I was dirty. I thought of the pain of my ancestors who'd been slaves, perhaps even sold in this very place. I thought of it all, and I put my hands over my face to hide my shame...but my weeping would not stop, as our professor's clapping increased in volume.⁴⁹

These two passages make plain the relationship between history and the individual that the text is anxious to reveal, as Ailey feels the weight of history within her own individual trauma. Her affective reaction is bodily—felt in her chest and tied into her breathing—as her wound from her own experience is reflected in the wound of the land. The image of her weeping parallels the blood-soaked land, as the text cultivates a constellation of history, body, and land that is central to its theorization of Black southern affect. Moreover, Ailey narrates that *something* hit her chest. In their article, “68 or Something,” Lauren Berlant delineates a useful way to think through the ambiguity of *something* in the articulation of indescribable violence and horror: “...*something*, a word that holds the place for a demand to produce something like a language—entire novels, songs, lyrics, histories,

⁴⁸ Jeffers, 242.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 242.

letters, criticism.”⁵⁰ In *Love Songs*, a text that is nearly overwhelmed with the task of producing language to capture that which has been repressed, *something* seems to intersect this demand for language (to both make sense of historical violence and provide alternatives) with affect. The overproduction of language that defines *Love Songs*’s form is an attempt to not only fill in the gaps of a repressed historical archive that centers whiteness, but also offer new modes of crafting an archive entirely. In mirroring Ailey’s emotion with that of a land capable of feeling, Jeffers suggests that the earth represents a mode of configuring southern (and American) history that is based on the acts of witness and testimony—a configuration that makes space for the feelings that are integral to the Black southerner’s relationship with the region and allows for other possibilities of imagining southernness. In *Love Songs*, feeling and history become ecological concerns, and alternative modes of feeling are, at their core, rooted in reclamations and revisions of southern land.

In these two passages, Jeffers locates a possible way to balance *Love Songs*’s interest in reconciling love and trauma by suggesting that any effort to theorize Black southern affect must occur within this triangulation of body, land, and history. And it is through this matrix that we can locate both typical modes of Black southern feeling and the potential for an alternative—the same potential that bell hooks sees in the hills of Kentucky in *Belonging*. For while Dr. Oludara is describing this southern land as an archive of undocumented violence, she also suggests that the possibility of healing is still there. Through this scene, we can trace the text’s imperative to give

⁵⁰ Lauren Berlant, “‘68 or Something,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 139. Berlant’s *something* is a reading of a scene in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* that narrates the protagonist’s reaction to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1953 in which four Black girls were killed in Birmingham in counterprotests to the resistance movements of the Civil Rights era. In response to this event, Cliff’s protagonist says: “Today there is a story which should have caused the sun to eclipse the earth—something...something in the heavens should have objected.” *Something* also appears in Martin Luther King’s eulogy for the four girls. For Berlant, “*something* here stands for the irreducible violent sublimity of American racism” as well as the fantasy of a decolonized, dissident history (139). *Something* also seems to encapsulate some feelings that can’t be put into specific words, feelings that contradict and dare and can only be felt rather than captured within a language that has been weaponized to suppress them.

language to alternative modes of southern feeling that prioritize the affective experiences of Black southerners.

Ache & Other (Southern) Feelings

Throughout *Love Songs*, the narrative mobilizes this essential turn to the land to radically shift how we might understand what it means to “feel southern.” As Ailey narrates:

Summer was for joy: the ride with my mother and sisters down the interstate to Chicasetta and seeing the Peach Butt in Gaffney, South Carolina. The tall structure that was supposed to look like a piece of ripe fruit but instead looked like somebody’s ass. Picking weeds with my granny, my sisters, and sometimes Aunt Pauline, and sitting on the porch after supper. Running through the peach, pecan, cedar, pine, and oak trees. Nothing barred my way, within reason. So long as I was with one of my sisters or, if alone, within earshot of my mother’s voice, I went wherever I wanted. I was free.

Autumn, winter, and spring contained my trials. There was contentment during the week at home with my sisters and parents. But on the weekends, there were the hours spent at the house of my father’s parents.⁵¹

The annual return to the South is written as a source of joy and freedom for Ailey, a time unthreatened by encounters with her paternal grandfather. The sentiments expressed by Ailey in this passage parallel the feelings of her sister Lydia, to whom the text turns later in the book:

Was this the same sky her daddy could see up in the City? Somehow, her granny’s sky seemed bigger. If she stayed here, if she hid in the woods, she could sleep under this sky. It would keep her safe, but then her mother was calling.⁵²

Both of these passages articulate a similar understanding of the South from the Garfield sisters as they write the South as something desirable, as a space of security. The Garfield sisters revise their family’s land—land that was once a plantation—as a place where they can be safe. Moreover, both sisters perform a similar move in juxtaposing their southern experiences to the City, which exists in the text as an encapsulation of an urban north. Both sisters mark the expansiveness of their southern home: Ailey describes the lack of boundaries that she finds while running through the Georgia trees,

⁵¹ Jeffers, 145.

⁵² Ibid., 431.

while Lydia describes the Chicassetta sky as larger than the sky of the City. Enlarging the space of the South, the Garfield sisters allow it to eclipse the North within their worldview, fixing it firmly at the center of their lives. The South becomes a haven for the Garfield sisters, and their return signifies a reclamation that is the product of generations. Their individual feelings constellate across invocations of history, body, and land. They inscribe their feelings of safety and freedom into the land, offering an alternative geography through which the South can be understood.

Of course, the book is wary of capitulating to a completely reparative understanding of the South and its relationship to Black affect. Throughout, the text is punctuated with returns to a pecan tree in Chicassetta where Uncle Root—Ailey’s great-great-uncle—was almost lynched during the Jim Crow era. Over the course of the novel, he returns multiple times to the tree, where he will retell the story. The first time that he tells it to Ailey, he invites her to look more closely at the tree:

“You see here? See these cuts? These showed up a few days after the commotion at the store. Somebody tried to chop this tree down. We never found out who did it, and it never bore fruit again.”⁵³

Similar to the “bloody spot” by Routledge, Uncle Root’s pecan tree articulates a relationship between the land and history that bears witness to the emotions that define a traumatic encounter that is emblematic of the violences of the white supremacist state, of slavery and its aftermaths.⁵⁴ This relationship exists within a particular affective loop in which the emotions that persist from the encounter are made legible by southern land and shared by a Black southern collective that understands the communal trauma that the land also represents. The anonymous violence enacted upon the tree could be understood in two ways: 1) it carries out the lynching that Uncle Root escaped and marks the tree’s own death with its inability to bear fruit, and 2) it shows a kind of

⁵³ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁴ Uncle Root’s pecan tree notably appears in the Songs as well. Root’s great-great-grandmother Tess, who was enslaved on the Pinchard plantation talks to the “large pecan tree that was feet away from the store that Samuel had built” after her father is sold (578). The tree also marks the place where Mamie, one of Samuel’s victims who died giving birth to his child, is buried. Through this kind of witnessing, nature becomes a repository for an alternative history.

resistance, an attempt to remove the tree that has been captured within a particular matrix of violence—to remove the traumatic object and deny it any futurity. This duality matters because it speaks to the problem of emotion in which this chapter is invested and to which *Love Songs* (and *Belonging*) attempt to give language. How can the joy and security that Ailey and Lydia find in the South be reconciled with the trauma and rage that Uncle Root has experienced? What vocabulary can encompass and understand the conflict between opposing feelings that are woven into the southern land—feelings that are always occurring, always demanding the space to take a breath?

The answer perhaps occurs in a chapter told from the perspective of Ailey's mother Belle, after she moves to The City following her marriage. In 1967, soon after they arrive in The City, race-based protests break out and are met with state resistance. As these protests begin to die down, Belle finds herself longing to return home to Chicassetta:

As spring gave in to warmth, there was no violence outside. No streets cherried over with fire, but Belle wanted to be back home. She longed to sit on the porch with the women of her family. To talk about nothing special, until the fireflies came. When she told Geoff that she missed home, he said she should be glad to be away from the south, with its Jim Crow laws and dangerous white men. And Belle was safe, but her longings stayed with her. Born in the City, her husband wasn't familiar with the taste of healthy, green food you have picked only hours before. The sight of earth not taken over by concrete. That in darkness, if there was no trouble, the only sounds came from small beings. He didn't know that you could ache for a place, even when it had hurt you so badly.⁵⁵

This passage reveals the text's interventions into a new way of formalizing affect.⁵⁶ That final line, the assertion that “you could ache for a place, even when it had hurt you badly” articulates the impossible emotional relations that have manifested throughout the different works of the Black southerners at the center of this chapter. Moreover, it is notable that Belle's longings are intimately tied to the natural world—the fireflies, the gardens, the soil and dirt, the critters. She turns to

⁵⁵ Jeffers, 306.

⁵⁶ In an interview with Bill Nigut and Patricia Murphy on the NPR radio show *Political Rewind*, Jeffers speaks to this exact passage: “I cried when I wrote those words, because I do ache for the South. There's a feeling that those of us who grew up in the South have, and we do ache for that place.”

ecological aspects of the South to make her longings legible, to name their active presence. To these longings, she also offers a feeling that embodies the text as a whole: ache. Here, ache operates as the missing vocabulary from our considerations of Black emotion and the South. Similar to hooks's "feeling split" and Chambers's "give a damn," Belle's ache writes her feeling(s) as a verb, underscoring the activity that is inherent in this act of emotion. Furthermore, this turn to ache offers a heuristic through which the intersections between feeling, history, race, and region can be understood. We can mobilize ache to—if not reconcile, at least—bridge the tensions that define the Black southern experience.

This heuristic of ache is mired in duality; it operates within two emotional registers, both of which are present within this passage from *Love Songs*. Our initial inclinations may be to think through ache and its denotations of pain—to ache suggests something dull and bodily, a soreness that persists for whoever feels it. And this kind of ache is definitely present within Belle's lament. This passage (and chapter) ends with "hurt," highlighting the wounds inflicted upon her and other Black southerners by the South. Ache also suggests a collapse between past and present, between presence and absence. The ache of the present denotes a wound of the past persisting—its sensation shifted and reconfigured, but felt nonetheless. And yet, her aching also exists within a more affectionate register—one that also plays temporally with the relationship between the past and the present. This ache articulates a profound longing for something missed, an attachment torn asunder; for Belle, this missed thing *is* the South as her aching attempts to fit the pain and desire that stems from the region. Both feelings take root within a single body, within a single word, and they offer a lens through which we may navigate the crush of emotion that occurs within the matrix of Blackness and southernness throughout the text.

It matters that the unifying affect of *Love Songs* contains a dual expression—a duality that can only direct us back to Du Bois himself. As we have already seen, Du Boisian double-consciousness

not only describes a powerful affective experience but provides a necessary frame through which we can understand the affective contradictions that occupy the works of both hooks and Jeffers. With a clearer interpolation of Du Bois than hooks, *Love Songs* explicitly examines this double-consciousness through its characters' intimate relationship to the South, as they confront what it means to witness oneself as both Black and southern. As the text makes clear, this double-consciousness allows for these characters to explore the ways in which their feelings can abound within this duality—to both love and hate the South, to sing both sorrow and love there, to feel an ache that denotes both incredible pain and intense longing. It opens up a new archive of feeling—a new model for processing emotion that more radically considers the dynamic relationship between history, memory, and identity. In short, it allows for a navigation of the affective network that has been cultivated within the space between Blackness and southernness, irrevocably centering that which has been banished to the periphery.

Love Songs—like *Belonging* and the debate over the name of Lee High School—trace the ways that a departure from nostalgia can open up new registers of feeling that more radically prioritize complex relationship between past and present as it manifests in memorialization in the South. Jeffers, hooks, and Chambers all approach this relationship through their prioritization of the feelings of Black southerners, giving language to the way that memories, both historical and individual, seep into the lives of those who remember and shape how they affect and are affected by the world. In centering southern Black feeling, we can turn to a question from Christina Sharpe—a question that also seems to be present in the work of Chambers, hooks, and Jeffers: “How does one memorialize the everyday?”⁵⁷ Embedded in this question are others: how does one recognize the everyday? How does one write it? What are its affective contours? How do lived experiences appear, when the everyday has been so irrevocably shaped by violence? For Black southerners, the memorialization of the

⁵⁷ Sharpe, 20.

everyday becomes an affective process as the duality—the inherent contradiction—of feelings toward the South encapsulates not only the trauma of slavery and its aftermaths but the foundational sense of home and community that can be found in the region. This kind of affective memorialization challenges the version of history told by white nostalgia and its materialization as the dominant history; it confronts and demands that the residue of the past within the present be exhumed and remembered, reclaiming an alternative southernness that recognizes, prioritizes, and embraces Blackness.

III.

“no meaning in a canefield”: The North Writes the South

Following his stint at the New Orleans’s *Daily Crescent* in 1848, Walt Whitman added “Longings for Home” to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Later retitled “O Magnet South,” the poem maps the southeast corner of the United States, opening with an excited claim to the region:

O magnet-South! O glistening perfumed South! my South
O quick mettle, rich blood, impulse and love! Good and evil!
O all dear to me!¹

Much attention has been paid to this poem and its introductory lines. In *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*, Jennifer Rae Greeson suggests that Whitman’s movement from the magnetic pull of attraction to the ownership of “my South” reflects a “possessive impulse in U.S. national culture from the founding”—an impulse that envisions a South that “can be taken over, reformed, reconstructed.”² For Greeson, Whitman’s poem mirrors an imperialist attitude toward the region: “On the cusp of the secession of the southern states from the Union, Whitman voices a desire to be at home in a places that is prospectively taken by force, possessed over the resistance of its inhabitants.”³

Merits of Greeson’s argument aside, I am interested in further unraveling the tapestry of desire that Whitman’s poem knits. While the previous chapter grappled with a desire for the South that is born of attachments to home and a yearning for a sense of belonging, the desire in Whitman’s poem stems from a different source, even though it may affect a similar kind of “longings for

¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 396-397. All quotations from the poem come from this source.

² Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 9

home.” The poem ends with a projection as the speaker imagines the intense feeling of seeing themselves in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee:

O my heart! O tender and fierce pangs, I can stand them not,
 I will depart;
 O to be a Virginian where I grew up! O to be a Carolinian!
 O longings irrepressible! O I will go back to old Tennessee and
 never wander more.

As Greeson notes, the South at the time of Whitman’s writing is a South on the eve of war, a South preparing to exit the national body of the United States. And yet, the South that Whitman conjures is “glistening” and “perfumed,” a South marked by a strange kind of allure for the poem’s speaker—the allure of owning, of becoming, of belonging to the region.

As the speaker maps out a diffuse southern landscape, their sketches of different ecological scenes are coupled with affective language, whether it be the “quick mettle, rich blood, impulse and love!” of the poem’s opening or the “tender and fierce pangs” and “longings irrepressible” of its ending. We could read the poem as an ode—an onslaught of praise marked by the speaker’s overwhelming emotion, their picturesque landscapes, their exclamatory interjections that bookend the text—but to do so ignores a crucial moment of interruption, where the speaker disappears from the poem:

O the cotton plant! The growing fields of rice, sugar, hemp!
 The cactus guarded with thorns, the laurel-tree with large
 white flowers,
 The range afar, the richness and barrenness, the old woods
 charged with mistletoe and trailing moss,
 The piney odor and the gloom, the awful natural stillness,
 (here in these dense swamps the freebooter carries his
 gun, and the fugitive has his conceal’d hut;)
 O the strange fascination of these half-known half-impassable
 swamps, infested by reptiles, resounding with the bellow
 of the alligator, the sad noises of the night-owl and the
 wild-cat, and the whirr of the rattle-snake.
 The mocking-bird, the American mimic, singing all the
 forenoon, singing through the moon-lit night

This excerpt contains the poem's single parenthetical—"(here in these dense swamps the freebooter carries his / gun, and the fugitive has his conceal'd hut)"—which ruptures the text's litany of praise and allure. The image captured by Whitman's parentheses contains the poem's only explicit reference to slavery in the speaker's dear South: that of a fugitive slave hunted by a slavecatcher. Relegating this moment to the parenthetical renders it superfluous to the poem itself, something unnecessary, something that can be easily removed. Even as this image of the South as a site of enslavement and fraught liberty punctures the poem, it does do in tension with its own grammar. If Whitman's parentheses suggest something that is extraneous to the text, the position of the image and the singularity of the punctuation call immediate attention to it, making it a central—if not *the* central image—of the poem itself. This moment of puncture cannot be so easily exorcized from the speaker's visions of the South, cannot be untangled from their desire. The text both grammatically repels the image and structurally compels the reader's attention to it. It may be tempting to couple this moment of contradiction, this crossing of opposing forces, with the previous chapters' conflicts, in which the characters of the different texts grapple with their own complex relationships with the South. However, such a reading ignores the disappearance of Whitman's speaker, the distance established between them and this crucial southern image.

In prior chapters, the confusing feelings that define different characters' experiences are tied to their southernness—to their attachments to the region that they consider home—suggesting that this southernness is something both innate and affective. The South and its history, in other words, shape their encounters with the world around them, as well as the feelings provoked by such encounters as they leave and return to the region. This chapter reverses this migration, exploring instead what may arise from the movement from North to South. What feelings toward the South are revealed when questions of southernness are removed, when the anchor of "home" is lifted? What might an examination of the South from a non-southern perspective uncover about the affects

that the South inspires outside of the region? Southern scholars like Greeson and Leigh Anne Duck have suggested that the South has played a central role in the construction and constitution of a larger national identity. Following their work, this chapter interrogates the affects that accompany such constructions, seeking out the feelings that may persist in the larger national imagination.

In doing so, this chapter focuses on the affective work undertaken by non-southerners' southern writing through an examination of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994). Written seventy years apart, the texts themselves seem to both welcome and resist being placed in critical conversation with each other. Not only are both texts centered around Georgia as a site of revelation and confrontation, but they also filter the majority of this central encounter through a northern perspective. Yet, more interesting perhaps are the ways in which the two texts diverge. For instance, *Cane* is understood as a canonical work of the twentieth century, even though it was not quite a mainstream success in its time.⁴ Meanwhile, little attention has been paid to *Midnight* in academic circles, despite its commercial success and continued mass appeal.⁵ The clearest difference between the two books, of course, lies in the question of race, which stands at the center of *Cane* (and its criticism) but lurks beneath the surface of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, present but unevenly handled.

When we place these texts in dialogue, Georgia (and by extension, the South) marks the geographic and discursive space where these two texts hew together and cleave apart. Crucially, this chapter examines the Souths produced across these texts as Toomer and Berendt map these

⁴ In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes highlights *Cane*'s lack of success with the public: "The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read "Cane" hated it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent" (3). *Cane* also faced struggles in marketing, as Toomer rejected any attempts to solidify his racial identity in the publicity surrounding *Cane*.

⁵ *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* spent 216 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The book was adapted into film in 1997 and into a musical in 2024. In an NPR segment on the book's thirtieth anniversary, Joseph Marinelli, president of the Savannah Convention and Visitors Bureau, credits the novel with an impact on tourism, explaining that Savannahians "continue, to this day, to see people on the street corner, holding the book, looking at certain buildings" (Payne).

affective, ideological, and geographic configurations, mobilizing images of southern land that mirror their attachments and detachments to the region. Both texts frame the settings that structure their titular plots—the gardens of *Midnight* and the cane fields of *Cane*—as spaces that simultaneously compel and repel their non-southern narrators. Despite their differences, both books offer models for conceptualizing attachment to the South beyond the southern perspective that this dissertation has, up to this point, prioritized.

In taking up the significance of the twinned forces of repulsion and compulsion in these works of non-southerners' southern writing, this chapter looks to other works on affect that theorize the larger ramifications of these feelings of attachment and withdrawal, namely William Ian Miller's and Sianne Ngai's respective writings on disgust. While disgust itself suggests a specific tonality that is ultimately too definitive for the emotions we can track across *Cane* and *Midnight*, as an affect, it offers the clearest articulation of the ways that compulsion and repulsion inform larger cultural and ideological narratives. As this chapter goes beyond the southern perspective, this approximation of disgust offers a necessary addition to how we may consider the South's place in the larger mythology of the United States, interrogating the relationship between feeling and power that maintains such narratives.

“Things are so immediate in Georgia”: Compulsion and Repulsion in *Cane*

Jean Toomer's 1923 *Cane* makes for a complex and sometimes controversial object of study. The text (I hesitate to use “novel” or “poem” as *Cane* seems to resist such classifications) stands as a seminal work of American literature, operating as a central representative of American modernism, the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement, and the U.S. South in the early twentieth century. These three categorizations of Toomer's landmark text are, of course, related: the Black American experience in the 1920s was often defined by a relationship to the South, through either the violence of the Jim Crow era or the transience of the Great Migration. As such, the

fragmentation and alienation—as well as the formal experimentation—that define the modernist era offer a perfect analog to the difficult feelings inspired by the South, both within and without the region.

Beyond its position in several different canons, *Cane* also evokes tangled strands of discourse, as many readings of *Cane* stand as readings of Toomer himself; the text becomes mobilized as evidence or admission of Toomer's complicated relationship to race. In their introduction to the latest Norton Critical Edition of *Cane*, Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. track Toomer's racial ambiguity and passing, pulling historical documents and letters in which Toomer identified as Black and white during different stages of his life. Byrd and Gates end their introduction with a declaration of how we may read Toomer's complex and often contradictory racial identification:

It is our carefully considered judgement, based upon an analysis of archival evidence previously overlooked by other scholars, that Jean Toomer—for all of his pioneering theorizing about what today we might call a multicultural or mixed-raced ancestry—was a Negro who decided to pass for white.⁶

Toomer's desire for racial ambiguity across his life becomes particularly relevant in existing scholarship on *Cane*, as the biographical becomes a central lens through which scholars view the work's commitment to scenes of indeterminacy. Byrd and Gates ultimately contend that "Toomer embodied in his person, in his disposition, and in his art many of the signal elements—hybridity, alienation, fragmentation, dislocation, migration, fluidity, experimentation—that define American modernism, and that he would so imaginatively address in *Cane*."⁷ Many critics follow this line of thought, absorbing Toomer's biographical aesthetic and racial hybridity as the defining entry point to the text.

⁶ Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Song of the Son": The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer," *Cane*, Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed., eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), lxx.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

Admittedly, it makes sense to read this indeterminacy across *Cane*. The text replicates these moments in which its collection of characters linger both across and between different dichotomies: night/day, Black/white, North/South. Francisco Robles has recently argued that a prioritization of the text's ambiguity is the most productive way through which *Cane* can be read, suggesting that we approach Toomer's work as a border text—a text of movement and migration. As he writes: “*Cane* rethinks the very notion of the border—what it means to cross certain borders, to live both between and within worlds, to experience oneself through the various contradictions that constitute and contain one's identity.”⁸ In other words, Robles insists upon an understanding of *Cane* that is defined by geography, by the borders that separate and contain land, bodies, and identity. Here, I continue to pull on these geographic threads, examining *Cane*'s northern narrators in Georgia—men whose relationship to the South is defined by both attraction and recoil. Their northern perspectives offer confrontations with region and race that produce a vital model through which the South can be understood in the larger cultural consciousness.

Moreover, while I think that Toomer's own experiences may offer some insight into this particular way of approaching the text, I am wary of an over-reliance on the biographical that attempts to cement a reading of Toomer himself, transforming the author into as much of a text as *Cane*. I build on the work done by Carolyn Dekker, who likewise pushes back against any attempts to codify Jean Toomer's maneuvers regarding his race as “passing.” Taking particular issue with Byrd and Gates's specific language in the introduction to the 2011 Norton Critical Edition, Dekker laments the widespread acceptance of their presentation of Toomer's history. She explains:

To claim that Toomer passed requires scholars to establish that he has one proper community of origin and belonging and show he then abandoned it. Arguments about Toomer's passing frequently employ an unacknowledged set of secondary parameters, in addition to race, when trying to place his community of origin. Gates and Byrd build on a long tradition of misreading Toomer in terms of class, region, and culture, therefore

⁸ Francisco E. Robles, “Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Borderlands of Encounter and Contradiction,” *MELUS: The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature* 45, no. 1, (2020): 27.

encouraging the misapprehension that he belonged to the community he portrayed in the first and third sections of *Cane*. I add issues of region and class to the analysis of race in *Cane*'s reception to reveal the constructedness of the regionalist credentials that the passing narrative naturalizes too readily... Over the years, scholars have paid too much attention to Toomer's passing, running, fleeing, and exile; I propose shifting attention to the way he dwelt in new places, engaging with them with imagination and sympathy.⁹

As Dekker argues, many of the critical attempts to define Toomer in terms of race and region depend upon a desire to understand Toomer *as southern*, assigning him a relationship to the South that is ultimately complicated in his written works. Such a configuration then shapes the way that both *Cane* and the South can be read (or perhaps, misread, as Dekker suggests), as Toomer's rendering of the region becomes influenced by questions of home, belonging, and identity that, while present in the text, are not necessarily reflections of Toomer's own attachments, as such interpretations contend.¹⁰ Rather, I follow Dekker's assertion that "Toomer's love for the South was problematic and seems more typical of an outsider than a returning prodigal or native."¹¹ This model for reading *Cane* offers inroads to understand the text beyond the individual—beyond the enigmatic and often distracting figure of Toomer himself—and instead allows us to consider what an outsider's perspective on the South can offer our understanding of the region.

In his own staging of the South across the vignettes and poems of *Cane*, Toomer insists upon the very border crossings that Robles underscores. In a letter to Waldo Frank, he maps the shape of *Cane*, emphasizing the way that the text is invested in a movement between the North and the South across its three major sections:

From three angles, CANE's design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from the South up to into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North.

⁹ Carolyn Dekker, "Jean Toomer, Sojourner: Striking Experiences in the South and Southwest," *MELUS: The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature* 92, no. 4 (2014): 93.

¹⁰ Per Dekker, "Gates, Byrd, and others before them offer a story of Toomer as a man who found his rightful places as a chronicler of the black, rural, South and then ran away from it" (96).

¹¹ Dekker, 98. Dekker's reading also turns to W.E.B. Du Bois's contemporary review of *Cane*, in which he wrote: "'Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia, but he does know human beings; and from the background which he has seen slightly and heard of all his life through the lips of others, he paints things that true, not with Dutch exactness, but rather with an impressionist's sweep of color'" (ctd. in Dekker, 47).

From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Boxseat and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song...Between each of the three sections, a curve. These to vaguely indicate the design.¹²

In his letters, Toomer insists on *Cane* as a geometric and geographic project, and the curves never complete a full circle—something remains uncontained by the shape as both the South and the North exceed their boundaries across each section.¹³ Within the “simple” forms of *Cane*’s opening section, which take place in the fictional town of Sempter (modeled after Sparta, Georgia, where Toomer was a substitute principal for three months in 1921), the lives of the southern communities are often observed by a narrator from the North, whose presence can interrupt their routines.

Significantly, these interruptions are bidirectional, as the South repeatedly appears throughout *Cane*’s second section. These appearances are usually linked to the memories of the different characters, many of whom consider the South as a kind of homeland, something they have become distanced from in the transience of the Great Migration. In these moments, the South unmoors, both geographically and ecologically as these characters’ attachments to the region shape their experiences in northern cities, whether it be Chicago, New York, or Washington, D.C. One such moment occurs in “Box Seat” in which a Black woman is made to embody the South in her proximity to Dan, the story’s protagonist:

He shrivels close beside a portly Negress whose huge tolls of flesh meet about the bones of seat-arms. A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets. Dreaming, the streets roll over on their bellies, and suck their glossy health from them. Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south.”¹⁴

¹² Jean Toomer to Waldo Frank, December 12, 1922. Cited in “Correspondence,” Second Norton Critical Edition of *Cane*, 162-163.

¹³ In *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity*, Karen Jackson Ford highlights just how complicated and inconsistent Toomer’s configuration of *Cane* proves to be: “If the book goes from ‘from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms,’ we have assumed that these forms map onto the South, North, and South respectively. But he immediately offers not just an alternative reading, but a converse one—‘or’ North, South, and North. In one breath he associates simple forms with the South and complex ones with the North, but in the next breath he reverses those associations” (5).

¹⁴ Toomer, 63.

Here, the text animates a kind of fraught regional crossing through this juxtaposition of the repeated motifs that define the respective sections of *Cane*. The urban North is characterized by the image of the street as the connective tissue of the city, an image that is specifically tied to that which is unnatural: concrete, cement, asphalt. Conversely, the rural South is made into the site of the natural world, evoked through the images of roots and soil. These contrasted motifs collapse in on one another as the roots of this “soil-soaked” woman both anchor to the South and are consumed by the “asphalt streets” as they disappear into the cement. In this passage, the border between the North and the South is made into something quite fragile, insisting on a crossing that makes clear the ways that northern industrialization depends upon the South as the streets “suck their glossy health from [the roots].”

In the text’s first section, the clearest example of northern puncture occurs in “Fern,” one of *Cane*’s most popular vignettes, which tells the story of a young Black woman in Georgia who stands as a perpetual object of desire for the men of the town, including the unnamed narrator—who is “from the North and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck up.”¹⁵ The reader’s introduction to this southern town is told through the description of this desire as an ongoing loop, with men “everlastingly bringing her their bodies.”¹⁶ Through this depiction, the narrator centers Fern, transforming her into an object of compulsion. This suggestion is present in his physical descriptions of Fern as well:

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird’s wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you...If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curve of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied.¹⁷

Fern's eyes, which become synecdochal for Fern herself, are magnetized, compelling the gaze of the men of the town and the northern narrator himself, a compulsion that they seem to be helpless against as their glances becomes "immediately" drawn to Fern, regardless of their original intention. Even the ecological metaphors that the narrator uses to craft his description follow this pattern, transforming Fern into the "common delta" into which everything flows, into which everything is naturally and automatically brought.

As this focus on Fern's eyes (as well as the attention to her "aquiline, Semitic" nose excerpted from the passage) fragment her body, the vignette seems to mirror the form of "Portrait in Georgia," in which the segmented body of a woman is made to enact the violence of a lynching. Paul Stasi highlights that "Portrait in Georgia" is often read as a blason, "a genre of poem about a female subject who is objectified and dismembered via the enumeration of body parts."¹⁸ For Stasi, the fragmentation of the poem makes clear the "connections among desire, miscegenation, and lynching" as it "describes the desired white woman in terms of the consequences of acting on that desire, the violent responses that make this racially transgressive desire legible on the black body."¹⁹ In comparison, the fragmentation of Fern further reveals another aspect of *Cane's* troubling relationship with desire. While "Fern" may not enact similar politics of miscegenation—the narrator specifically explains that white men "let her alone"—the vignette seems to have a geographic and ecological aim, tying Fern to the South itself. The work of the poetics here make Fern and the South—the ecological, geographic South—doubles of each other, as the descriptions of Fern's body mirror the body of the land. The narrator maps these ecological bodies across and through her; in

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Paul Stasi, "'Synchronous but More Subtle Migration': Passing and Primitivism in Toomer's *Cane*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 55, no. 2 (2009): 158.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the opening description, she even affects the movement of the water itself. In the transaction of the metaphor, just as Fern becomes inextricably tied to these “mobile rivers,” the water itself becomes an intrinsic part of the economies of feeling and desire within which Fern exists.

In his work on *Cane*’s liminality, Robert Arbour recognizes this relationship that Fern and the other women of the text have with metaphor, suggesting that they “inhabit a liminal space within which race, gender, and region are indeterminable” and “necessitate a subjective and personal interpretation that results in the forging of a personal connection with a folk identity.”²⁰ As metaphors, the women of *Cane* occupy a space of semiotic transaction that acts as a site of indeterminacy, thus marking their role in the text as facilitators of interpretation. For Arbour, Fern’s fluidity metaphorizes the liminal indeterminacy through which the Black northern narrator can interpret his own relationship to a southern subjectivity. In reading Fern—and by extension, the land of Georgia—the Black northern narrator is able to tie his desire for Fern to a desire for the South itself, a desire that is only further compounded when he explains that “[l]ike her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South.”²¹

Moreover, through his portrayals of her eyes, the narrator imbues Fern with a kind of power that supersedes the agency of those who look upon her, establishing a pull of desire in which even the reader is implicated as he addresses some unspecified “you.” Yet, even as the narrator casts Fern into this domineering role, the passage’s final line seemingly undoes this configuration, revealing her eyes to be subject to interpretation (and often, misinterpretation) by the men who have seen her. As

²⁰ Robert Arbour, “Figuring and Reconfiguring the Folk: Women and Metaphor in Part 1 of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 55, no. 3 (2013): 310.

²¹ Toomer, 19.

Fern is framed through her wordless ability to compel, the question of agency becomes even more problematic as Fern is clarified to be passive within the matrix of desire revolving around her.²²

Fern's passivity is only further emphasized in the vignette's final scene, which, like other climactic moments of the collection, takes place in a cane field. Approaching the canebrake with Fern, the narrator's desires—both for the woman and the South—all seem to collide:

Through a canebrake that was ripe for cutting, the branch was reached. Under a sweet-gum tree, and where reddish leaves had dammed the creek a little, we sat down. Dusk, suggesting the almost imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze about the cane. I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had vision. People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose. A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall....When one is on the soil of one's ancestor's, most anything can come to one...From force of habit, I suppose, I held Fern in my arms—that is, without at first noticing it. Then my mind came back to her. Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in.²³

The scene ultimately performs the kinds of border crossing that Robles highlights as different dichotomies—night/day, North/South—begin to the collapse. The language of the scene fogs imprecisely, mirroring the “purple haze about the cane” as the northern narrator seems to lose his grip on narrative itself, overwhelmed by the “strange” feeling that dominates his experience in Georgia.²⁴ If this scene is as Arbour suggests, the northern narrator accesses his own sense of southernness here, a southernness that hinges upon and is catalyzed by his proximity to the excessive embodiment of the scene.²⁵ The narrator crafts an ecology in which he stands at the

²² As Paul Stasi writes: “She desires nothing and is, as a consequence, the object of history, never its agent” (159). Even her ability to compel is a product of interpretation, meaning that has been thrust upon her by the men who view her.

²³ Toomer, 21 (original ellipses).

²⁴ Catherine Keyser highlights this syntactical shift in terms of genre, writing: “From a narratological perspective, the narrator has shifted from a local colorist, nostalgically recording the telling details of life in a small Southern town, to a modernist, shaping his sentences to reflect unspeakable yet urgent psychic experiences” (289).

²⁵ Per Arbour's reading of the scene: “Increasingly aware of Fern's mediatory abilities as a metaphor for the Southern folk culture, the narrator imagines that he will have visions like other folk inhabitants have ‘on the soil of one's ancestors.’ He thus begins to personalize his experience of the South. Although he holds Fern in his arms, the narrator loses awareness of this as he focuses on the intangible visions of the ‘countryside’ and ‘God’ mediated to him through Fern's eyes and connects figuratively with the folk identity. The narrative closes with the narrator traveling north in a train that crosses the Dixie Pike as he glimpses Fern's eyes, which provide a vision of ‘the countryside and something that I call God’ to the narrator. ‘Fern’ ends with a final image of portability and with the narrator's personal

center, surrounded by the very bodies of the countryside that Fern both encompasses and is a part of. This scene—which includes the narrator’s own ecologically-imposed southernness—condenses into that which flows into Fern’s eyes, underscoring a textual insistence on ecological and bodily weight that undercuts the scene’s ambiguity. It is only through this relationship that the narrator can script his own southernness, that he can recognize Georgia as the “soil of one’s ancestors.” As the scene eddies between the physical landscape, uncertain memory, and the narrator’s southern feelings, Fern becomes both the conduit and site of this affective flow. Fern’s body becomes a delta through which the South can be stored, memorialized, and later accessed by the narrator; she and the geography that she embodies are marked by the narrator’s desire for this sense of southern origin.

Yet, even as the scene mires in the strange sense of the narrator’s attachment to the South, this desire is proven fraught as his attention turns back to Fern:

I must have done something —what, I don’t know, in the confusion of my emotion. She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly...Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. It seemed to me as though she were pounding her head in anguish upon the ground. I rushed to her. She fainted in my arms.²⁶

In the cane field, Fern is undone—or as Samantha Wallace suggests, “unravels into paroxysm”—the cause of which is never made clear in the narration.²⁷ In this crucial moment, Fern, who has served

interpretation of Fern and the South, enabling him to reconnect with a sense of Southern folk identity as he returns to the North” (318).

²⁶ Toomer, 21.

²⁷ Samantha Wallace, “What Happened in the *Cane*? A Rereading of Jean Toomer’s ‘Fern,’” *#MeToo and Modernism*, edited by Robin E. Field and Jerrica Jordan (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2022), 159. Wallace highlights this final scene within a larger acknowledgment of Fern as a survivor of sexual violence. Part of this violence is marked by the eclipsing nature of the narration, which occludes Fern’s interiority and renders her passive and silent—an object purely for the interpretation of the men who come to her. In turning to the elliptical nature of the final scene’s narration, Wallace argues that Fern’s unraveling seems “much like a person triggered to breakdown by sexual trauma” as “something crucial between Fern and the narrator has been lost in the recounting” (164-165).

the narrative as an object of interpretation for the narrator, suddenly becomes unreadable. In this moment of southern access, Fern (and by extension, the region that she has been metaphorically and narratively forced to embody) are occluded from both narrator and audience. The desire that has, until this moment, defined the narrator's relationship to Fern is immediately warped, and he is repelled from her—incapable of understanding her, of accessing any sense of her interiority.²⁸ Her body, which exists in the narrative as a compelling signifier of southernness, is overcome within the canebrake, and the narrator's simile further ties her to southern ecology and economy, filling her body with the sap of the cane.²⁹

In this critical moment of narrative fracture in the cane, the northern narrator is ultimately both compelled and repelled by the South that Fern has been made to embody. The vignette ends with the narrator's departure for the north, which can be read as either a denial or rejection of the "southern feelings" he accessed through his interaction with Fern in the cane field. This perpetual evocation of cane is naturally the throughline for Toomer's text as a whole, reifying the narrative's investment in the South. Yet, it may be this insistence on cane as a defining motif that also underscores Toomer's own status as a non-southern southern writer. In her historicist reading of *Cane*, Barbara Foley attends to the economics that underlie Toomer's Georgia. Part of her work reveals that cane, despite its centrality to Toomer's depiction of Sempter and the South, was not a major crop within the local economy of Sparta.³⁰ For Foley, Toomer's turn to cane reveals his

²⁸ As Wallace reminds us, "'Fern' is the narrator's hypothesis, his speculation, a fantasy which may (or may not be) far from the truth... This means that though we see her through him, it is his wants, desires, and motivations that we can discern and infer much more than we ever could Fern's" (163).

²⁹ Keyser suggests that the use of "boiling sap" here underscores the "denied history of violence that supports the fantasy of eroticized creolization," explaining that "[d]uring this transformative epiphany, the urban modernist who earlier rhetorically distanced himself both from "black folks" and from "white men" takes his immersive cue from the rural, mixed-race woman" (290).

³⁰ Per Foley: "From the omnipresence of this motif in Toomer's text, one might conclude that cane constituted an important crop in the Sparta-area economy... But sorghum cane occupied—and still occupies—a relatively marginal place in the farming economy, furnishing animal feed and syrup and molasses for home use. There were in the 1920s no large-scale stands of cane in Hancock County equivalent to the immense sugar plantation then existing in Louisiana and Texas and subsequently developed in Florida. Sorghum cane was primarily part of central Georgia's subsistence economy" (992).

distance from the lives of Black southerners in Hancock County, suggesting instead a “lyricist’s and a mystic’s reaction to the sensuous features of its harvest and conversion into syrup.”³¹ As such, *Cane*’s own repetition of its eponymous crop highlights the distance between the text and the author—making clear the work of replication, interpretation, and negotiation that shape the South of the text.

Throughout *Cane*, Toomer’s cultivation of cane fields marks similar moments to this final scene in “Fern”—the cane both compels and repels. As Foley suggests, part of the compulsion stems from Toomer’s own play with language and metaphor as “the scent of cane suffuses the landscape and sweetens its inhabitants, transmuting their suffering into beauty and signaling their fusion with nature.”³² As Toomer maps reverence across this relationship with the cane, he marks a kind of longing for the connection to land and community that defines Black life in the South. And yet, even as cane accompanies such depictions of desire, the cane field also plays host to violence and terror, whether it be Fern’s breakdown or Ralph Kabnis’s fear of lynching as he sees “eyes flaring from the cane.”³³ As the site where desire and horror collide, the cane field reveals the affective weight that accompanies representations of the South from northerners and southerners alike.

In *Cane*, the complexity of this weight is coupled with the text’s own investment in depicting the fractured relationship between Black Americans and the region, a fragmentation that is intertwined with matters of fiction and representation.³⁴ As many critics turn to *Cane* as some kind of

³¹ Barbara Foley, “In the Land of Cotton: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *African American Review* 50, no. 4, (2017): 992

³² *Ibid.*, 991.

³³ Toomer, 91. Similar scenes of horror in the cane can also be found in “Carma,” “Blood-Burning Moon,” and “Reapers.”

³⁴ Foley similarly highlights Toomer’s play with the fictive: “Nonetheless, Toomer’s focus on cane as the central symbol of the merging of the real and the ideal—coupled with his relatively superficial understanding of the lumber and cotton industries furnishing the mainstay of Hancock Country economic life—reveals that Toomer’s stance was indeed, as [Susan] Blake has argued, largely that of the ‘spectatorial artist’” (992).

negotiation of the Toomer's relationship to race, they presume a false dichotomy between either a disavowal of the South or an acceptance of a "true" southern identity—a presumption which ultimately overlooks the ways that the text formally and thematically establishes his outsider status in its examination of the South. In the modernist world that Toomer cultivates, the South can be found at the center—a site where all the borders and binaries of *Cane* start to collapse. The cane field marks a distinctly recognizable southern geography, a place where *Cane*'s cast of northern characters attend to their conflicting interpretations of and attachments to the region, as they begin to grapple with the aftermath of the history that disappears Whitman's speaker in "O Magnet South." In the geographies that Toomer maps across *Cane*, we find an interrogation of what the South means to those outside of the region, attending to a more capacious understanding of the ways that the South can be narratively rendered in a national imagination.

"We goin' to the flower garden": John Berendt's Savannah

If *Cane* offers another dimension to Whitman's "strange fascination" with the South, John Berendt's 1994 *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* seems to enact a similar, and equally perplexing, northern longing for the South that echoes Whitman's speaker. The text narrativizes the 1981 murder of Danny Hansford and the subsequent trials of Jim Williams in Savannah, Georgia. Over an eight-year span, Williams was tried four times for Hansford's murder, until he was eventually acquitted in May 1989. While the crime and courtroom drama of the Williams case provide the novel's central plot, majority of the text features the narrator (understood to be Berendt himself) observing and engaging with the community in Savannah, resulting in the novel's cast of memorable characters, many of whom are actual citizens of the city met by Berendt during his time there.³⁵ As

³⁵ While I am wary about conflating the author with a first-person narrator, Berendt himself seems to invite it. In an interview with southern lifestyle magazine *Garden & Gun* about the thirtieth anniversary of *Midnight*, he talks about the surviving characters of the novel: "When the Lady Chablis died in 2016, the [now-deceased] defense attorney Sonny Seiler said to me, 'Now that Chablis has died, I'm the last living major character.' And I said, 'Sonny, I'm still alive!'" (Diego).

such, *Midnight* occupies an interesting place between the fiction and nonfiction, which Berendt addresses in his author's note:

The characters in this book are real, but it bears mentioning that I have used pseudonyms for a number of them in order to protect their privacy, and in a few cases I have gone a step further by altering their descriptions. Though this is a work of nonfiction, I have taken certain storytelling liberties, particularly having to do with the timing of events. Where the narrative strays from strict nonfiction, my intention has been to remain faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of events as they really happened.³⁶

Most of these moments of narrative stray pertain to the timeline of events in the text.³⁷ In an article on Berendt's novels for the *New York Times*, Edward Wyatt explains that Danny Hansford's murder, which in the book occurs months after Berendt's move to Savannah, actually occurred several years before he came to the city, leading to several fictional scenes surrounding the murder itself.³⁸

Berendt suggests that such additions are the natural result of "rounding the corners to make a better narrative."³⁹ For my own purposes, I am less concerned with these rounded corners than I am with the "better narrative" that they have constructed.

This narrative actually begins with one of these moments of fictive invention, as the opening chapter describes a meeting between the narrator and Jim Williams that is interrupted by Danny Hansford, who was hired by Williams as a handyman (as well as a prostitute, as the text later reveals).⁴⁰ Until this interruption, the first chapter introduces the reader to both Williams and

³⁶ John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1994), 389.

³⁷ Berendt's own admission in the author's note led to minor controversy, even contributing to his loss of the 1995 Pulitzer Prize. An administrator of the Pulitzer explained that "The Board did take cognizance of the author's note and it did have some bearing on the decision not to consider the book for the prize in general nonfiction" (Wyatt).

³⁸ Edward Wyatt, "His Blockbuster on Shelves, He Tempts Fate with Fire," *New York Times*, September 21, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/21/books/his-blockbuster-on-shelves-he-tempts-fate-with-fire.html>.

³⁹ Doreen Carvajal, "Now! Read the True (More or Less) Story!; Publishers and Authors Debate the Boundaries Of Nonfiction," *New York Times*, February 24, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/24/books/now-read-true-more-less-story-publishers-authors-debate-boundaries-nonfiction.html>.

⁴⁰ This interruption by Danny Hansford is one of the novel's fabricated scenes, given that Berendt's actual first meeting with Jim Williams occurred after the murder. In this opening chapter though, Berendt's persona describes Hansford's abrupt interruption, as he bursts into the room yelling "Goddamn bitch!" Berendt's description follows: "He appeared to be about nineteen or twenty, He was wearing blue jeans and a sleeveless black T-shirt with the words FUCK YOU printed in white across the front. He was trembling with barely controlled fury...The boy grabbed a vodka bottle from the table and filled a crystal glass to the brim. He gulped it down. His arms were tattooed—a Confederate flag on one arm, a marijuana plant on the other" (17-18). The scene does clear work of exposition, introducing the reader to the

Savannah, intertwining Savannah's history with anecdotes about the novel's central figure. At one point, surrounded by the "trappings of aristocracy, nobility, royalty" that adorn his home, Williams even warns Berendt, "You mustn't be taken in by the moonlight and magnolias. There's more to Savannah than that. Things can get very murky"—a description that could just as easily pertain to his own self and the murder that follows. With Williams as referent, the text's production of Savannah mirrors the "darkly handsome, almost sinister features" that it assigns him, even as he is revealed to be an outsider to the city, born near the town of Macon and belonging to the *nouveau riche* rather than the old money of Savannah's blue bloods.⁴¹ Berendt showcases a Savannah of the upper class—a "house-proud Savannah" with grand squares and grander wealth, with exclusive clubs and parties full of southern gentlemen and belles.⁴² Yet, Berendt cannot map these aspects of the city without also giving shape its stratification along the lines of race and class—making clear the more "sinister" side of Savannah.

One such line features in the description of Lucille Wright, a "light-skinned black woman" who is "Savannah's most sought-after cateress" and "held in high-esteem" by the women who hire her: "She's a real lady," they often said, and you could tell from the way they said it that they considered it high praise for a black woman."⁴³ Berendt does not linger on this moment where the curtain peels back—a moment in which the racial hierarchy of Savannah peeks through. Yet, the scene still serves as a puncture of some kind, confirming for a northern audience (whom it seems

strange relationship between Hansford and Williams, as well as painting a portrait of Handford as a violent, erratic figure, enough so that the subsequent discourse surrounding his death makes sense to the reader. Foiled against Jim Williams' meticulous, aristocratic trappings and southern drawl, Danny Hansford also offers an alternate version of the South to the reader, that of the poor, angry white man—an image amplified by the Confederate flag emblazoned on his arm.

⁴¹ In relaying a story to Berendt, Williams shares: "I was born in Gordon, Georgia. That's a little town near Macon. The biggest thing in Gordon is a chalk mine. My father was a barber, and my mother worked as a secretary for the mine. My money—what there is of it—is about eleven years old" (4).

⁴² Berendt, 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

such descriptions are for) that the legacy of racism that defines the South remains. The moment also marks an important aspect of Berendt's narration: his distance from his object of observation.

Berendt's novelistic persona confirms this distance as he defines the pull Savannah had for him, leading to his eventual move:

I was beguiled by Savannah...I suspected that in Savannah I had stumbled on a rare vestige of the Old South. It seemed to me that Savannah was in some respects as remote as Pitcairn Island, that tiny rock in the middle of the Pacific where the descendants of the mutineers of the H.M.S. *Bounty* has lived in inbred isolation since the eighteenth century. For about the same length of time, seven generations of Savannahians had been marooned in their hushed and secluded bower of a city on the Georgia coast...An idea was beginning to take shape in my mind, a variation of my city-hopping weekends. I would make Savannah my second home...enough to become more than a tourist if not a full-fledged resident. I would inquire, observe, and poke around wherever my curiosity led me or wherever I was invited. I would presume nothing. I would take notes...At times, I came to think of myself as living in Savannah. I found myself in an adventured people by an unusual assortment of characters and enlivened by a series of strange events, up to and including murder.⁴⁴

Berendt establishes himself as "beguiled" by Savannah, turning to language of charm and desire to articulate his own attachment to the city—an attachment that is shaped by the ways in which Savannah projects an image of an antebellum South. While Berendt never fully explains what he means by a "rare old vestige of the Old South," the descriptions of Savannah that have led to his beguilement paint a portrait of a city trapped in amber. In her essay on Berendt's novel and its 1997 Clint Eastwood-led film adaptation, Clara Juncker highlights that the character that Savannah is made to play in both versions acts as a simulacrum of Savannah itself. As she argues, "Berendt's Savannah becomes a hyperreality, where southernness constitutes a series of interrelated discourses about the South and where comfortable notions of fact and fiction, acting and reality, class, gender, and truth no longer fit, or matter."⁴⁵ In other words, Savannah is not just southern, but *hyper*-southern—the city made an exaggerated character in its own replication as the hierarchies and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36-37

⁴⁵ Clara Juncker, "Simulacrum Savannah: *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2005): 182-183.

stereotypes that shape our cultural ideal of the South are brought to the fore.⁴⁶ As Berendt plays with the relationship between fiction and fact, Savannah (and by extension, the South) is caught within the collapse of the real and the unreal.⁴⁷

Moreover, even as Savannah becomes his “second home” and he wades further and further into the strange city, Berendt shows little interest in belonging to it; instead, his purposes tend more toward the ethnographic as he seeks to inquire, to capture, to render for an audience. As an outsider, Berendt is able to be swept up in life in Savannah without truly belonging—able to desire, to be seduced, without being culpable in the city’s racial and economic politics, even as his very project depends upon them. Significantly, Berendt’s ability to move through the variety of Savannah’s social circles is a product of his own identity as a northern white man. Seemingly detached from the “isolated” world of Savannah, Berendt’s persona in the novel becomes a repository for these stories, as the different characters strive to make their way of life legible for Berendt’s non-Savannahian audience.⁴⁸

Even the language of attraction that he repeatedly mobilizes to explain his relationship to the city depends upon distance, upon his perspective as a northerner compelled by the veneer of the South. In addition to being “beguiled” by the South, Berendt frames his move to Savannah as a kind of seduction. In an interview for *The Writer*, he declares that Savannah is “a seductive city, and [he]

⁴⁶ Juncker highlights the way that Berendt’s text features familiar southern literary tropes. She explains: “As the title suggests, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* draws on traditional themes and figures familiar to readers of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, William Styron, Walker Percy, and Alice Walker: grotesque characters, gothic settings, North/South dichotomies, southern heroes and belles, racial ambiguities, the importance of place, and more” (182).

⁴⁷ Much of the appeal of Savannah lies in its relationship to fiction for Berendt. In contemplating his move to Savannah, he shares an image of the city shaped by its appearance in popular culture and literature, particularly highlighting *Treasure Island* and *Gone with the Wind*. As he writes: “These, then, were the images in my mental gazetteer of Savannah: rum-drinking pirates, strong-willed women, courtly manners, eccentric behavior, gentle words, and lovely music” (27). This gazetteer is maintained throughout the pages of the novel, denigrated by Juncker as she accuses Berendt of “cram[ming] in as many clichés about the South as his pages can hold” (186).

⁴⁸ As Berendt explains in his interview for *The Writer*: “The storytelling experience is alive and well in the South. When people heard I was writing a book, they were eager to talk with me” (18).

fell under its spell.”⁴⁹ Even as Berendt names a sense of desire for the world presented by Savannah, that desire is mediated, defined by the distance embodied in his northern perspective. In many ways, Berendt’s replication of Savannah echoes Whitman’s glistening and perfumed South that opens this chapter.⁵⁰

These echoes also seem to be present in the way that Berendt physically maps Savannah. The collapses that Juncker highlights define the ways in which space and land are represented in *Midnight*. As the title suggests, the novel is invested in the image of the garden—descriptions of and synonyms for it abound throughout the text. In recounting his entrance into Savannah, he sets one such scene:

Abruptly, the trees gave way to an open panorama of marsh grass the color of wheat. Straight ahead, a tall bridge rose steeply out of the plain. From the top of the bridge, I looked down on the Savannah River, and, on the far side, a row of old brick buildings fronted by a narrow esplanade. Behind the buildings a mass of trees extended into the distance, punctuated by steeples, cornices, rooftops, and cupolas. As I descended from the bridge, I found myself plunging into a luxuriant green garden.

Walls of thick vegetation rose up on all sides and arched overhead in a lacy canopy that filtered the light to a soft shade. It had just rained; the air was hot and steamy. I felt enclosed in a semitropical terrarium, sealed off from a world that suddenly seemed a thousand miles away.⁵¹

As the architectural melds with the ecological, the natural land and the man-made constructions are pressed flush into the “panorama” that Berendt presents, offering a view of Savannah as something

⁴⁹ John Berendt, “A Conversation with...John Berendt,” by Kristine F. Anderson, *The Writer*, vol. 111, no. 1 (January 1998): 17.

⁵⁰ Berendt’s descriptions of Savannah often mirror the ecological language of Whitman’s poem. In a comparison between New York and Savannah, Berendt writes: “At this point in my experiment in bi-urban living, I found myself spending more time in Savannah than New York. The weather alone would have been reason enough for the tilt. By late April, New York was still struggling to free itself from the clutches of winter, and Savannah was well into the unfolding pageantry of a warm and leisurely spring. Camellias, jonquils, and paperwhites had bloomed in December and January. Wisteria and redbuds had followed, and then in mid-March the azaleas burst forth in gigantic pillows of white, red, and vermilion. White dogwood blossoms floated like clouds of confectioner’s sugar above the azaleas. The scent of honeysuckle, Confederate jasmine. And the first magnolia blossoms were already beginning to perfume the air. Who needed the chill of New York?” (167).

⁵¹ Berendt, 28.

picturesque—a “luxuriant green garden,” a “semitropical terrarium.”⁵² Such a depiction furthers the othering of Savannah that the novel upholds, as something separate from Berendt’s audience. As Berendt curates the stories that populate the novel, he similarly curates an image of Savannah itself, an image that furthers discourses of the South as something different and detached from the rest of the country. As the southern land of the novel is mediated through Berendt’s attention to the myriad gardens of Savannah, the *reader’s* attention is repeatedly drawn to something cultivated and constructed—sites of preservation and presentation that reflect Berendt’s own attraction to this “rare vestige of the Old South.”

Berendt’s insistence on Savannah as this singular enclave of the Old South rests upon a romanticization of the region, the repeated insistence of the city as something spatially and temporally isolated from the rest of the world. Much like the gardens that define it, Savannah is meticulously contained. Berendt even returns to this comparison in the novel’s closing chapter, refusing to relinquish his central metaphor:

For me, Savannah’s resistance to change was its saving grace. The city looked inward, sealed off from the noises and distractions of the world at large. It *grew* inward, too, and in such a way that its people flourished like hothouse plants tended by an indulgent gardener. The ordinary became extraordinary. Eccentrics thrived. Every nuance and quirk of personality achieved greater brilliance in that lush enclosure than would have been possible anywhere else in the world.⁵³

Berendt’s investment in Savannah rests on what seems to be a revision of southern exceptionalism, presenting Savannah as a final place in which the intense commitment to tradition that culturally defines the South remains. While the concept of a port city being “sealed off” from the rest of world rings fairly hollow, Berendt still insists upon the city’s containment and timelessness, presenting it as

⁵² This positioning of Savannah as one large garden occurs through again as Berendt describes the city’s layout: “There were five on Bull Street, five on Barnard, four on Abercorn, and so on. James Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia, had been responsible for them. . . . The streets were to be laid out in a grid pattern, crossing at right angles, and there would be squares at regular intervals. In effect, the city would become a giant parterre garden” (29).

⁵³ Berendt, 388.

a “lush enclosure” that he has stumbled upon and moved through unobtrusively, never fully interrogating how his own novel offers the opportunity for some gardening of his own. As the seemingly unobtrusive northern narrator—one who swears only to inquire, observe, and presume nothing—Berendt presents a version of Savannah that is assumed to be authentic.⁵⁴ Of course, Berendt’s version is itself pruned and trimmed, landscaped by his own compulsion. Invested in the exceptionalism with which he both opens and closes the novel, Berendt shapes a Savannah that can explain his fascination, complete with “eccentric” and borderline-hyperbolic characters, a murder mystery, and a romanticized South. If the gardens of Savannah present a carefully curated landscape, Berendt’s work in *Midnight* cultivates a Savannah that relies upon a culturally-constructed image of the South, which allow him to merely gloss over some of the political issues within the city as they simply confirm what his northern audience may already conceive of region.⁵⁵

There is one critical moment in *Midnight*, though, that seems to throw the image of the garden on its head. Even as the garden literalizes Berendt’s mediated desire for the South, it also

⁵⁴ Outside of the author’s note, this question of authenticity appears in a conversation between Berendt and Joe Odom, one of *Midnight*’s recurring characters, Joe Odom, following a St. Patrick’s Day parade in which the parade ends with a Confederate tableau, complete with a dead Union soldier. Berendt’s persona remarks that the “Civil War has been over quite awhile.” Joe Odom then attempts to explain the relationship between white southerners and the war. As Berendt narrates: “‘Not if you’re a southerner,’ said Joe. ‘But you know, that dead Yankee isn’t just about the Civil War. He’s sort of a symbol of what could happen to any Yankee, who comes down here and gets folks all riled up...He could some fella from New York who decided to write a book about us and started filling it with drag queens and murderers and corpses and bottles of pointing and—what’s that you were telling me about just a minute ago? Oh yeah, voodoo! *Voodoo!* Witchcraft in a graveyard! Damn!’” Berendt’s reply merely addresses the truth of his narrative: “I’m not making any of this up, Joe” (257).

⁵⁵ The chief of these issues is naturally that of race. As Berendt writes: “The story of blacks in Savannah was, of course, a very different one from that of whites. Slavery was forbidden in Georgia in 1735 (Oglethorpe called it ‘a horrid crime’), but in 1749 the colony’s Trustees gave in to pressure from the settlers and legalized it. Despite a long history of oppression, the 1960s civil rights movement in Savannah was almost entirely nonviolent...In 1964, Martin Luther King declared Savannah ‘the most desegregated city in the South’: In 1980, the population of Savannah was half white and half black” (42). However, *Midnight* does not reflect such demographics. Beyond the aforementioned Lucille, the novel only has a handful of Black characters, the central of which is Chablis, a transgender drag queen whom Berendt befriends. For the most part the Savannah of *Midnight* seems fairly segregated in contrast to MLK’s assertion, as many of the social events that Berendt attends are largely filled with white Savannahians. Often, the novel’s Black characters are present only in employed roles, like Lucille and Minerva, Jim Williams’s “root doctor.” In the chapter entitled “Black Minuet,” Berendt attends the one event in the novel for Black Savannahians: a Cotillion sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha. He explains his interest: “The more I thought about it, the more I began to feel the urge, as an observer of the local scene, to know more about the black debutante ball and, if possible, be invited to it” (312). In short, after interviewing the founder of the ball, Berendt secures an invite and is able to move through this space with a mobility that is not reflexive for the Black characters in *Midnight*.

complicates the affective geography that Berendt maps in *Midnight*. At the end of the novel, Berendt accompanies Minerva, a voodoo practitioner employed by Jim Williams, to the Bonaventure Cemetery where Danny Hansford is buried.⁵⁶ As they walk through the cemetery, Minerva refers to the space as a “flower garden,” refracting the ecological language that has dominated the novel. Yet, Berendt highlights the landscape as something different than the meticulous squares and gardens of Savannah:

A solid wall of trees rose before us on the opposite shore. It was a forbidding mass without a single light visible...Slowly, as my eyes adjusted, to the darkness, I became aware of dense shrubbery around us and of the ghostly drapery of Spanish moss...All I heard tonight was the wind sighing through the trees.⁵⁷

Made into a shapeless “forbidding mass,” the landscape of this “garden” embodies a completely opposite affect to that of Berendt’s Savannah. In his essay on Bonaventure Cemetery’s ecology, William Bryan examines Berendt’s ecological description against the resurgence of tourism inspired by *Midnight*. He argues that Berendt’s depictions of the cemetery “play up its untamed characteristics to amplify the book’s focus on death and the supernatural.”⁵⁸ In other words, Berendt marks the cemetery as a different kind of environs, a foil to the carefully planned gardens and squares of Savannah proper. While Bryan localizes this exotification to this particular scene in the novel, it is actually indicative of Berendt’s larger relationship to Savannah as a whole. Whereas the gardens of Savannah’s square reflect a charm that can seduce and beguile, the land of the cemetery repels, affecting a geography that literalizes Berendt’s detachment, rather than his attachment, to the space.

⁵⁶ William Bryan has written extensively about Bonaventure Cemetery’s changing landscape, highlighting the cemetery’s relationship to tourism, of which *Midnight* and its film adaptation played a role. As Bryan asserts: “Bonaventure’s transformations can tell us a lot about the evolution of ideas about wildness and preferences for natural landscapes in the United States, particularly in the South...Bonaventure’s landscape, then, has always been as much a product of human imagination as natural conditions on the ground” (70-71).

⁵⁷ Berendt, 381.

⁵⁸ William Bryan, “Taming the Wild Side of Bonaventure: Tourism and the Contested Southern Landscape,” *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 4 (2017): 70. Bryan further highlights that this foil has actually shaped how the cemetery appears in tourism materials, which “have drawn on the cemetery’s wild characteristics as a way to position it among a variety of other ‘dark tourism’ sites, exotifying both landscape and culture in problematic ways” (Ibid.).

As he and Minerva move through Bonaventure, their different relationships to the space hold firm, as it exists as both a cemetery and a garden in his narration and Minerva's dialogue, respectively.⁵⁹ In conflating garden and grave, the text warps the geography that Berendt has already established, turning his cultivated mapping of Savannah askew and drawing the reader's attention to the feelings of recoil that underlie the compulsion of the novel's earlier scenes. This relationship hinges upon outsider status, reflecting a larger, cultural construction of the South shaped by these feelings of attraction and retreat that mark his separation from the region.

Naming Compulsion and Repulsion: On Disgust

In tracing the compulsion and repulsion that Toomer and Berendt (as well as Whitman) map across different southern geographies, I have been purposefully imprecise in the specific emotions that I ascribe to such affective forces. Part of this imprecision stems from the texts themselves; the northern narrators and authors often struggle to articulate the specific and often contradicting feelings that the South inspires—feelings that so rarely boil down into a single word. And yet, examining the ways that the South both compels and repels across both *Cane* and *Midnight* reveals a particular felt pattern that speaks most directly to work that has been done on disgust, namely William Ian Miller's *Anatomy of Disgust* and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*. While disgust might name too strong, too specific of an emotion for the sense of detachment that underlies both *Cane* and *Midnight*, Miller's and Ngai's scholarship still highlight the similar structures of attraction and withdrawal that are not only present in both texts but also play a significant role in how disgust is theorized and understood. As disgust offers an approximation to the affective forces that shape each text, I suggest that turning to these works of affect theory will allow for consideration of the larger role that the

⁵⁹ This moment echoes an earlier scene in the novel's eponymous chapter, in which Jim Williams, Berendt, and Minerva go out to a graveyard in Beaufort to both commune with Danny Hansford and curse Spencer Lawton, the defense lawyer in the case against Williams. As they enter the graveyard, the conflation of graveyard and garden is made immediately clear: "In a few moments, we reached the end of the lane. The sliver of a new moon hung like a slender cradle over a grove of tall, dark trees. We were at the edge of a graveyard... 'A lot a people does this kind of work,' Minerva said. 'But it look like we got the garden all to ourselves tonight'" (247).

South has been made to play in the imaginary of the United States—a role that reflects the larger forces of compulsion and repulsion mapped across these southern texts by non-southerners.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Miller considers the relationship between these forces, framing them as two affects embedded within one another:

And even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without capturing our attention. It imposes itself on us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing ‘double-takes’ at the very things that disgust us.⁶⁰

For Miller, disgust and desire inform one another—are intimately tied—and often in ways that seems inevitable and automatic, mirroring characters’ relationships to the South in both *Cane* and *Midnight*. Even as the characters encounter significant moments of repulsion, their compulsion toward these southern spaces is often presented as something which they are powerless to resist, whether it is the northern narrator drawn helplessly to Fern’s eyes or Berendt’s persona beguiled and seduced by Savannah.

To this end, Sianne Ngai ends *Ugly Feelings* with a similar interrogation of the relationship between compulsion and repulsion, examining disgust as the emotional counter to the excess of attention given to desire in academic circles.⁶¹ As she writes:

There is always a certain asymmetry in the pairing of disgust and desire, since disgust is a structured and agonistic emotion carrying a strong and unmistakable signal, while desire is often noisy and amorphous....There is thus a sense in which disgust is the ugliest of “ugly feelings,” yet an interesting exception. For disgust is never ambivalent about its object. More specifically, it is never prone to producing the confusions between subject and object that are integral to most of the feelings discussed in this book. Whereas the obscuring of the subjective-objective boundary becomes internal to the nature of feelings like animatedness and paranoia, disgust strengthens and polices this boundary. Even if disgust is boiled down to its kernel of repulsion, repulsion itself tends to be a fairly definite response, whereas the parameters of attraction are notoriously difficult to determine and fix. Put simply, desire seems capable of being vague and amorphous, and even idiosyncratic in ways that disgust cannot...[W]e tend not to ask for supplementary ratification of our desired object’s

⁶⁰ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), x.

⁶¹ Per Ngai: “Theories, poetics, and ethics of ‘desire’ abound, but something about disgust seems to have resisted engendering these forms of attention. Though Barthes’ *jouissance*—the hyperbolic endpoint of desire, if not a form of desire per se—and all of its variants have energized critical writing on literature for decades, disgust has no keywords associated with it and has largely remained outside the range of any organized critical practice or school” (332).

desirability, or demand that others share our affective relation to it or our valuation of it, once that object has actually been established.⁶²

Ngai's emphasis on desire's "amorphous" nature seems relevant to the way that compulsion works in both *Cane* and *Midnight*, as something that is particularly problematic, as the helpless pull toward the South that these northern figures experience is often bound up within a larger matrix of desire, akin to the noisiness that she suggests. Yet, for Ngai, a significant difference between disgust and desire lies in the ways that these affects distinguish between the subject and object relationship. As such, even as Ngai's work invests in questions of subjectivity and aesthetics, her attention to disgust's ability to "strengthen and police" the borders between subject and object seems relevant to the distance emphasized in *Cane* and *Midnight* as the northern narrators across both texts maintain a sense of separation from South, particularly through a repulsion that enforces an impenetrable distance, such as Fern's unreadability or the "forbidding mass" of Bonaventure Cemetery. Across both texts, the South must stand as something spatially, temporally, and ideologically distinct from the northern spaces that exist counter to the region.

In highlighting disgust's imperative to divide and distance, I find it to be a useful lens through which we can consider the South's relationship to the rest of the country, in which the region often exists as a separate entity from the United States' own narrative of democratic idealism. This separation is one that has been historically, economically, geographically, socially, and affectively enforced, beginning long before the secession and formation of the Confederacy during the Civil War.⁶³ In *Our South*, Jennifer Rae Greeson tracks this division, interrogating the ways that

⁶² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 335.

⁶³ The separation of the U.S. South from the rest of the country continues to be of interest to literary works. Both Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) and Catherine Lacey's *Biography of X* (2023) imagine an alternative future and history, respectively, in which the southern states fracture from the rest of the United States. *American War* ties this split to climate change, citing a fossil fuel ban as the catalyst for the secession of Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and South Carolina. The novel explains that, "In the South, an entire region decided to wage war again, to sever itself from the Union rather than stop using that illicit fuel responsible for so much of the country's misfortune" (El Akkad 18). Comparatively, *Biography of X* charts an alternative past, in which the Southern Territories close themselves off from the rest of the country following World War II, resulting in the rise of the South as a Christo-fascist state. While I am

the sharp lines drawn between the South and the rest of the United States serve the larger nation-building project. She contends that the South has always played a vital role in the way that the United States has been conceptualized, cast as the Other, the periphery to a northern center.

Greeson opens her argument with the assertion that:

A concept of the South is essential to the national identity of the United States of America. Wherever U.S. citizens were born, wherever we presently live, whatever our personal experience of the southeastern states—for all of us, knowing about our South is part of knowing what it means to be an American...What remains constant across U.S. history is the conceptual structure provided to us by our South: it is an internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole.⁶⁴

Greeson makes clear that the divisions that set the South apart from the rest of the country are the product of an ongoing project of meaning-making that is older than the United States itself. As Greeson marks a collectively-imagined South that exists within a larger cultural imaginary, her sustained emphasis on distance and separation invoke a similar structure to the borders between subject and object that define Ngai's configuration of disgust. The enforcing of boundaries—boundaries that both *Cane* and *Midnight* return to across their respective stories—underscores not only a cultural investment in understanding the South as the nation's Other but also reveals how such boundaries are often affectively sustained. These boundaries create a unique relationship between the South and the rest of the country: even as the South stands as an integral part of the country, it is a part that is held at a distance in larger discourses of the nation.

Mobilizing disgust as a lens through which this distance can be understood highlights the structural dynamics that define the role that the South has been made to play on the national stage. Miller emphasizes disgust's ability to cultivate hierarchies, explaining that it can “confirm others as

interested in thinking through how these imagined schisms, these echoes of the Confederacy, contribute to a larger cultural narrative about the region, such a detour takes us beyond the scope of this chapter. I mention these texts here to highlight that the drawing of borders between the South and the rest of the United States is an ongoing project that exists within both our cultural and literary imaginations.

⁶⁴ Greeson, 1.

belonging to a lower status and thus in the zero-sum game of rank necessarily define oneself as higher.”⁶⁵ This ranking further solidifies the boundaries that Ngai highlights, and when applied to the relationship between the South and the United States, this hierarchy becomes clear. As Greeson argues: “*North* and *South* are foundationally hierarchical terms: rather than denoting an equally weighted, descriptive binary, ‘North’ serves as center and norm, while ‘South’ stands as deviation.”⁶⁶ In the “zero-sum game of rank” that Miller suggests, the separation between North and South (as well as between region and nation) ultimately stratifies. And as forces of compulsion and repulsion permeate both *Cane* and *Midnight*, this stratification plays a crucial role in the respective Souths that are replicated for their audiences.

More seems to be at stake in this cultural and ideological stratification—an issue that Leigh Anne Duck takes up in *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, where she sketches the prevalence and formation of the “backward South” in the twentieth century. As she outlines:

While associating the nation with democracy and change and the region with racism and tradition, twentieth-century U.S. nationalism repeatedly celebrated the latter paradigm, failing either to address its incongruity with liberalism or to analyze the desires that rendered this restrictive model of collectivity attractive to so many national audiences. Concomitantly, when national discourse has acknowledged the conflict between southern conservatism and national democracy, it has typically done so in ways that localize this conflict—a “backward South” and a modern or “enlightened nation”; such models fail to incorporate a conceptual structure for assessing an ongoing conflict between prominent cultural and political models of national affiliation. Nowhere has this pattern been more apparent and destructive than in political and legal representations of southern racial segregation, which argued that apartheid was a necessary concession to a backward culture. These formulations disavowed both the contemporaneity of the South with the larger nation and the presence of apartheid in other areas of the country.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Miller, x.

⁶⁶ Greeson, 12.

⁶⁷ Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 3.

Duck emphasizes the kind of narrative purpose that Greeson suggests, making clear that a “backward South” that stands as the unwieldy and ungovernable center of racism and failures of progress allows the nation itself to offload such problems. Detached from the incongruencies and foundational injustices that run antithetical to any project of liberation and justice, the United States is able to present itself as the beacon of progress in and for the world. In localizing the prevalence of white supremacy—of diagnosing it as part of a larger problem of southern conservatism—the nation itself can more fully embrace a narrative of democracy and enlightenment.⁶⁸ Whether or not the South was the sole site of segregation in the United States (and, as Duck makes clear, it was not) does not quite matter. What matters instead is the distillation of two distinct identities for both region and nation, identities that are endlessly reifying each other within the cultural narratives of the United States.

Duck suggests that these identities are maintained through temporal means. Marked as the regional embodiment of conservatism and tradition, the South stands out of sync with the progressive temporality that governs the rest of the country.⁶⁹ Such temporal incongruity also defines the Souths of both *Cane* and *Midnight*, acting as a significant point of the non-southern writers’ and narrators’ affective engagement with the region. For Toomer, the South exists as the originary site of Black life in the U.S., and the longing for the folk culture in rural Georgia is felt within the alienated Black communities in the North as well as within the northern narrators who

⁶⁸ While Duck’s focus in *The Nation’s Region* largely revolves around issues of race during Jim Crow-era segregation, the language of the South as a kind of “problem” for the nation as a whole has been circulated across other contexts, such as in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s assertion that “the South presents right now the nation’s number one economic problem” in 1938.

⁶⁹ Per Duck: “Increasingly, after the Civil War, the dominant national time was understood to be that of capitalist modernity—a linear, progressive temporality allowing new mobility and opportunity; thus the United States was a represented chiefly as an administrative or economic unit rather than a collective based on shared customs. This modern national ‘chronotype,’ or collection of temporally coded traits, was propositioned against those of regional cultures, which were understood to be shaped by tradition” (5).

cross regional borders. In *Midnight*, Berendt's attraction to Savannah is constantly tied to its resistance to change, to his assertion that he had found in the city a fragment of the "Old South."

As the North writes the South, Toomer and Berendt distill compulsion and repulsion into the titular geographies of each text, making legible the versions of southern life that they are invested in presenting and perpetuating. As Toomer and Berendt mediate these attachments (as well as these detachments to the South), they highlight a fascination with the region, but it is not a fascination to which they (nor their characters) can belong; instead, it is a fascination motivated by their externalization to the region, a fascination that can ultimately be disavowed through their distance and estrangement. Moreover, even as both texts stem from a northern perspective that is both compelled and repelled, they also reveal that such feelings are shaped by the identities, particularly the races, of their respective authors. Even as Toomer presents a static, lyricized version of rural Georgia, part of the text is haunted by the images of exploited labor and bodily violence that are signified by the cane fields that populate it. However, while *Cane* opens with this particular version of the South, part of the text's affective project seems to be a collapse of this version, as the problems of racism that affect the South transcend regional borders in the second section.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Berendt's Savannah conjures a romanticized South that still comprises recognizable archetypes and a segregated society. Even as Berendt reveals, he pointedly never *belongs*, even as his race, gender, and class afford him unlimited mobility across the different strata of Savannah. Within both *Cane* and *Midnight*, the authors participate in the collective, cultural work of creating the South—ideologically, affectively, and geographically—as they cultivate a physical representation of the region that mirrors their own attachments and ideals of it.

⁷⁰ In "Kabnis," *Cane*'s final section, a similar consideration of the relationship between the North and South appears. In a conversation between the northern Kabnis and two of his southern friends, he says: "Its diff—that is, theres lots of northern exaggeration about the South. It's not half the terror they picture it. Things are not half bad, as one could easily figure out for himself. Without ever crossing the Mason and Dixie line: all these people wouldn't stay down here, especially the rich, the ones that could easily leave, if conditions were so mighty bad" (86-87).

Ultimately, this role that the South plays—the backward region, the Other, a repository for national shame and sins—may be so deeply ingrained that there is no return from the affects that it inspires. But what ultimately comes from the hierarchies that stem from being an object of cultural disgust and disavowal? In his introduction to *Creating and Consuming the American South*, Martyn Bone underscores that “...the ways in which ideas and stories about ‘the South’ and ‘southernness’ have social and material effects that register on various local, regional, national, and transnational scales.”⁷¹ As Bone contends, the way that the South is represented transcends the imaginary in which it exists, permeating the discursive, the political, and the societal.

Even in recent events, feelings of disgust toward the region manifest again and again, such as in the 2024 presidential election where the region’s overwhelming majority vote for Donald Trump led to a wave of online critique and condemnation.⁷² Such disavowal further perpetuates the cultural ideal of the South and allows the stratification that stems from such repulsion to extend to the people that populate the region, many of whom are exceedingly vulnerable and disenfranchised. As this chapter and dissertation contend, affective attachments are continually (and often unconsciously) upholding structures of power that sow division and alienation, that localize problems that are widespread, often to the detriment of those most affected. Literature, in its replications and articulations, plays its own role in the way that such affective attachments are sustained, and it only through mapping and unpacking them that we may see how tightly they have grasped us.

⁷¹ Martyn Bone, “Old/New/Post/Real/Global/No South: Paradigms and Scales,” in *Creating and Consuming the American South*, eds. Martyn Bone, Brian Ward, and William A. Link (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 1.

⁷² Most of the time this kind of online disavowal imagines the natural disasters that plague the South, which are often a result of climate change and failed political policy, as a punishment for the region’s “backwardness.” As one user wrote: “Texas, Louisiana, and Florida won’t get one prayer out of me next hurricane season #Election2024.” Similarly, another user suggested that “THE SOUTH DESERVES HURRICANES AND FLOODS.”

IV.

**“Everything south of the levee’s going under”:
Fractured Feeling in a Climate-Catastrophized South**

In *An Easy Place/To Die*, Vincent A. Cellucci tethers his collection of poems to the city of New Orleans in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina. The final poem, “Causeway,” acts as a culmination of the devastation that he witnessed—formally consisting of fragmented lines and stanzas that deny any sense of completion or cohesion, all while weaving in and out of New Orleans in the late summer months of 2005. The poem seems insistent on its own strategic incomprehensibility and alienation, which marks it paradoxically as a product of a particular moment in history as well as something that is unmoored in the face of impending and continuous catastrophe, of which Katrina was only a single entry. Through this lyrical intervention, Cellucci marks the impact of a specific disaster on a certain place, while also negotiating such a disaster’s role in a larger history of environmental, apocalyptic catastrophe.

This particular aim of “Causeway” crystallizes into a stanza that consists of a timeline beginning with the date of Katrina’s landfall:

8-29-05
06
07
08 (Gustav)
09
10 (BP Oil Leak in Gulf)¹

This collection of dates constructs a five-year genealogy that maps different disasters along the gulf of the southern United States—disasters that have, more precisely, wrecked Louisiana’s coast, disasters that are both natural and the product of human activity. Cellucci’s recall of this recent history of catastrophe seems to construct a stable, linear timeline. The dates march forward,

¹ Vincent A. Cellucci, *An Easy Place / To Die* (Baltimore: CityLit Press, 2011), 70.

unceasingly, as the poem catalogs Louisiana's devastation. In the following stanza, however, this stable temporality shifts into a more speculative realm:

*Imagine a City with no Children
not a single Child. cried played
walked below hunched adults
didn't hold her hand*²

The poem, which was just so rooted in space and time, detaches, as Cellucci brings the reader to an unnamed City that may or may not exist in both the past and the future. The City that Cellucci conjures is a doomed one, cast outside of a normative, reproductive futurity. In the movement between these two stanzas, New Orleans both *is* and *isn't*, grounded in linearity while also reimagined into a timeline that does not progress toward any kind of recognizable future.

Furthermore, for Cellucci, the wasteland that Katrina made of New Orleans acts as a precursor to other climate concerns. Throughout the poem, he invokes images of snow in the city: “pencil sketch resolution yet to vote not on: south in snowflakes / deliver flavored mud and moon”; “old crickets / forgotten. because it doesn’t snow here / why I say it does.”³ Through later mentions of uptown’s Audubon Park and the Mississippi River, the final stanza of “Causeway” places this snow-based climate instability squarely in New Orleans, eventually asserting that “snow makes sense.”⁴ The poem is happening across time and all at once as Cellucci casts Louisiana into an unsure future, caught within the constellation of catastrophes worsened by the irrevocable damage of climate change, as the southern coast’s temporal instability plays out in a hyperbolic pageant.

This relationship between poetry, temporality, and ecocritical writing has been well-documented, most recently in Sonya Posmentier’s *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of*

² Ibid., 70.

³ Ibid., 64, 67.

⁴ Ibid., 71. The stanza: “Sati sequins on Audubon’s grass / incorporating / words fresh kudzu electricity for a sec / snow makes sense / 3 moonlit summers / assure the exhausting / breath of the Mississippi / will not extinguish—”

Modern Black Literature (2017) and Min Hyoung Song's *Climate Lyricism* (2022). In both Posmentier's and Song's texts, the lyric offers a spatio-temporal distortion that reconfigures the ecological and historical imaginations of the Anthropocene—a formalization of the unstable, nonlinear temporalities wrought by our era of environmental precarity.⁵ Further, these dis-synchronous recognitions of time matter when we turn our attention to a climate-catastrophized South. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the South's relationship to (white) nostalgia has fostered an intimate relationship with the past—with the process of turning back through history, with romanticizing and (re)imagining what has been. This kind of nostalgic relationship with the past depends on a linear understanding of time that prioritizes white experiences and histories, rejecting any acknowledgment of the ways that the past manifests and persists into the present. I have already considered how such a temporal reflection eclipses Black southern experiences, but as both Song and Posmentier make clear, such teleological frames of time also obfuscate our ability to critically consider climate change and catastrophe. In this chapter, I focus specifically on south Louisiana, whose tattered coastline has been caught between the immediate violence of worsening natural disasters and the slower violence (to cite the well-worn phrase from Rob Nixon) of coastal erosion, environmental racism, and economic blackmail. Through these violences, the ecological intersects with the social, resulting in mass displacement, federal abandonment, and biopolitical impacts.

What feelings stem from living in a doomed place—from calling something impermanent “home?” How do those with deep attachments to this region navigate the anxiety and resignation that we typically associate with the Anthropocene—affects that stall, halt, and negate any possible futurity? And perhaps most importantly, how do we make space for feelings that prioritize the lived experiences of those on the frontlines of climate change in the United States? In beginning this

⁵ Per Song: “Climate change operates in a temporality that is not synchronous with human habits of thinking about time and in a space that is not commensurate with human inhabitation. It is occurring everywhere and nowhere in particular and in both short durations and impossibly long expanses of time” (3)

chapter with Cellucci's "Causeway," I want to bring to the fore the value of poetics in giving shape and language to the complex interplay of feeling, time, and space as it pertains to the U.S. South, which has already felt the hot grasp of environmental catastrophe. Building on the work of both Song and Posmentier, I see an opportunity to reimagine the formal and affective stakes of representing catastrophe—a chance to navigate between grim realism and hopeful optimism in the era of climate change and recognize the creative work that is felt in aspirations of futurity.

In *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, Olúfemi O. Táíwò makes clear these different registers through which an alternative future can come to fruition. He ends his development of a constructive political approach by highlighting the types of work that come from imagining, planning, and building a new world.⁶ Part of this work takes place on the emotional plane, as he suggests that "we can neither plan nor build a better world without collectively cultivating diverse kinds of moral and emotional discipline."⁷ Any critical work that considers the impact of climate change, whether locally, nationally, or globally, should be interested in this project of building a better world, and this project is what motivates and informs the stakes of my work in this chapter. I am interested in thinking through the kind of emotional discipline that Táíwò highlights here, in naming the affects that are necessary in facilitating and carrying out a local, constructive approach that attempts to find solutions for surviving the Anthropocene within the communities that are already beginning the process of building a new world. To such an end, I turn with both hope and trepidation to the southern coast of Louisiana—in both real and fictional geographies.

⁶ As Táíwò defines: "A constructive approach to politics involves building power through institutions and networks. Some of these operate apart from or in the margins of the ore dominant global institutions: like collective informal economic and mutual aid practices that Black peoples and others have practiced continuously over the past centuries" (95). Later in the same chapter, he also clarifies that "a constructive approach to politics calls for us to build power expansively, across all aspects of social life" (98).

⁷ Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 102.

These threads of feeling, catastrophe, temporality, and futurity tangle messily in Benh Zeitlin's 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as the environmental, economic, and social disasters of the Anthropocene are laid bare through the story of Hushpuppy, her father Wink, and their home on the Isle de Charles Doucet, which is affectionately (and troublingly) called the Bathtub throughout the film. The Isle de Charles Doucet is based on the Isle de Jean Charles, a small strip of land in Terrebonne Parish off the ragged coast of Louisiana, about eighty miles south of New Orleans. Although the film's mythic qualities seem to suspend it outside of the specificities of place and time, *Beasts* was filmed in Terrebonne Parish, geographically transposing a fictional South onto the real thing. Moreover, the majority of the cast were locals from New Orleans—the diegetic space is populated by the very Louisianians most familiar with the all-too-real devastation wrought by ecological precarity. In tracing this gnarled relationship between a real and fictional South, I suggest that the film's complex negotiation between a real and fictive South has a specific political payoff; it grants itself latitude to both depict actually-existing conditions and posit potential futures. Specifically, I examine the way that the film attempts to convey an alternate pantheon of emotions in a world that faces its own end.⁸

Furthermore, in using *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as the focal text for this chapter, I want to establish an alternate mode of reading the film that recoups this alternative affective epistemology—a mode that turns to the lyric as a formalization of these problematics of feeling, temporality, and space as they pertain to ecological catastrophe. As I trace the ways that *Beasts* expresses its catalog of emotions that stem from the precarity of the Bathtub and its residents, I mobilize a critical

⁸ Sonya Posmentier suggests that “catastrophe brings to the fore...crises of preservation” (10). In the South, these crises are faced over and over again—decisions are repeatedly made regarding whose worlds are worth preserving. In such a proliferation of catastrophe, emotions defined by futurity, no longer seem to suffice. Instead, they suspend and delay, unable to imagine, unable to act, unable to build the better world necessitated by a perpetually-apocalyptic present. Part of my work here depends on uncovering alternate emotional registers that allow for acknowledging the possibility of this kind of building, that detach us from our suspension and suggest a new epistemology of emotion that facilitates the work needed to survive.

examination of *Beasts* through the lens of the lyric, calling attention to the language used in the film's often-strange dialogue as well as in Hushpuppy's addresses to the audience through voiceovers that disrupt that progression of the film's narrative. Simply, I posit that a lyrical reading of the film unlocks not only a more complex emotional ethos but also a way of imagining and affecting the creative work implicit in engaging and building a better world. "Building" is key here; emotion is always deeply and intimately intertwined with capacities for action, and I strive to foreground both the feelings that emerge from sites of climate catastrophe, as well as the attachments to making, organizing, and living on. By examining emotions through lyric time and form, we might be able to unstick the affects of the Anthropocene and imagine a new affective geography that underlies the ability to work towards a better world.

Lyrical Capacities

Before proceeding with the work of this chapter, I need to address the thorny question of the lyric. To help do so, I want to first highlight Hushpuppy's opening voiceover. These opening lines follow several expository shots of Hushpuppy's interactions with the animals that surround the trailer where she lives alone, which notably stands high above the ground, lofted by oil drums:

All the time, everywhere, everything's organs be beatin' and squirtin' and talkin' to each other in ways I can't understand. Mosta the time they probably just sayin' "I'm hungry," or "I gotta poop," but sometimes they talkin' in codes.⁹

These first lines of the film immediately mark a particular plane of communication between Hushpuppy and the audience, as her voiceovers enter what I will provisionally call a "lyrical" register that prioritizes not only her specific point-of-view but also her ability to make sense of the world around her and articulate an epistemology that has been notably shaped by the environment in which she exists. These voiceovers rupture their scenes with an atemporal reflection that disturbs

⁹ Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, film script, (2005): <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Beasts-of-the-Southern-Wild.html>, 3.

the linear timeline of narrative and exists within an alternative register to other moments of speech within the film. Hushpuppy's lyrics serve to both philosophize the events of the film and cultivate a space through which she can engage the audience directly to convey her sensorial engagement with the world. In affective terms, the voiceovers allow for an (either direct or indirect) articulation of how she feels within the modes of relations generated by this world.

At first glance, we might not associate Hushpuppy's words with our typical understanding of the lyric, but a number of recent critics have authorized an expanded definition I want to think through here. However, I do so at the risk of falling into the trap that Virginia Jackson refers to as "lyricization"—a conflation of the lyric with poetry and poetic elements that ultimately detaches the lyric from the specific historical conventions of genre.¹⁰ This collapse of the boundaries between lyric and poetry has ultimately resulted in the lyric's transition into a capacious form that has been abstracted into a catch-all for the figurative—into an amorphous model for naming that which goes beyond the signification of language, subsuming all the different metrics through which meaning is made. As Jackson, with co-editor Yopie Prins, writes in *The Lyric Theory Reader*: "Perhaps the lyric has become so difficult to define because we need it to be blurry around the edges, to remain capacious enough to include all kinds of verse and all kinds of ideas about what poetry should be."¹¹ These blurred boundaries of the lyric reveal a demand placed upon it, a persistent belief that the lyric can *do* something—that it can affect and be affected by the readers and environment that it engages.¹²

¹⁰ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

¹¹ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 1.

¹² Much of the critical work done on the lyric often repeats similar formal conventions, but often default to a personifying, metaphorical mode of discussing the lyric. To illustrate what I mean by this, I turn to a moment in Song's *Climate Lyricism* when he explains his interest in the lyric: "I am nevertheless drawn to the lyric...because it directs attention not only to what is there. It sees what is there and something else besides" (41). The lyric's ability to *see* in Song's depiction suggests an active form that reaches beyond the ways in which we might think about genre and form. Important to Song's argument and use of the lyric is this personified link between the lyric and the humanity as the lyric itself quite literally takes on a life of its own. Song is not the only theorist to see such activity as characteristic of the lyric.

Across the works of Jackson and other theorists of the lyric, there exists a standard core of formal qualities of the lyric which underscore it as a compressed, dialogical form of writing that invests in the relationship between the speaker's expression and the audience's absorption.¹³ With each writer who undertakes a study of the lyric, these qualities are expanded upon, but their crux remains the same. In this chapter, I highlight these definitional expansions in Song's *Climate Lyricism* and Posmentier's *Cultivation and Catastrophe* in particular because both texts apply the lyric's capacities for meaning-making to matters of ecology, to the relationship between the human and more-than-human world—the relationship that is at the center of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Furthermore, in both authors' configurations of the lyric, there lies an understated link between the lyric and feeling that requires further development, not only in regard to my own critical work but in the ways that we frame the affective stakes of expression in the era of the Anthropocene.

In *Climate Lyricism*, Song turns to economies of attention and relation that engage a collective understanding of and communication within the climate-catastrophized world. He attends to the formal qualities of the lyric that are embroiled not only in the “careful observation of what is observable in language,” but in techniques of communication between the speaker and the audience.¹⁴ Within these more conversational attributes, Song contends that there lies a way of referencing climate change that might actually allow for more of a shared emotional collectivity, as he writes of an understanding of the lyric that “is not concerned with the spotlighting of an individual ‘I’ or the exploration of a profound psychic interior, with which the lyric is often

As T.J. Clark writes in *Farewell to an Idea*: “By ‘lyric’ I mean the illusion in an artwork of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own” (401, cited in Jackson *DM* 236). In this equation, content and form collapse and collate as the lyric conflates into both the expression of an individual perspective’s “laying claim to a world of its own” and the very capacity to lay such a claim at all. Perhaps the lyric’s capaciousness—its tendency to unfold into what Virginia Jackson calls “a heterogeneous collage”—relates not only to the dehistoricization that Jackson discusses in *Dickinson’s Misery*, but also the abstractions, personifications, and metaphors to which we seem to default in critical examinations of the form. Ultimately, our writing on the lyric has tangled it so intimately with the humanity’s abilities to *do*, to *feel*, to *affect* that in any effort to unknot the threats seems fruitless.

¹³ See essays in *The Lyric Theory Reader* and Tom Bristow’s *The Anthropocene Lyric* (2015).

¹⁴ Min Hyoung Song, *Climate Lyricism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 4.

associated, but focuses instead on the space between a first-person speaker and a second-person addressee.”¹⁵ For Song, the form of the lyric fosters a way of thinking through relationality as he spatializes the lyric’s form of address. Song maps a space that collapses the individual “I” in favor of collectivity and solidarity, as both speaker and audience must work in tandem to construct meaning via the very form of the lyric itself. Placing Song’s understanding of such lyrical capabilities in conversation with Táíwò’s constructive paradigm, I suggest that lyrical reading mirrors a kind of building project that is based on recognition between speaker and audience. In the precarious world of the Bathtub in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, this recognition by way of the lyric offers another mode through which we can understand the film, a mode that takes seriously Hushpuppy’s engagement with and understanding of her rapidly-disappearing world.

The relationship between Hushpuppy and the Bathtub can be further atomized by Posmentier’s critical work in *Cultivation and Catastrophe*. Posmentier’s attention to the lyric adds another dimension to the conversational and relational qualities that Song highlights, emphasizing the ecological nature of the lyric form. As she contends:

I name such spaces of bounded aesthetic innovation “lyric ecologies,” establishing a relationship between lyric and ecology on the level of both content and form. I am interested in the way poems recount, contain, and respond to ecological experience—by which I mean that relationships between human and nonhuman organisms and the management and use of natural and agricultural resources...I am also interested in lyrics as ecological: that is, how poems sometimes mimic or approximate organic forms and processes often associated with enclosure, preservation, self-sustainability, and internal relation, forms that can exceed their own boundaries, and that may in turn yield new models for social and ecological relation.¹⁶

If Song is emphasizing the space that the lyric opens up between speaker and audience in order to consider the consequences of such models of relation, Posmentier is questioning the nature of such a space, underscoring the ecological representation that is inherent in the lyrical form. In other

¹⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁶ Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivations and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 3-4.

words, she suggests that the spaces opened by lyrics cultivate their own ecologies between speaker, audience, and environment. A similar ecology also can be found in *Beasts* as the film uses voiceover to formalize a relationship between Hushpuppy, her audience, and the shifting landscapes of the Bathtub.

Furthermore, for Posmentier, the lyric's capaciousness applies to both form and temporality. She explains that her lyric ecologies abound not only in poems but also in the relationship between poetry and other modes of conveying one's lived and felt experiences. Like Song, Posmentier posits the ways in which the lyric moves away from linearity to express a more complicated understanding of the temporalities impacted by the relationship between humanity and its surrounding environments.¹⁷ As she writes: "This book posits a theory of lyric time that encompasses both historical continuity and the ruptured time of what Édouard Glissant calls 'nonhistory,' the time fractured by the slave trade and its legacy."¹⁸ For Posmentier, the lyric can encompass multiple temporal forms and play with and within the relationship between linearity and rupture. While Posmentier centers her work on the way that such temporalities unspool in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent plantation slavery in the Americas, this unstable relationship between progression and disruption—between the linear and the fractured—also echoes across the fraught temporalities of the Anthropocene. Posmentier makes clear that such lyric time may have the capacity to encapsulate the distortions made legible by climate change.¹⁹

¹⁷ As a note, Posmentier's work is, at its core, a study of the fraught relationship between Black diasporic communities and linear history, and the ways that the lyric formalizes an alternative mode through which Black history can be expressed and experienced beyond progressive, narrative-based models. This emphasis on race informs both Posmentier's archive and critical engagement with lyric theory. In mobilizing Posmentier's lyric theory, I do not want to divide her work from its critical onus, but I do want to make clear the ways in which Posmentier expands and complicates typical models of understanding the lyric.

¹⁸ Posmentier, 5.

¹⁹ To be clear: I do not think the different registers of nonhistory and ruptured temporalities between my work in this chapter and Posmentier's work in *Cultivation and Catastrophe* are separate. These temporalities are quite intimately intertwined as consequences of hegemonic global systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism.

Posmentier mentions a final formal quality of the lyric that is of interest to my critical work in this chapter: “As a form that mediates between the musical and the textual, lyric poetry also indexes that which is extraliterary, including both sonic and environmental experience.”²⁰ This definitional work mirrors her earlier assertion that the lyric offers “forms that can exceed their own boundaries.” This question of excess is an important one, and I would argue that what exceeds the bounds of form—or what is eternally present in questions of language and representation—is the unshakable presence of affect. The relationship between lyric and affect is one that seems subconsciously central in the ways that the lyric is mobilized (particularly the emphasis on expression) but has yet to be fully discussed in critical circles.²¹

And so, for the purpose of this chapter, I risk indulging in the capaciousness of the lyric form, a capaciousness only further stoked by the formal, temporal, ecological, and affective aspects of the lyric that Song and Posmentier emphasize. Further, the blurred boundaries of the lyric make it the ideal form through which we can attempt to give shape to the fractured temporalities and feelings that abound in the climate-catastrophized South at the center of my work here. As climate disaster heralds the end of one particular world and the shift to another—a shift that unmoors us from our defining spaces and temporalities—the lyric’s formal plasticity ultimately models meaning-making in a way that understands the collapse of arbitrary boundaries between human and nonhuman, teleology and rupture, end and beginning, old and new.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹ Tom Bristow is one of the only critics to attempt to draw out this relationship between lyric form and affect. In *The Anthropocene Lyric*, he explains the formal elements of the lyric that carve out space for attention to the affective: “Apostrophe (turning away from the world to address an abstract idea) and appeasement (by the human, of the other ‘more-than-human’ world) are reconceived within contemporary nature poetry...to the extent that they establish new terms for the elegy and the ode: plaintiveness for what has been forgotten and what can be praised, lost worlds to be lamented and remembered, and the emotional cost of such modes of expression. This ecological plaint, witness to our various modes of feeling, isolates moments of human experiences and moments in the lyric with particular contemporary significance” (4). While Bristow is definitely guilty of lyricization here, he still makes concrete the affective stakes intrinsic in lyrical modes of expression. He further gestures toward the expansion of other modes of affective engagement as endemic to the lyric form, suggesting that in thinking or reading lyrically, we might move past our current pantheon of inert and individual catastrophic feelings.

As the lyric signifies the affective and imaginative work that has become necessary in the face of ecological collapse, it also offers key opportunities through which we can approach *Beasts*. At its core, lyrical reading directs our attention to specific conventions of language and form at play in *Beasts* to convey the film's snarl of temporal, affective, and ecological concerns. Beyond lyric's prioritization of expression, my use of the lyric in this chapter also depends upon the form's uses of personification, apostrophe, and metaphor to make sense of the ways that Hushpuppy and her surrounding community members use the play of language to metabolize their relationships to each other, the very-alive world of the Bathtub, and the disaster that signifies the end of their world. Moreover, in my use of this kind of lyrical reading to examine film rather than poetry, I am positioning the film as externalizing what Song explains as "what is observable in language" through its rich interplay of visual, sonic, and linguistic elements that seek to express the lived experiences of Hushpuppy at the intersection of social and ecological catastrophe.

As such, I am using *Beasts* to further expand the almost-overwhelming capacities of the lyric to represent not only the relations between the human and non-human world (as well as the complex relationships between human and human) but also the complicated matrix of feeling that plays a role in what Posmentier refers to as "new models for social and ecological relation." I am interested in thinking through what the lyric makes accessible in terms of emotion, in thinking through the way that it plays with form, time, and experience to enact new ways of making such feelings collective, of sharing them across a community.

We can now return to the voiceover with which I began. As Song and Posmentier make clear, the lyric can slip through our usual poetic forms. If recognizing the lyric largely revolves around formal qualities of first-person speakers, compression of content, and atypical and nonteleological temporalities, we can trace those through much of the dialogue in *Beasts*.

Furthermore, these lines establish Hushpuppy immediately within a network among the more-than-human world as she attempts a translation of the “codes” of the animals that persist not only in her small sliver of the world but outside of it. Tracing this network across a temporal expanse (“All the time, everywhere, everything...”), Hushpuppy speaks in a way that strives to transcend the limitations across both geographies and species. Organs become synecdoches of different beings as she unites the human and nonhuman through the functions of bodies. She underscores the significance of the ordinary, the everyday—those things that are always happening that she may or may not be privy to. In her bodily litany, she rejects any possibility of human exceptionalism, making clear in this speech to her audience that her understanding of the world is one predicated on a networked, anti-hierarchical engagement with the environs that cultivate it.

Critical Ecologies

My insistence on this new way to critically engage *Beasts* stems from my own attempt to navigate the two polarized camps of thought that the film has inspired across both public and academic critical landscapes. Released to much acclaim in 2012, *Beasts* was lauded by many critics as a celebration of self-sufficiency, highlighting the film’s specific capacity for joy that manifests through the raucous joie de vivre of the Bathtub’s eclectic residents.²² In his review for *The New Yorker*, David Denby writes:

...these folks live like outlaws without committing any crimes. When they need food, they catch shrimp and crab, and, as far as we can see, barter and share the few scavenged goods they have. They drink and party a great deal, young and old, black and white together. Welcome to post-prosperity America. “Beasts” is the first classic of the Long Recession, and, surprise!—it’s a joyous movie.²³

²² In his *New York Times* review, A. O. Scott calls the film a “blast of sheer, improbable joy,” while *The Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw refers to it as a “superbly energetic vision of climate catastrophe.”

²³ David Denby, “Beasts of the Southern Wild,” *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/beasts-of-the-southern-wild>.

There is much to say about Denby's depiction of *Beasts*, but I want to stress his suggestion that the social consequences of "post-prosperity America" are an erasure of demarcations of difference, such as race, gender, and class.²⁴ Few reviews of the film seem interested in questions of race—beyond observing the film's own lack of attention to the topic—despite the Black protagonists at the center of it. Even Benh Zeitlin remarked that the Bathtub is a place where "no one sees race," suggesting instead that it should be understood as an egalitarian utopia.²⁵

It is Zeitlin's steadfast belief in and portrayal of such utopian ideals that comes into direct contrast with the other camp of responses to this film: those who take umbrage with the film's insistence on racial blindness and embrace of destitution-as-independence. In her 2012 essay on the film, bell hooks critiques the film's failure to engage in the racial politics that it so explicitly enters, highlighting that "no race talk, no racial discourse disturbs the peace."²⁶ hooks is not the only

²⁴ Such moves praising the community at the center of *Beasts* also occur in more academic work. In her contribution to the collection of essays entitled *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies*, scholar Sarah E. MacFarland ends her article with: "So while the resilience seen in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and literature of the US South might be a model for us all, first we have to accept the ecological collapse and the grief that accompanies such massive loss also offers choices: to tell stories, to celebrate together, to support each other or to climb on the heads of neighbors while the rest of the world drowns" (198).

²⁵ Jeremy Butman, "'Beasts of the Southern Wild' Director: Louisiana is a Dangerous Utopia," *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/06/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-director-louisiana-is-a-dangerous-utopia/259009/>. Per Zeitlin: "The Bathtub is a statement, for sure. But to me, within the context of the movie, it's a statement that this is utopia. That's what the movie tells you, and that's what the characters tell you, and that's what I'm trying to say with it. This is the greatest place you could ever live and that you could fight and die for. I want audiences that come from places that are completely the opposite of that to look at this and be like, 'Wow, if these things didn't divide me from everyone around me, I would have this incredible freedom and I would fight for this place.'" Yet, Zeitlin's belief in a utopia completely detached from race ignores the racial legacy implicit in the film's very title, which notably doesn't repeat the title of the play it is based on. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is a loaded title, poetic and mythical enough to allude to the world within the movie. It comes from a Doris Betts short story that is radically different from the film—a short story about the fetishization of a Black man by a white housewife who imagines herself as his sex slave. In her essay, bell hooks calls Betts's story "one of the most sexist and racist representations of black masculinity in contemporary southern literature." If we go even further back in literary history, the phrase "southern wild" can be traced to William Blake's 1789 poem "The Little Black Boy," in which the Black speaker begins the poem by proclaiming: "My mother bore me in the southern wild, / And I am black, but O! my soul is white." All this to say, despite Zeitlin's protests to the contrary, his film is intrinsically concerned with and entangled with questions of race.

²⁶ bell hooks, "No Love in the Wild." *NewBlackMan (in Exile)*, (2012): <https://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html>. Much of hooks's critique of the film hinges on the troubling relationship between Hushpuppy and Wink: "Wink teaches his daughter showing emotions is a sign of weakness, that she must be tough... At times Wink is affectionate and caring towards his child but rage always engulfs their brief bittersweet positive encounters. Engaged in brutal acts of repressing emotions or acting them out, Wink is a hard man without any boundaries."

academic unsettled by the film's belief in its own utopia. In her essay on *Beasts*, Christina Sharpe also emphasizes the troubling implications of the role Hushpuppy plays throughout the movie, particularly as a key figure of climate resistance:

If one sees this film primarily as a way to visualize *resistance* to climate disaster then that requires that one have no desire to alleviate Hushpuppy's devastation; have no desire to care for a child who says, "I can count the times I been lifted on two fingers."...The film *needs* black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence, the violence of extreme poverty, flooding, the violence of a six-year old girl living in her own ramshackle house with no mother or father, be inspiring and not tragic? How else could it "just be" with no backstory, no explanation?²⁷

Both hooks and Sharpe make clear that to see *Beasts* solely as a celebration (or as a utopia) is to ignore the racial and economic undertones upon which it relies. Similarly, while Benh Zeitlin may revel in the self-sufficiency prized by south Louisiana, he fails to acknowledge that this self-sufficiency has been necessitated by policy failures on both a state and federal level—that the affects of remarkable joy and resilience in these communities are punctuated by shortened lifespans and the slow violence of environmental injustice.²⁸ Many of *Beasts*'s limitations are woven into the very fabric of its construction, into the epistemology that imagined it. In my reading of the film, I do not intend to disregard or ignore such limitations, but I am instead interested in using both lyric and affect theories to uncover other critical approaches that might allow for a further examination of the emotions that occur at the intersection of studying both the South and the Anthropocene—an intersection that *Beasts*, more than any other film in the last fifteen years, has brought to the forefront of the public imagination. The film may still provide a place to begin our considerations of futurity and feeling in the era of climate disaster, to make legible the alternate registers of feeling that

²⁷ Sharpe, Christina, "The Romance of Precarity I," *Social Text Online*, (2013): <https://socialtextjournal.org/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-the-romance-of-precarity-i/>.

²⁸ From *The Atlantic* interview with Zeitlin: "When you go down there, there is, without any money, way more fun and joy happening in South Louisiana than there is in New York City. There are people out there with no money at all, no job going to the water and eating what would be a \$300 meal for lunch, like 500 crabs on the table. It's this decadent experience where you don't need money to have a feast every night and to celebrate. That is definitely something that I'm trying to glorify in the film...I'm not dealing with the harsh realities, but that's not the idea. The idea is the good parts of it. And it's not a piece of realism, so I don't have to deal with the bad parts of it" (Butman).

more robustly consider the relationship between southerners on the coast, their endangered homes, and the felt impacts of climate catastrophe.

“We got feeling!”

A more infamous scene in *Beasts* underscores this relationship between affect and land in the community of the of the Bathtub. At a crab boil celebrating the lives of those killed in the storm that floods their community, Wink stops Hushpuppy from opening up a crab with a knife and tells her that instead, she has to “Beast it.”²⁹ In this context, beasting means tearing the crab’s shell open with your hands and sucking out the meat inside. After Hushpuppy successfully beasts her crab, she stands on the table to meet her father’s eyes and flexes her biceps to the cheering of the other residents of the Bathtub. Wink opens his arms wide and tells her “You see what kind of family we got? We got feeling!”³⁰ Yet, even as this proclamation valorizes life in the Bathtub, what that feeling entails and how it is articulated requires further extrapolation.

Feeling plays an important role in *Beasts*’s ethos. At its core, the movie is largely about grief from a child’s perspective—a child who longs for her absent mother as she watches her (abusive and alcoholic) father slowly die, all while her home is lost to catastrophe. The storyline at the core of *Beasts* is adapted from *Juicy and Delicious* by Lucy Alibar, who wrote the play in her own grief for her dying father and cast her Hushpuppy as a ten-year-old white boy to detach her grief from herself and distill it into something separate and tangible.³¹ On the screen, a similar distillation seems to

²⁹ Alibar and Zeitlin, 37. In her review of the film, bell hooks calls this “one of the most disturbing scenes in the film [that] highlights Wink’s dominance and control over everyone, especially Hushpuppy.”

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ In the Author’s Note, Alibar addresses the transgendered casting: “I’ll also say that it was important for me, at the time of writing it, to have it not be a play about me. The best way I knew to do that was to make Hushpuppy a boy. I’ve chosen to leave Hushpuppy a boy in the text, but I’d be very interested and open to seeing this character as a little girl.” The gender- and race-blind casting that took place as this story moved from the stage to the screen consumes majority of the critique. I’ve previously mentioned bell hooks’s “No Love in the Wild,” as well as Christina Sharpe’s and Jayna Brown’s “The Romance of Precarity I” and “The Romance of Precarity II,” respectively. Similarly, Tavia Nyong’o’s “Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism” offers an in-depth analysis of the ramifications of this casting in the film.

occur within the relationship between Hushpuppy and the environment around her as she attempts to make sense of the enormity of her own feelings through her relationship with the more-than-human world, leading to the lyrical register that dominates the film.

The ecological and affective capacities of the lyric collide during one of Hushpuppy's lessons from Miss Bathsheba in the only school in the Bathtub. She shows the children in her care a tattoo of a cave drawing on her leg, in which a man hunts an aurochs, and proceeds with her lesson:

Meat. Meat. Meat. Every animal is made out of meat. I am meat, y'all asses meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe. This here, is an aurochs. A fierce, mean creature that roamed the earth back when we all lived in caves. They would gobble the cave babies down right in front of their cave parents. And the cavemen couldn't do nothing about it because they were too poor, too stupid, too small. Who here thinks the cavemen were sitting around crying like a buncha pussies? Y'all better think about that. 'Cause any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. The ice caps gonna melt, the water's gonna rise, and everything south of the levee's going under. Ain't gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole bunch of water. Y'all better learn to survive.³²

Miss Bathsheba's monologue is arguably one of the most important in the film. Not only does it begin to sketch out what Sarah E. MacFarland refers to as the "ethical-ecological framework" of the film, but it also provides one of the clearest examples of the form that language takes in the Bathtub—language that is compressed by the magnitude of the tangled connections between human and environment, language that seeks to transform the space between the speaker and her audience into a space of education and testimony that personifies and recognizes the agency of the more-than-human world.³³ In Miss Bathsheba's lessons—which seem to take a similar form to Hushpuppy's own addresses to the audiences—the lyrical capacities of *Beats of the Southern Wild* emerge.³⁴

³² Zeitlin and Alibar, 10.

³³ Per MacFarland: "Rejecting the consumer-driven capitalistic social and economic structures of twenty-first-century America, residents of the Bathtub demonstrate that skills, not things, matter. Thus, their ethical philosophy is one based on multispecies community, abundance, celebration, and recognizing that bad comes with any good" (190). MacFarland's reading seems to be a critical elaboration on Zeitlin's utopian ideals.

³⁴ There is, of course, much to say about the content of Miss Bathsheba's lesson, particularly in comparison to the way Wink teaches his young daughter. While Wink's lesson relies on a kind of dominance, of reaching the top of a hierarchy through any means necessary, Miss Bathsheba seems to suggest a radically different pedagogy that understands relation

As established, the lyric has the ability to both compress and address, to make legible the expanse of attention necessitated by a shifting world. The lyric thus offers the opportunity for what Song refers to as a “self-conscious working through” that can destabilize Western ideals of human exceptionalism and provide a kind of lateral agency across the natural world.³⁵ As Miss Bathsheba’s monologue makes clear that the humans of the Bathtub are nothing but meat, she rejects any ecological hierarchy that places the human on top, instead compressing an epistemology that prizes a flattened, network between human and more-than-human into a metaphor, into a lyric: “Everything is part of the buffet of the universe.” More important, perhaps, is the way that Miss Bathsheba proceeds to mobilize the lyric, to use it pedagogically to teach children a way of survival through understanding their place within this network. If, as Song defines, the lyric marks a “self-conscious working through” of ecological relations, Miss Bathsheba’s lyrical dialogue suggests that part of “working through” is an affective endeavor that seeks to uncover alternate modes of feeling within the Anthropocene that are inexplicably active and constructive—modes of feeling that ensure survival in a world marked as disposable by neoliberal systems of capital. In the wild world of the Bathtub, feeling becomes intrinsic to one’s ability to survive. In the cautionary tale that Miss Bathsheba weaves from the cavemen and the aurochs, no room exists for fear and sorrow—feelings that seem to suspend action and deny any of the self-conscious working-through that Song’s work on the lyric necessitates. Moreover, implicit in Miss Bathsheba’s lesson is a sense of collective emotion as she tells the children, “Y’all better learn to survive.”

Her communal pedagogy persists throughout the film as we are brought to another one of her lessons that occurs after the flood, as all the residents of the Bathtub move in together to share

not through power and control or vertical hierarchies of individualism and human exceptionalism, but instead flattens the geometries of relation in favor of communal, collaborative survival.

³⁵ Per Song: “What I am calling *climate lyricism* refers to this self-conscious working through...Climate lyricism begins by turning anthropocentric habits of expression (especially the kind developed alongside the growth of European settle colonialism) back on themselves, so that the nonhuman is given human characteristics and asserts the kinds of powers that humans are traditionally thought to be the only ones capable of possessing” (2).

their dwindling resources. Treating a sick child, she gives each of the other children a task to assist her, telling them: “This is the most important thing I can ever teach y’all. You got to take care of people that’s smaller and sweeter than you are.”³⁶ The stage directions that follow this line in the script focus on Hushpuppy’s reception of this lesson: “Hushpuppy registers this advice, takes it to heart. She rubs [the girl’s] chest with delicacy and affection.”³⁷ This moment in the film is a vital one as it reifies an affective pedagogy based on collective care and action in the face of existential danger. Notably, this scene follows Wink’s telling Hushpuppy to “beast” the crab, as well as his proclamation that part of what sets the Bathtub apart from the dry world is their possession of feeling. Despite the stark differences this sequence of scenes establishes between Wink’s and Miss Bathsheba’s pedagogies, there is a clear link between the idea that feeling—in its kaleidoscopic and nondescript registers—is what links this community together, as well as an integral part on the way the next generation must learn to survive.

“But we ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

This tangibility of feeling that defines life in the Bathtub also seems to take its inspiration from south Louisiana. On the film’s setting, Zeitlin has said:

The reason I wanted to do this story was that I’m interested in the moment of living in south Louisiana, where there’s a group of people, and a world, that know they’re under threat constantly, but they’re totally entrenched in living there, and they’re not going to leave. I wanted to understand that impulse as an observer and then also my personal impulse to move there and live there the rest of my life—why do you want to do that?³⁸

Zeitlin is not alone in his attention to this impulse, this willingness to remain in a South rendered increasingly vulnerable. In their sociological study of displaced persons in the Katrina diaspora, Lynn Weber and Lori Peek note the intrinsic rootedness found along the Gulf coast:

New Orleans and other Gulf coast residents were in many ways more rooted in place than the average American. In fact, before Hurricane Katrina, over 75% of New Orleans

³⁶ Alibar and Zeitlin, 39.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Butman.

residents were born in Louisiana and had lived most of their lives there. This attachment to place translated into strong and spatially concentrated social networks among many of the displaced.³⁹

What, then, might it mean to be southern when the geography of the South is physically disappearing? This lack of mobility offers another layer to our considerations of southernness. The attachment of these residents to their home is meaningful and speaks to an entrenchedness, a rootedness—something that I refer to as *stuckness*—that denotes a particular affective state cultivated between these southerners and the South itself. Zeitlin, and well as Weber and Peek, seems to look at this stuckness with a kind of admiration for the intimate sense of community that stems from such an attachment to place. As such, to be “stuck” in the South might denote a state of comfort and resistance rather than limitation.

However, I would argue that the feeling of stuckness is more complicated. While it might allow for the growth of rich and devoted communities, it is also intertwined with other politics that shape and define it. In the introduction to their study, Weber and Peek also note that the option for evacuation was never a valid one for everyone, and the intersections of race, class, and disability played a huge role in who was left behind (or stuck) in New Orleans when the levees broke.⁴⁰ Like all other affects, stuckness cannot exist purely within a vacuum. This ambivalence of being stuck is best captured by Jordan Alexander Stein, who writes:

...“stuck” is just a useful means of describing the feeling of the experience of being fixed in place. To be stuck is to be located in happenstance—neither a zone of crisis nor one of aspiration or desire. By my reckoning, stuckness doesn’t generate too much narrative. Ask a stuck person why they live here, and you might be told, “I just do.”⁴¹

Stein writes stuckness as a feeling of being frozen of place, of being held within the grasp of one’s circumstances with no clear way (nor, perhaps, desire) to extract oneself. For Stein, stuckness is a

³⁹ Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 15.

⁴⁰ Per Weber and Peek: “The vast majority of those who either chose or were forced to stay behind were African American, poor, elderly, and/or living with a disability” (2).

⁴¹ Jordan Alexander Stein, *Avidly Reads Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 103.

passive feeling—to be acted upon, to be made stuck, with no capacity to act in return. This point is where our understandings diverge. If anything, *Beasts* shows us that a feeling of stuckness has much to say as it generates both narrative and episteme—both of which provide some kind of insight into catastrophized life.

This understanding of stuckness marks where my reading of the film attempts to merge both Zeitlin's insistence on the Bathtub's philosophical significance and Sharpe's readings of what the film actually accomplishes. *Beasts* does have something to teach us, but despite all of Zeitlin's claims of utopia, *this community has nowhere else to go*. As Sharpe points out, members of the Bathtub live in abject poverty, and they cannot afford to go elsewhere. Moreover, the film makes clear that the Bathtub has been physically cut off from the rest of the world by a man-made levee. The levee is meant to preserve the mainland—a space which the film highlights as the industrial, civilized counter to the wild space of the Bathtub as represented by a metallic petrochemical plant. In the forced separation of the two spaces, the Bathtub and the poverty-stricken community that inhabits it are sacrificed for the maintenance of the mainland.⁴² In this sacrifice, the residents of the Bathtub are severed from any idea of elsewhere and rendered stuck, intertwining their stuckness (again) with issues of race and class.

Yet, in *The Anthropocene Lyric*, Tom Bristow offers another dimension to how we may consider this complex feeling of stuckness through what he calls *situatedness* and *settledness*. Bristow defines *situatedness* as “how the human is situated within its habitat...how we make places out of our individualised, community-based globalised and more-than-human relations (and imaginaries), while *settledness* refers to “how ‘home’ is defined and constructed: a question that ranges from how we feel at home in ourselves and at home in physical spaces...how we make emotional and territorial

⁴² In her review of *Beasts*, Patricia Yaeger writes: “This film carries the nation’s baggage; it investigates a culture of racial neglect, creates a zone of history-making for Katrina’s disposable bodies, and provides a steady critique of white capital” (“Dirty Ecology”).

signposts in our personal memories and in cultural memory.”⁴³ Both *situatedness* and *settledness* coincide with a matrix of relations that contour the ways that humans attach themselves to the place they call home—in which “place” encapsulates not only a geographic location but the more-than-human surroundings that also play an active role in such attachments. Bristow further highlights the affective geographies that frame the relationship between human and home as an emotional endeavor.

In Hushpuppy’s Bathtub, *situatedness* and *settledness* add to stuckness a vocabulary through which we might conceptualize the devoted attachment to place that provides both the enrichment of the setting as well as the ultimate conflict of the film. When Wink takes Hushpuppy to the levee to look at the chemical plant on the other side, he remarks, “Ain’t that ugly over there? We live in the prettiest place on earth.”⁴⁴ And the difference between the two places is, of course, striking. The levee is man-made—harsh, grey concrete that brutally rises out of the water. The grey bleeds into the sky—its hue fed by the smoke emitting from the metallic plant. The vibrant, deep greens of the Bathtub seem a world away.

This attention to the chemical plant is important not only because of the contrast it provides between the “civilized” world and the Isle de Charles Doucet but also because of the way that plant anchors the film firmly in the South, specifically in Louisiana, where petrochemical plants litter the banks of the Mississippi River.⁴⁵ The script refers to this plant as the “engine that runs the Northern world,” marking both the clear North and South divide that runs through the film as well as the

⁴³ Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.

⁴⁴ Alibar and Zeitlin, 5.

⁴⁵ My use of “civilized” here is pulled from the *Beasts* script, which describes this scene as such: “They look out to where the water goes all the way to a monolithic, 20-foot wall stretching infinitely into the distance. This levee, the first piece of modern construction we’ve seen, encloses the civilized world, protecting it from rising water. The Bathtub is on the wrong side of the wall...Hushpuppy looks over the wall to the Dry Side. It’s an endless sprawl of oil processing power plants without a tree or bird in sight” (4).

ways that industrialization and modernity have facilitated the sacrifice of life in its service.⁴⁶ In *Beasts*, this sacrifice is made clear when Hushpuppy narrates:

Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all gonna drown down here. But we ain't goin' nowhere.⁴⁷

Hushpuppy cements the ethical and epistemological divide of the Bathtub from the “dry world” of modernity, particularly in the way she highlights the alienation of the industrialized world from the land. Meanwhile, the residents of the Bathtub have built their life around the Gulf waters and adapted to live among the water (recall Hushpuppy and Wink's lofted trailers). We also see tensions between state and community, as the state writes off the Bathtub by building this wall, leaving the community to fend for themselves until they ultimately leave or drown. And finally, we find the determination to remain—that sense of settledness that makes leaving the Isle de Charles Doucet ultimately unimaginable.

Lyrically, Hushpuppy's voiceover here pries open a space in the film between herself and the audience. Her voice layers over the visual—aerial shots that move from the greyness of “civilization” to the bright colors of the Bathtub and its surrounding waters and close ups of the residents running and drinking in some kind of celebration—and twines with the sonic as the music starts to swell beneath her words, growing louder as she enunciates that final line of defiance and giving way to a crescendo of triumphant fiddles and guitars, the chatter and whoops of the crowd, and the steady heartbeats of the animals Hushpuppy holds up to her ear. Her lines thread together these different elements, and they do so from outside of the film's teleological march. Detached

⁴⁶ Alibar and Zeitlin, 5. Further, the biological harm that such plants cause to the human body plays an implicit role in the trajectory of the film. It is revealed that Wink is dying from some blood disorder (he tells Hushpuppy, “My blood's eating itself?”). Sarah E. McFarland ties this to Louisiana's moniker of “Cancer Alley,” writing: “Wink's poor health and eventual death have important ecocritical impacts, whether he dies from toxic pollution from living downstream of the entire US agricultural runoff into the Mississippi, from leptospirosis carried by mud-borne bacteria from the nearby oil refining and petrochemical production, or some other cause” (191).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

from linear identifiers, Hushpuppy punctures the narrative and addresses the audience in a way that gives language to the sense of stuckness that defines life in the Bathtub. She also introduces and contextualizes the sights and sounds that are integral in the personification of every piece of the Bathtub, that cast the Isle de Charles Doucet as a significant and mythical character in the film—kinetic, bursting with undeniable life, unmoored from the rest of the world surrounding it.

Further, this role of myth in the film also disconnects the Bathtub's abandonment from this world that we inhabit. *Beasts* seems to belong to some unknown, unreal, and untold place and time. However, the levee that protects the industrialized world is plucked from the history of the Isle de Jean Charles, refracting a question of disposability and survival across both the real and fictional South. The inhabitants of Louisiana's Isle de Jean Charles are largely members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe, who highlight that their island is at risk not only of excessive flooding, but also coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion made worse by oil and gas companies.⁴⁸ In the 1990s, the state and Army Corps of Engineers deemed it too expensive to include the island within the levee system that protects part of Louisiana's coast, an exclusion that highlights that the creation of disposable bodies is an ongoing process—one that reframes catastrophe as not only a single event, but rather as a constellation of decisions that eventually aggregate into an ending of those worlds outside of the determined systems of care.

In view of such harsh realities, Hushpuppy and Wink's determination to remain in the Bathtub denotes not only a deep attachment to and identification with their home but also a kind of defiance toward the world that would render them disposable.⁴⁹ Their stuckness is defined by both a

⁴⁸ As an important note, the members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe on the Isle de Jean Charles are descended from Indigenous peoples who settled on the island as a way of escaping the Indian Removal Act of 1830, highlighting a troubling legacy of displacement and marked disposability at the hands of the federal government (<https://www.isledejeancharles.com/>).

⁴⁹ One of the clearest signs of identification with the Bathtub is written into the very names of Hushpuppy and Wink. In the scene of the storm, as Hushpuppy and Wink huddle in their boat, so they will float when the Bathtub starts to flood, Wink drunkenly confronts the storm, running out into the rain with a shotgun and shooting up at the sky, yelling: "We Doucets, we're not scared of no damn storm!" (25). Both Hushpuppy and Wink have taken on the identity of the Isle de

rich, active kind of deep love, as well as a more determined resignation as they are cut off from the rest of the world and left to fend for themselves. They are stuck, but they also can't imagine life outside of their own stuckness—they both cannot and refuse to look elsewhere. And that refusal matters; that refusal is a reclamation of agency. In the era of climate catastrophe, *Beasts* models (albeit, incompletely, imperfectly, and in some places, impossibly) a commitment to one's home that suggests a possibility of survival through remaining. The stuckness that defines life in the Bathtub also forms a praxis of not only building up one's community but also committing oneself to doing the necessary work of survival at home rather than turning elsewhere.⁵⁰ The epistemologies of the Anthropocene seem to always be invested in progress, in marching forward and setting their eyes on that which lies elsewhere. As the wealth of the world concentrates into the hands of a few and billionaires turn their sights to space and the work of imagining futurity always sees survival on another planet besides Earth, the episteme of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* seems quite humble in comparison. It is also an epistemology forged through realities and politics of disposability, an

Charles Doucet, and Wink, who repeatedly tells Hushpuppy that she'll be "King of the Bathtub" frames the island as her inheritance.

⁵⁰ Jayna Brown, among other critics, might see this as too generous a reading of the film. As she writes in a follow-up essay to Christina Sharpe's: "I had a compelling conversation with a colleague who insisted that the film was self-aware, posing such pain and chronic catastrophe of poverty as unresolvable, and that the film showed a triumph of the disenfranchised to create community. I don't grant the film that complexity. I just wanted to give Hushpuppy a bath, and take her in my arms." I don't disagree with Brown's rejection of the film's complexity—I think Zeitlin's ethos behind the film has demonstrated quite clearly the ways in which the film fails to account for (or even understand in the first place) both its own dystopian premise and the space that it occupies at the intersection of race, class, and futurity. For all that Zeitlin posits about the mythical status of his setting and characters, the seeming myth cannot be disentangled from the world that it is transposed upon nor the world that consumes the film. The issues of climate change and poverty that refract throughout *Beasts* stem from the same white supremacist, imperial-capitalist frame, and the failure to understand this is what ultimately accounts for the film's own confused and complicated premise. With all this being said, I am examining this film over a decade after its release, following five years of a global pandemic, class and racial unrest, and growing wealth inequality in a world where climate change goes unaddressed and the meager protections in place have been rolled back. We have witnessed again and again the state's willingness to sacrifice human life in the name of profit. With this new context, I turn to this film as at least a starting point to think through locality and community-building. In many ways, the Bathtub shows us an unsustainable version of this kind of relational frame, but in taking the frame seriously and critiquing the ragged ends that it refuses to tie up, I suggest that it at least offers a place to start by turning to the American South—a site of immense precarity (both geographically and temporally) as well as a site where much of this kind of constructive community work and mutual aid is already underway.

epistemology that recognizes that hopes of elsewhere are also entrenched in politics of exclusion and that survival for the majority depends on leaning into stuckness and building a new world at home.⁵¹

In my skeletal sketch of stuckness, I see an affective frame that generates—an affect that networks and collates many other modes of feeling. There is no one correct way to be stuck, to feel stuck, and I do not want this to be construed as a purely negative emotion. My emphasis here commits more to thinking through feelings of cultivation—modes that describe one’s geoaffective relationship with the environment that is interwoven in the way the world can be seen, processed, and understood, particularly in a lived political moment of transience sustained by capitalism and exacerbated by our contemporary moment of climate crisis.

In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Lauren Berlant writes: “Capitalism fracks the sensorium.”⁵² The line is pithy and memorable, capturing the affective impacts of capitalism’s capacity for alienation and fracture as well as the embedded threat of capitalism’s willingness to sacrifice the world in service of the maintenance of power and the generation of concentrated wealth. In the face of such a force, how do we articulate the sometimes-opaque webs of feeling that manage to slip through the hairline fractures of capitalism and crisis’s near totality? How might we recognize the depth of the connection and commitment to community and environment that suggests an alternate affective mode of relation that bursts forth from the refusal to move, to stand steadfast in the place where one is from in the face of an incoming flood? While *Beasts* offers one

⁵¹ A similar epistemology to the one in *Beasts* can be found more exactly (and more nuanced) in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Examining the matsutake mushrooms that have grown in forests that have been wrought by human intervention, Tsing takes up questions of surviving in ruins. As she writes: “To live with precarity requires more than railing at those who put us here (although that seems useful too, and I’m not arguing against it). We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours. This is where mushrooms help. Matsutake’s willingness to emerge in blasted landscapes allows us to explore the ruin that has become our collective home” (3). For Tsing as well as for *Beasts*, home holds the answers for the collaborative survival needed to survive climate change and catastrophe.

⁵² Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 26.

place to start, the South itself also presents a few concrete examples of what this looks like in practice.

In August of 2016, an unnamed storm hit Baton Rouge, and as sustained rainfall flooded the Greater Baton Rouge Area, the city itself became nearly unnavigable. No one had prepared for the flood—nor had anyone predicted the extent of devastation that it would bring—and as a result, many people became trapped in their homes as the waters rose and it became exceedingly clear that this storm would unleash much more than the typical rainfall that plagues Louisiana's late-summer afternoons.⁵³

Many of the stories that came out of what Louisianians now call "The Great Flood" are about a volunteer organization called the Cajun Navy, which consists of boat owners along the Gulf coast who responded to the calls of people trapped in their homes. Where federal and state systems failed, those in the communities who had any kind of boat headed out, using social media to coordinate rescues. Many of those who took to the floodwaters had lived through Katrina, whether as witnesses or survivors of the hurricane themselves, revealing the depth of commitment not only to place, as they chose to remain in south Louisiana, but to the people within their communities as well. In an interview, one member of the Cajun Navy said:

The true Cajun Navy is the everyday Joe that had a full-time job and had a boat at his house and then launched his boat at the side of the highway. I knew if I was the one who couldn't get out, there would be somebody who would come and get me. We are a people that stick together, take care of our own.⁵⁴

These lines reveal the cluster of feelings that seem to nest within the larger affective structure of stuckness, as this Cajun Navy member describes feelings of care and solidarity that stem purely from

⁵³ Multiple meteorological studies on the weather system responsible for the flood understood part of the storm's severity to stem from climate change, and they predict that a warming world will only increase the likelihood of such storms in the future. One such study concludes that "the warming since 1985 could have increased the even precipitation by 20%" (Wang et. al 11,805).

⁵⁴ Catherine Thorbecke "Volunteer 'Cajun Navy' Rescues Fellow Community Members Trapped by Louisiana Floods," *ABC News*, August 18, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/volunteer-cajun-navy-rescues-fellow-community-members-trapped/story?id=41482404>.

feeling as though one fundamentally belongs to this South Louisianian community, feelings that also turn to the local for survival rather than seek futurity elsewhere.⁵⁵

“I wanna be cohesive.”

I have spent much of this chapter discerning a collection of terms and forms that can be used to give this film shape, thinking through the separate roles that each play in the film’s formation of and belief in its own ethos. While the film may not fully succeed in encapsulating and solidifying this ethos, it offers a space where we can recognize the struggle between a utopian aim and the shattered refraction of an endangered and dangerous world. I am referring, of course, to Hushpuppy, whose problematic position in the film as philosopher and protagonist both reveals the incompleteness of Zeitlin’s utopian ethos and opens the film up to other capacities for reading, feeling, and imagining the world. Amidst the precarity to which she has been abandoned, Hushpuppy networks herself within an ecological and geographic frame that suggests the fragile possibility of a mode of feeling—of building—the world that exists beyond what even *Beasts*’ mythology can imagine. Hushpuppy occupies a particular space within the film that offers a faint suggestion of how we might weave together these disparate threads of lyric, catastrophe, ecology, futurity, and feeling.

Through the directives of lyrical reading, I examine then the film’s implicit epistemology of feeling that cultivates emotion as both a fundamental aspect of one’s relationship with the land as well as an integral mode through which these feelings are expressed, as exhibited through Hushpuppy’s tether to the aurochs. In one of the film’s more emotionally-charged scenes, Hushpuppy’s anger, fear, and sorrow become inexplicably tied to the emergence of the aurochs

⁵⁵ Notably, many of those volunteering within the Cajun Navy also see their work as outside of systems of capitalistic profit. This same member also said, “It’s really disheartening to know that some people have tried to monetize this, but we were just there to save lives and get people out of those floodwaters” (Thorbecke). There’s an interesting tension in which capitalism’s totality—which is, of course, interwoven into the exacerbation and catastrophization of the flood—chafes against the feelings engendered by stuckness.

from the ice of Antarctica. In this sequence, Wink returns in a hospital gown after a days-long absence. Excited to see him, Hushpuppy follows him closely, talking ceaselessly and asking questions that he does not want to answer. Eventually, he scares her away with a yell and a physical advance, and she runs back to her trailer, where she turns up the stove and watches the fire grow. As her trailer starts to burn, she hides under a cardboard box, while Wink crashes through the door, calling for her. Once he realizes where she is, she jets out from her box and sprints outside as he follows close behind, shouting for her. He catches up to her and tries to drag her back home. When she refuses, he slaps her, and she falls to the ground. Visibly upset with what he has done, he tries to help her up, but his words don't follow suit as he says: "See what you making me do? You're killing me!" Getting to her feet on her own, Hushpuppy yells back: "I hope you die! And after you die, I come to your grave and eat birthday cake all by myself!" She punctuates her retort by striking Wink in the chest—a strike in which the sound of a child's fist hitting her father blends into the earth-shattering crack of ice somewhere far beyond the Bathtub. Wink falls to the ground and begins to seize, and Hushpuppy runs, her fear and hurt and rage mirrored in the avalanche that unleashes the aurochs. She calls out to her absent mother, "Momma, I think I broke something!" And, in this moment, her language compresses the storm of her emotions, and she is referring to both her father and the earth itself.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Alibar and Zeitlin, 17-18 (entire scene). In the scope of this chapter, I'm centering my reading of this scene on thinking through the role that Hushpuppy's emotions play in establishing her affectively-charged link with both the world around her in the Bathtub and the world of the past—the world outside of time—that the aurochs belong to. However, I do want to note one line of Hushpuppy's that occurs in this scene that I haven't mentioned. As the fire bursts forth from Hushpuppy's stove (on which she is cooking canned cat food), a voiceover explains how she sees the box that she's hiding under—a box that is full of her drawings—as she says: "If Daddy kill me, I ain't gonna be forgotten, I'm recording my story for the scientists of the future. In a million. years, when kids go to school, they gonna know the once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub." These lines seem to capture the dilemma that comes from analyzing the film—the difficulty that complicates any kind of conclusion. On one hand, we see the interesting things that the film is playing with in terms of myth, imagination, and futurity, as Hushpuppy's lyrical modes of speech play and slip through tense, moving her amongst past, present, and future. On the other, we also see concretely the elements of the film that trouble Sharpe, Brown, and hooks in their critiques: the brutality and devastation of Hushpuppy's world that is falsely wrapped in broken ideals of utopian survival.

In this scene, which notably comes right before the storm that floods the Bathtub—a storm meant to recall Katrina or Gustav or any of the hurricanes that have wrecked Louisiana’s coast—we see Hushpuppy affectively metabolize the catastrophes that have punctured her short life. She cannot name these disasters directly, but they still engender their own complex and interwoven affective response. She attempts to navigate the depth of love that she has for her father, the subsequent betrayal that stems from his neglect and violence, and the intangible loss of her mother. Within this constellation of familial catastrophe—in a moment on the brink of ecological disaster—we see Hushpuppy’s emotions manifest in the world as her expression of her feelings physically impacts the Antarctic shelf.

This moment marks the precipice in both the film and Hushpuppy’s life. Narratively, this scene fleshes out the aurochs that will stomp through the rest of the film, interrupting the typical narrative structure and presenting something that is ultimately outside of time—or, as Tavia Nyong’o explains of the aurochs, “outside of history”—as the extinct march toward a world in the process of its own extinction.⁵⁷ As the aurochs continue to appear throughout the rest of the film, it is never completely clear whether they are embodied within the physical world of *Beasts* or amongst fragments of Hushpuppy’s imagination. And in some ways, confirming the physical reality of the aurochs does not even matter. What is important instead is the way that the beast is connected to Hushpuppy.⁵⁸ The aurochs, whether real or imagined, are a product of Hushpuppy’s own emotions—the film almost suggests that she *feels* them into existence, into time, into the world. As

⁵⁷ Nyong’o very succinctly describes this phenomenon, remarking that *Beasts* is a film “in which the aurochs, victim of the first anthropogenic extinction, presides over the final one” (252).

⁵⁸ This intertwining of the aurochs and Hushpuppy is, of course, fraught with troubling conclusions. As Nyong’o asks of Hushpuppy’s role in the film: “What is the relationship between her singular race, gender, and infancy and the ostensibly universal narrative she embodies? and why is her narrative of wondrous survival framed through such standard tropes as black familial dysfunction, paternal violence, and licentious femininity? Circling around these responses has been another anxiety about cinematic depictions of black (and other subaltern) people as primitives in a continuum with nonhuman animals. Even if the film’s ambition is to valorize feral human nature, at what price is such transvaluation purchased?” (251).

manifestations of her grief, her rage, and her loss, they mark the depth of the relationship between Hushpuppy and the more-than-human world.

For Hushpuppy, this moment of conflict allows her to articulate the loss she has felt over the brief span of her childhood. At this moment, her life shifts and she learns something. The cry to her mother that she broke something is recuperated into one of her lyrical voiceovers—which, like the aurochs, are outside of time—as she says: "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will get busted."⁵⁹ Again, the lyric marks a space where Hushpuppy pays immense attention to make sense of the world around her, compressing the immensity of her ideas about organic, ecological relations into figurative representations and speaking them directly to the audience. The lyric directs our attention to this moment bound by the interruption of progressive time and history, where ecology and affect collide.

Posmentier writes of a relationship between lyric and ecology that concretizes the ways in which the lyric can formally attend to the organic outside of typical teleological dimensions. Using catastrophe and cultivation as her anchors, she suggests that the schematic of the lyric provides certain metrics that can make visible spatiotemporal modes that exist outside of linear time. Further, Posmentier's work emphasizes the lyric's attention to the pure flexibility of language as she deconstructs the usual understanding of catastrophe:

Although its meaning in common parlance is something like "disaster," or, in a geographical context "cataclysm," the primary definition of catastrophe according to the *OED* is dénouement, "the change or revolution which produces the conclusion of the final event of a dramatic piece." So there is no better place to begin with the etymology of this "overturning," which suggests, among other things, the turning of soil before planting a new crop. Its root "strophe," of course, is not only the Greek word for turn but also for the poetic unit of the stanza, "a series of lines forming a system." Catastrophe, then, is always involved with art making. It contains not only the finality of death and displacement but the making of form in the first place.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Alibar and Zeitlin, 21.

⁶⁰ Posmentier, 23.

As Posmentier mobilizes catastrophe as a frame for generative formal work, she triangulates a relationship between catastrophe, poetics, and ecological persistence. As we have seen, in Hushpuppy's world, catastrophes—even those that she does not identify as such—abound. In the age of the Anthropocene, where catastrophes seem to multiply into inevitability, we must reorchestrate our own conceptualization if we are to survive in a catastrophized world. In both the fictional South of the Bathtub and the real South whose struggles *Beasts* dramatizes, catastrophe exists front and center, impossible to avoid. Survival contends on reframing how to adapt to such a cacophony, reshaping the ways in which one engages with the world, and recognizing the affects that foster the continuation of one's community.

As the film grapples with the effects of its transposition between the fictional and the real, we are brought to two scenes outside of the Bathtub—two scenes that exist as registers of grim realism and mythical imaginary, respectively. The first scene is a forced evacuation of the Bathtub and the second is an adventure led by Hushpuppy as she and other young girls are picked up from the Gulf by a fishing boat and brought to a floating brothel (aptly named Elysian Fields), where they are cared for by the women inside with a maternal tenderness that the Bathtub has never offered. While Sarah E. McFarland's essay on the film diligently examines the first exit through the contrast between the Bathtub and the clinical evacuation center, I am more interested in mythical scene where the movie seems to splinter off from its original ethos.⁶¹ From the moment the girls take to the water, *Beasts*—already ruptured by the stampeding aurochs—disengages from its progressive narrative entirely. Hushpuppy is swimming toward a distant beacon that she has long associated with

⁶¹ As McFarland describes the scene: "To the government, the wetlands function as a place of dangerous wilderness. The Bathtub residents blow up the levee to let out the seawater and as it drops, expose the detritus of consumerism (and more stuff for them to retrieve and repurpose), but then helicopters come and forcibly remove them to a 'mandatory evacuation area.' Wink receives unwanted medical care. Hushpuppy is washed and dressed and her hair is forced into tight braids....In one shocking scene, filmed from Hushpuppy's height and point-of-view, viewers see her father Wink in a wheelchair, too drugged to do more than open his eyes with tubes sticking out of him: this is her story, after all, and we see her trauma in Wink's loss of agency and freedom" (193).

her mother, assuming that the source of light marks where she could find her. It is unclear, though, the exact plan she has to reach it. The scene is cast into the soft pastels of sunset, and time's passage seems suspended and uncertain.

Eventually, the girls clamor onto a lone tugboat, and Hushpuppy tells the captain of her intent to find her mother. Later, in the wheelhouse, Hushpuppy asks him where they're going, and he responds: "Don't matter, baby. This boat'll take you exactly where you need to be. It's just that type of boat." He eats a chicken biscuit and tosses the wrapper to the floor, which is covered with them. He tells her, "I've been eating these my whole life. I keep the wrappers in the boat, 'cause they remind me who I was when I ate each one. The smell makes me feel cohesive." To which Hushpuppy responds, "I wanna be cohesive."⁶²

In a film that is so full of wild interactions between human, land, and beast, this exchange easily slips through the cracks. What does it mean to be cohesive in such an incohesive world? A world in which humanity itself is fractured, sorted, and hierarchized; where nonlinear temporalities reign; where the world can end over and over and over? In this exchange between Hushpuppy and the ship captain, the space between them is palpable as he expands his moment of nostalgia into a something that melds both past and present. But for Hushpuppy, a child on the cusp of finding an absent mother and losing her father—all while the only home she has ever known is rendered unlivable—what would it mean to feel cohesive?

At the end of the film, there is a final voiceover from Hushpuppy, spoken at Wink's bayou funeral as the truck-boat turns into a floating funeral pyre:

When I relax behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. when I look too hard it goes away, but when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I'm a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right. When I die, the scientists of the future, they gonna find it all. They gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub.⁶³

⁶² Alibar and Zeitlin, 65,

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

In these final lines, Hushpuppy suggests what cohesion in catastrophe may look like. This jump to her philosophical conclusion seems quite clear at first glance, appearing to build upon the foundation laid by the scene in the wheelhouse. Hushpuppy—as she has been doing the entire film—maps herself in relation to the more-than-human world that surrounds her, understanding herself as a product of this relation and recognizing it as a fundamental part of her. Subsumed into the Bathtub’s geographic and ecological contours, she suggests cohesion as a mode of sensing the world, of feeling her place within an unseen, yet intricate collection in which everything is affected and affecting, all the time, everywhere.

A second glance at the speech reveals what could be understood as a more temporal element of cohesion, further elaborating that stickier point from the wheelhouse where the past and present seem to exist in tandem in the soft orange mythos of the scene. Hushpuppy’s final line is presented hopefully, with triumphant, joyful music cresting underneath her words, but the content is quite melancholy: “When I die, the scientists of the future, they gonna find it all. They gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub.” This scene enacts a temporal warping that is significant to Joseph R. Roach’s work on catastrophe, where he writes:

The choreography of catastrophic closure offers a way of imagining what must come next, as well as what has already happened. Under the seductive linearity of its influence, memory operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that is itself, for better or worse, a work of art.⁶⁴

In the final voiceover of *Beasts*, Hushpuppy enacts this temporal tension in her own imagination, casting herself into both the past and the future. She makes herself into an entity—a Hushpuppy—

⁶⁴ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33. I found this line when Posmentier cited it in *Cultivation and Catastrophe*. Her reading of Roach is useful and succinct: “Joseph Roach compellingly depicts catastrophe (and here he means not necessarily environmental disaster but any form of destruction, calamity, or ‘downward turning’ in dramatic performance) as a structure of memory holding the past and the future in relation” (156).

to be discovered and remembered, to persist beyond her own catastrophized moment. She enacts her own memorial, splintering away from the assumed linearity of her own life toward a version of herself that exists in the past, present, and future, as she projects into an imagined future to formalize the inevitability of her own pastness, her *wasness*. Through her lyric—which Roach might identify as art—she cultivates the survival of not only herself but her father and the place they called home, crafting a cohesive memory of it all.

And then the film ends, revealing one of the major limitations of *Beasts*. While it may plant a seed of the kind of imagination that is necessary for survival in the face of imminent devastation, the film cannot grow that seed to fruition. It provides the outline of affective cohesion at the end of the world, but it cannot show us anything more than the lyrical imagination of such a mode of engaging with one's environs, of the centrality of the destabilized temporalities that will come to define life in the Anthropocene. The final scene of the movie—like many other scenes across the film—is a troubling one presented under the guise of hope. In this scene, Hushpuppy leads the remaining residents of the Bathtub (half of whom are also children) across the narrow strip of land that leads them out of their home, waters from the Gulf encroaching and lapping at their feet. The scene is clearly meant to be an inspirational one, a projection of resilience cast in soft colors as the music swells to a joyous crescendo. They have survived and will continue to survive—they will build their utopia elsewhere!

I have previously discussed some critiques of this scene, particularly those of Brown, Sharpe, and hooks, who are concerned with the emotional labor and responsibility of care that is cast onto Hushpuppy's shoulders to, in Nyong'o's words, "perform the work of imagining the survival of a civilization that has abandoned her."⁶⁵ My interest in this final scene, however, lies more in the way that it ends. The camera slowly zooms out, shrinking this small band of young children and alcoholic

⁶⁵ Nyong'o, 251.

adults against the expanding Gulf waters that surround them on every side. And then, it is over. With a hard cut to the black screen of the credits, we are left only with the triumphant music of the Bathtub and no resolution to the plight of their small community. I would argue that the film *has* to end here—to go any further would collapse the fragile utopian ethos on which it was built. In reality, they have nowhere to go and very few, if any, resources necessary for survival. The episteme that defined life within their insular community is at odds with the world into which they are heading. The film ends with a moment of ambiguity that can never be fully actualized, as the continuation of their life is rendered impossible. The work of the imagination, that has been made so central to Hushpuppy’s survival in the Bathtub, is incomplete outside of it. The future that she casts in her final voiceover is tied into the Bathtub itself—a product of her relationship with her home.

And yet, despite such limitations, I cannot ignore the chords that *Beasts*—no matter how clumsily—attempts to strike. Despite its flaws and limitations, the film takes seriously the necessity of imagination and creativity at the end of the world, centering the locus of such attention to possibility firmly in the South, where the end of the world is teased with every yard of land that disappears into the Gulf of Mexico. Now, nearly fifteen years after the release of *Beasts*, the inhabitants of the Isle de Jean Charles have been relocated, named by the *New York Times* as the “first American climate refugees,” and their relationship to the land that has signified their own survival and resilience has been severed.⁶⁶ The South’s precarity, compounded by the repetition of disaster and catastrophe at Louisiana’s southern coast, illustrates a place where the end of the world is already recognized and taught as inevitable—a place where affectively attuning oneself outside of the totality of capitalist individualism is necessary in order to survive.

⁶⁶ Coral Davenport and Campbell Robertson, “Resettling the ‘First American ‘Climate Refugees,’” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html>.

While *Beasts*'s ethos of race-blind utopian resilience leaves much to be desired, it still attempts to imagine a world that *wants* to persist outside of the disposability and transience that capitalism facilitates. It offers affective modes, such as stuckness and cohesion, that renegotiate how we might feel ourselves and our communities as they are made increasingly vulnerable by the disasters of climate change. In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Berlant reminds us of the intertwining of poiesis and world-making—of poiesis *as* world-making.⁶⁷ At the intersection of the theory that has been so central to this chapter lies this relationship between creative work and the process of building a new and better world. If, as Táiwò says, there exists an affective element in this process, we must conceptualize new ways of feeling ourselves in the world around us, to express the multi-faceted, kaleidoscopic modes of affecting and being affected by the world. Nestled within the structures of stuckness or cohesion that *Beasts* begins to sketch out are entire networks of feelings that prioritize the recognition and prioritization of the relations between the self and its surrounding environment. What these feelings facilitate, as illustrated by the Cajun Navy and other work being done in the South, are ways of creating alternatives to rugged individualism and alienation in the face of climate disaster. Such affective modes open up a space through which catastrophe transforms into something else entirely—into something that necessitates the work of imagining beyond the end of the world.

⁶⁷ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 20.

CODA

Vulnerable Souths

Thanks to cheaper prices and the convenience of JetBlue's direct service between Boston and New Orleans, the last leg of my trips home always begin the same way: traversing the eighty-mile stretch between the Louis Armstrong International Airport and Plaquemine, the small town where I grew up. The drive consists of an endless highway, with long stretches of road surrounded by nothing but trees. These swaths of green are often interrupted by a number of silver petrochemical plants like the one that sits opposite the Isle de Charles Doucet in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Like Wink, I always think about how ugly they are—these dystopian cities belching smoke into the sky, the metallic sheen of them too stark, too barren.

As the last chapter highlights, these plants define life in south Louisiana, especially in a place like Plaquemine. The town is nestled between three major ones: Dow Chemical, Shintech, and Westlake Chemical.¹ Many people in the region work, have worked, or will work in one of these places, and the plants structure many aspects of everyday even for those who do not labor within them. When my sister and I were in elementary and middle school, we had monthly chemical spill drills on Mondays where we and all the other students would file out of our classrooms and sit against the walls of the hallway, cupping our hands over our mouths and noses as we rehearsed for a dangerous leak. Generally, we accepted these drills as a normal part of our routine and never considered their relationship to the specific kind of vulnerability that framed our lives.

In many ways, this small example is endemic of larger patterns of vulnerability and precarity that stem from the dominance of these plants in the towns and cities that border the Mississippi

¹ A 2019 analysis by ProPublica suggests as many as thirty industrial plants in and surrounding Iberville Parish, of which Plaquemine is the parish seat (Baurick et. al).

River. Beyond the danger of chemical spills, these plants are regular polluters of the land, air, and water; there is a reason why this stretch of land along the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans—which maps almost perfectly onto that route that my parents drive to take me home—is infamously known as “Cancer Alley.”² And despite the proven detrimental environmental and health effects, these plants are so entrenched in the Louisiana economy that any immediate solution would cause incredible social and financial upheaval.³ Even as industrial plants cause irreparable ecological harm, particularly in poor communities largely populated by people of color, they still act as major employers across the state, offering economic opportunities, especially for those without college degrees.⁴ Yet, even as these plants exist in the state as beacons of economic opportunity, they also contribute heavily to the degradation of economic and social development via Louisiana’s Industrial Tax Exemption Program (ITEP), which allows for massive property tax breaks that ultimately reduce the amount of money returned to the communities that house these major industrial companies.⁵ The quality of life for the majority of communities in Louisiana is thus capitulated to corporate wealth; vulnerability and precarity become the norm. What future is left to us—what future can we imagine—under such conditions? What futures are we forced to relinquish?

² In partnership with both *The Advocate* and *The Times-Picayune*, the major newspapers of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, ProPublica published a major analysis on the expansion of petrochemical plants in Louisiana and the subsequent social and environmental effects. While much of the piece focuses on St. Gabriel, the largest municipality in Iberville Parish, the authors do turn an eye to the \$1.5 billion expansion of Shintech in Plaquemine, highlighting that this expansion would “intensify pollution in an area where an EPA model estimates the toxic levels of cancer-causing chemicals to be double the already high Iberville Parish average” (Baurick et al).

³ Scholars such as Robert D. Bullard have written extensively about this kind of economic blackmail in the South. See Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (1993) and *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (2000). In *Confronting Environmental Racism*, Bullard actually names the prevalences of these plants as a kind of “petrochemical colonialism,” that “mirrors the system of domination typical of the Old South” (13).

⁴ In Louisiana, in particular, such opportunities for blue-collar labor matter. The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities highlights that in Louisiana only 26.1% of the population over 25 years of age has at least a bachelor’s degree, as based on census and survey data from 2018-2022. In Iberville Parish, this number drops to 14.9%.

⁵ In an article for the *Louisiana Illuminator*, journalist Wesley Muller highlights that ITEP is “one of the most generous corporate handouts in the nation,” offering companies “an 80% exemption on property taxes for up to 10 years.” In 2018, the grassroots organization Together Louisiana contended that in that fiscal year alone, ITEP led to a \$1.9 billion loss in revenue for local governments.

As I conclude this dissertation, it is this question of futurity that seems to linger, just as it is this question of futurity that underlies my returns home. Like many of the authors and academics throughout these chapters, I look to the South as both a scholar and a southerner, and this project was born out of my own feelings toward Louisiana and the region, toward the place that I still think of as home, even though I have no intention of permanently returning. When I was younger, such an admission would have been an exciting, endless source of relief. Recently, though, the decision is tinged with grief.

In grappling with such questions and feelings, I end with a final turn to the South, a region marked by ongoing political struggle, and I maintain that the region has much to teach us about survival. In particular, I examine Jesmyn Ward's 2013 memoir *Men We Reaped*, which eulogizes five young Black men in Ward's coastal Mississippi community, including her younger brother, whose death at the hands of a white drunk driver haunts the text. Through the obituaries that puncture Ward's own memories of her life in Mississippi, *Men We Reaped* offers a meditation on a kind of grief that has fundamentally reshaped Ward's family and community. In grappling with the material causes and consequences of this grief, the memoir also directly interrogates the widespread expectation of resilience along the southern Gulf coast, where such resilience has been made an inevitable, ordinary affect of the everyday.

As I look to the work of Jesmyn Ward, who stands as the foremost southern literary voice in the twenty-first century, my work comes full circle. If the dissertation's first chapter presents Quentin Compson's "I don't hate it!" as the originary site of contemporary southern affects, ending with Jesmyn Ward's ambivalent resilience and grief in the face of the twenty-first century's precarity closes the loop. If Faulkner's work revolves around a changing South in the wake of the Civil War, highlighting the affects entrenched in the white southern consciousness shaped by a Lost Cause ideology, Ward's work offers an insight into the problems and feelings that define the modern South.

At the core of Ward's work, particularly *Men We Reaped*, lies a conscious commitment to the South, as she navigates the contradictory feelings that define life in the region.⁶ In tracing the refractions of such emotions, I end this dissertation not on a note of condemnation, but rather one that recognizes the affective legacy of the South as a model for survival. While the fourth chapter tracked such survival across the moments of climate catastrophe within the mythologized landscape and temporality of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, this coda ends firmly in the present day, turning to Ward's work as a more salient navigation of the social and racial politics that shape the everyday experiences of southerners and accompany these matters of futurity. In the precarity and vulnerability of our current moment, we have a responsibility to turn to the authors and thinkers that embody a deep commitment to place—to follow their example in mapping affective geographies that emphasize and prioritize collective survival within the contours of our contemporary moment.

Significantly, these problems are not singular to Louisiana or even the South as a whole. In the five years following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—itsself a mass death and disabling event—the disposability that often marks life in the South (particularly for the working class and communities of color) has become the norm through the erosion of both public health, social justice, and environmental protection initiatives. I started writing this coda a month into 2025, during the first official week of the second Trump administration, and already cruelty, catastrophe, and capitulation are steady benchmarks of our day-to-day. California burns, while the Gulf coast freezes. Vulnerable immigrant populations are subject to warrant-less searching and detainment, and the rights of transgender people are annihilated. The United States has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement, the few environmental protections enacted during the Biden administration

⁶ In *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward—like both bell hooks and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers in the second chapter—suggests a paradoxical relationship with the region: “How could I know then that this would be my life: yearning to leave the South and doing so again and again, but perpetually called back home by a love so thick it choked me?” (195).

have been repealed, and the expansion of oil drilling within the country has been demanded. Grief abounds, and vulnerability reigns.

This precarity is, of course, the culmination of years, decades, *centuries* of accumulation, consolidation, and exploitation; it is the logical ending point for a country built on white supremacy, patriarchy, and imperialism. And even as the vulnerability that has shaped life in specific regions and communities in the past begins to spread, the effects are still felt unevenly. Similarly, the demand for mass resilience is not met with the same feelings and is filtered through rage and ambivalence. As grief and vulnerability stand as the defining affects of our current moment—of, perhaps, the twenty-first century as a whole—these questions of survival remain, questions which are fundamentally shaped by the emotions that they inspire.

On Ambivalent Resilience

At the end of *Men We Reaped* Jesmyn Ward, reflects on her mother's life as a Black woman in Mississippi:

But as an adult, I see my mother's legacy anew. I see how all the burdens she bore, the burdens of her history and identity and of our country's history and identity, enabled her to manifest her greatest gifts. My mother had the courage to look at four hungry children and find a way to fill them. My mother had the strength to work her body to its breaking point to provide for herself and her children. My mother had the resilience to cobble together a family from the broken bits of another. And my mother's example teaches me other things: This is how a transplanted people survived a holocaust and slavery. This is how Black people in the South organized to vote under the shadow of terrorism and the noose. This is how human beings sleep and wake and fight and survive. In the end, this is how a mother teaches her daughter to have courage, to have strength, to be resilient, to open her eyes to what is, and to make something of it....Without my mother's legacy, I would never have been able to look at this history of loss, this future where I will surely lose more, and write the narrative that remembers, write the narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen.* It is not easy. I continue. Sometimes I am tireless. And sometimes I am weary.⁷

This "history of loss" refers to the deaths of Roger Daniels III, Demond Cook, C. J. Martin, Ronald Lizana, and Ward's brother, Joshua Dedeaux—five young Black men from Ward's hometown of

⁷ Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 250-251.

DeLisle. Each of these deaths occurred in quick succession between 2000 and 2004, and *Men We Reaped* is invested in both documenting these men's stories as well as reflecting on the ways in which their deaths impacted the community. In telling this history, Ward weaves through time, crafting two narrative threads—one which moves forward in time as she follows her family's experiences in DeLisle and another which moves backwards as she catalogs the lives and deaths of these five men, starting with the final death in 2004 and ending with her brother's death in 2000.

While *Men We Reaped* is very much invested in cataloguing the oft-ignored vulnerability of Black men in the South, this final turn to her mother suggests the social, affective, and familial weight of bearing *witness* to this vulnerability. Even as Ward memorializes her mother's strength and resilience, she is also calling attention to the physical and affective labor that sustaining such feelings requires in the face of immense and immutable grief—the weariness that the such emotions inspire.⁸ This emphasis on fatigue ties Ward's memoir to Lauren Berlant's concept of "slow death," which they define as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population."⁹ For Berlant, slow death depends on ordinariness, on the cultivation and proliferation of environments that are able to erode communities over time.¹⁰ Similarly, Ward's acknowledgment

⁸ Notably, Ward repeatedly attends to her mother's relationship with labor throughout the book, making clear that her mother's work is responsible not only for the survival of her family but also the upward mobility that Ward experienced. In detailing a moment of double consciousness from her youth, a conversation that a teenaged Ward had with the wife of her mother's employer who funded Ward's education at a private Episcopalian school, she writes: "...I thought about sitting in my mother's employer's family room, watching my mother clean while I waited for her to finish so we could go home. I thought of how it felt to witness my mother at work, of how I was very conscious in that moment of my dark skin, my overbite, my irascible hair, the way my hands itched to help my mother. How my legs tingled as I sat and looked at my mother as she worked, and how I was aware that the wife was talking to me like an intellectual equal, engaging me, asking about my college plans. How the privilege of my education, my eventual ascent into another class, was born in the inexorable push of my mother's hands. How unfair it all seemed" (202-203).

⁹ Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754.

¹⁰ As Berlant further explains: "Slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporal environments whose qualities and contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on, in which everyday activity; memory, needs, and desires; diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity" (759). At first glance, Ward's memoir, defined by the traumatic deaths of young men in her community, does not seem to fit neatly into this definition. Yet, as Ward's framing makes clear, the successive nature of their deaths—five deaths in four years—suggest some kind of normalizing pattern; Ward ties their deaths become the conditions of the community, region, and country. These deaths act not only as sites of grief, but of the kind of wearing down and exhaustion that slow death suggests.

of her mother's labor at the end of *Men We Reaped* also emphasizes the ways that living with this "history of loss" has sunk into the marrow of the everyday—has become, in a way, ordinary—in the lives of southern Black communities.

As Ward moves from her mother's legacy to her own, she further cements this connection between grief, resilience, and labor. In her reading of *Men We Reaped*, Stacie McCormick draws from the memoir's title to suggest that "Ward places herself in the role of 'reaper'—or collector of narratives of Black experience—making worlds and undoing others."¹¹ In doing so, Ward identifies herself as not only a witness to these deaths and a survivor of immense grief, but also an organizer who must constellate these deaths to make clear their pattern—to argue that they were not random nor circumstantial, but a product of systemic injustice. In the memoir's introduction, she elucidates this aim:

My hope is...I'll understand a bit better why this epidemic happened, about how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread here. Hopefully, I'll understand why my brother died while I lived, and why I've been saddled with this rotten fucking story.¹²

In her turn to this language of sickness—"epidemic," "festered," "spread"—Ward reframes the systems of white supremacist violence that have so deeply impacted her community, highlighting them as a fundamentally antithetical to the growth and maintenance of healthy communities. Such a frame also denies the very possibility of reforming such systems; a virus cannot be legislated and changed, only eradicated. Moreover, as she constellates her brother's death within this sickened network of failed systems, Ward calls attention to the external forces that act upon our lives and

¹¹ Stacie McCormick, "We Are Here: Jesmyn Ward's Black Feminist Poethics of Place in *Men We Reaped*," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 38, no. 2 (2023): 553. Furthermore, the title of the memoir also reflects a larger collection of narrative. The text begins with three epigraphs, one of which is from Harriet Tubman: "We saw the lightning and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped." As a "reaper," Ward collects the narrative of Black southern life in DeLisle while also constructs a larger genealogy of Black survival across history.

¹² Ward, 8.

emphasizes that the continued survival of vulnerable communities rests on the recognition and removal of such forces. Only then is “healing” possible; only then can futurity take root.

Furthermore, in casting the narrative within *Men We Reaped* as a “rotten fucking story,” the resilience that Ward remarks upon at the book’s close takes on a different sheen than the one that normally colors our stories of resilience, when we write them as something moving, aspirational. Instead, for Ward, any question of resilience becomes irrevocably tied to the violences enacted by state and systemic failures. What does it mean to be resilient in a world that does not care if you live or die?

Sociologist Sarah Bracke interrogates the relationship between a failing, negligent state and the emphasis on resilience. As the world becomes increasingly vulnerable through capitalism’s social and ecological catastrophes, Bracke suggests that expectations of resilience have a more sociopolitical function, as she writes:

I take resilience, in other words, not as a term to describe the ways in which individuals might deal well with the challenges of contemporary society, but as a key to investigate contemporary operations of power and notably to further explore processes of subjectification that belong to the realm of neoliberal governmentality and biopower. This point of departure understands neoliberalism not only in terms of political economy, but also as a cultural project bent on reshaping the structure of social relationships and subjectivities.¹³

For Bracke, resilience is to be understood as a kind of aspirational or “good” affective frame through which one understands their ability to persist in the contemporary era, but it also requires never questioning the cause of such precarity in the first place. As Bracke continues: “Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it.”¹⁴ As resilience is heralded as a vital affective frame for survival in the age of capitalism’s

¹³ Sarah Bracke, “Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 62.

¹⁴ Bracke, 62.

vulnerable refractions (as many of the celebratory responses to *Beasts* demonstrated), Jesmyn Ward's work stands a necessary deviation from our cultural scripts of resilience. For Ward, resilience is an ambivalent thing: required for survival in an unjust world, but also a reminder of the infrastructural absences that have necessitated its very inevitability.

Ward's works continually return to this ambivalent resilience as she grapples with the realities of Black life on the coast of Mississippi, often laying bare the inequities of what scholars such as Andreas Malm, Jason W. Moore, and David Ruccio call "the Capitalocene," a term meant to clarify capitalism as the engine of what is typically referred to as the Anthropocene.¹⁵ As capitalism's extractive principles feed from and fuel the exploitations of white supremacy that have manifested (and continue to manifest) systemically in the United States, precarity can only grow. For Ward, such precarity is felt keenly in the South, where a lack of economic opportunity couples with the aftermaths of slavery and the Jim Crow era and the threat of ecological devastation in the era of climate change, leading to an influx of grief and death that necessitates the maternal resilience that she understands as her legacy.¹⁶ For while Ward emphasizes the resilience that has become integral to the experience of Black communities in the Gulf South across her fiction and nonfiction, she also reveals the vulnerability that has necessitated it as well as the vulnerability that it perpetuates. Even as Ward writes her mother's resilience as a key part of her ability to survive, she still marks the labor of being resilient—the ways that resilience is an exhaustive mode through which to live, manifesting an inherited generational weariness.

¹⁵ See Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part 1: on the nature and origins of our ecologic crisis" (2017), as well as *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016), in which he credits Andreas Malm with coining the term as a graduate student in 2009. David Ruccio is typically credited with having been the first to publicize this frame through which the Anthropocene could be understood via a 2011 blog post that mentions "the Age of Capitalism" (<https://anticap.wordpress.com/2011/03/04/anthropocene%E2%80%94or-how-the-world-was-remade-by-capitalism/>).

¹⁶ Ward actually notes this relationship between social and economic forces in the memoir's final chapter, which opens with a list of statistics that highlight the precarity of Black life in Mississippi. At the end of this list, she underscores the forces acting upon and destabilizing her community: "By the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing" (237).

For Ward's community in DeLisle, resilience is the only way to persist—it seeps into the structures of community and family, becoming both an affective and relational frame for how people exist together and survive. Similarly, Bracke suggests: “In precarious times, resilience is the new security.”¹⁷ In other words, as precarity becomes more and more inevitable, resilience is employed as a new apparatus—given a new social, ideological, and moral weight. In this way, the expectation of resilience shatters the relationship between citizen and state, between citizen and citizen, shepherding an individualist model of relation that has itself been co-opted by the very systems that have necessitated it. Across Ward's work, the material conditions that have heralded her community's resilience cannot go unmentioned, as she rewrites resilience as a generational and communal burden that lays bare the state-sanctioned vulnerability that has cultivated it. Ward's ambivalent resilience refuses a reconciliation of one's own precarity with the physical, emotional, and communal management that neoliberal resilience demands.

On Grief

For Ward, living in a world that demands resilience has become synonymous with a world that has been fundamentally shaped by grief. As such, *Men We Reaped* operates first and foremost as a work of obituary. In the chapters named after the men whom she grieves, Ward offers snapshots of their lives and deaths, connecting their experiences to both the community that they left behind and the tragedies of racial and class warfare that preceded them. More significantly, Ward's obituaries act as a salient documentation and remembrance of each man—an acknowledgement that they were once *here*. In telling the “rotten fucking story” of their deaths, she also makes sure to recognize the wholeness of their lives. Rather than allow them to disappear into the statistics of violences that she turns to at the end of the book, she instead offers the reader an insight into their lives, emphasizing in particular moments of kindness, joy, and love. In telling each man's story, she

¹⁷ Bracke, 57.

also constellates them within the larger community of DeLisle, which, like an obituary, offers a list of those who survive and mourn them.

Highlighting the memoir's relationship to the work of the obituary further underscores the role that grief plays in the world-making suggested by Ward's reaping. To this point, I turn to Judith Butler's essay "Violence, Mourning, and Politics," which examines the global power of the obituary. While Butler's work considers the violence wreaked by the United States abroad, the attention to the meaning constituted by the obituary as both form and genre is particularly prevalent to the regional and national aims of *Men We Reaped*. As Butler contends:

There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition. Although we might argue that it would be impractical to write obituaries for all those people, or for all people, I think we have to ask again and again how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy. As a result, we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building. The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note.¹⁸

In concretizing this link between the written form of the obituary and the affective state of "grievability," Butler not only underscores the relationship between language and the felt effects of mourning but also asserts what is at stake in the attention that we pay to grief. For Butler, the obituary has the power to obstruct erasure and render visible multitudes of life. In such a framework, recognizing lives as grievable and feeling acutely the subsequent grief acts as a kind of resistance. Butler reorients the affects of national binding, questioning what becomes of us and our communities if we make space for and center grief in a public sphere.

¹⁸ Judith Butler. "Violence, Mourning, and Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020), 34.

In light of Butler's work, approaching *Men We Reaped* as an obituary further stresses the affective aims of the text—its miring in the politics of this grievability. Reflecting on the experience of such grief, Ward even echoes Butler's language of "worth":

But this grief, for all its awful weight, insists that he matters. What we carry of Roger and Demond and C. J. and Ronald says that they matter. I have written only the nuggets of my friends lives. This story is only a hint of what my brother's life was worth, more than the nineteen years he loved, more than the thirteen years he's been dead. It is worth more than I can say. And there's my dilemma, because all I can do in the end is say.¹⁹

Ward centers grief as a significant affective force; like Butler, she links this language of grieving with that of recognition. In doing so, grief offers a kind of resistance, a refusal to mark bodies and lives as disposable, particularly those that have violently marginalized by the state.²⁰ Even as Ward laments the limitations of what the text can capture—as language fails to fully encapsulate the entirety of their lives—*Men We Reaped* refuses to let them disappear from memory, asserting that they are, in Butler's words, "worth a note." The eponymous chapters inspired by these men grant the reader small slivers of their lives and rejects their erasure from the world at large. They are grieved, documented, and remembered, by not just their community but the network of Ward's audience.

Moreover, Ward writes of grief as something active—a feeling that recognizes, that spurs, that binds. In such a framework, *Men We Reaped* seems to offer a kind of domestic answer to the questions posed by Butler at the end of "Violence, Mourning, and Politics." In considering the role that grief can play in the relationship between Americans and the rest of the world, Butler asks:

If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?²¹

¹⁹ Ward, 243.

²⁰ Such a sentiment feels quite familiar, as the kind of resistance embodied in the turn to grief mirrors the same rhetorical and affective strategies that accompany the discourses surround the violence faced by Black Americans at the hands of the police. Significantly, within two years of Ward's writing and publication of *Men We Reaped*, the Black Lives Matter movement exploded following the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. In the decade that followed, the different demonstrations and protests following the murders of victims, such as Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, return to this same question: in a world defined by violence in all its myriad forms, whose lives are deemed worthy of recognition, remembrance, and grief?

²¹ Butler, 30.

Butler suggests that the experience of grief—to actually feel the loss of another—forces a reconsideration of our attachments to and relationships with others. Within the international frame through which Butler writes, the felt experiences of grief offer a counter to the dehumanization and erasure that accompanies the violence of the American state abroad. Within the United States, Ward highlights a similar kind of force, emphasizing the precarity her community faces, in her words, at “the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power.”²² Against such conditions, Butler’s final question seems particularly relevant, especially for those outside of the communities most affected. To grieve, in other words, stands as a vital responsibility in this era of precarity into which we have all been shepherdded; to grieve stands as an acknowledgment of injustice and a rejection of erasure.

On Futurity

Across *Men We Reaped*, both ambivalent resilience and grief are inherently mapped matters of futurity, of surviving beyond absence, neglect, and violence, particularly in the South, where such forces have played a fundamental role in both the past and present of the region. For Ward and her community in DeLisle, their survival defies the orders of power that have deemed their lives disposable. As she concludes the work of obituary undertaken in her memoir, Ward details what such survival comprises:

We who still live do what we must. Life is a hurricane, and we board up to save what we can and bow low to the earth to crouch in that small space above the dirt where the wind will not reach. We honor anniversaries of deaths by cleaning graves and sitting next to them before fires, sharing food with those who will not eat again. We raise children and tell them other things about who they can be and what they are worth: to us, everything. We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die. We survive; we are savages.²³

²² Ward 237.

²³ Ibid., 250.

The final line cements that this work of survival is a refusal of the dominant powers that structure our world; it marks the reality that living *in spite of* such systems requires detachment from them, to be marked as “savages.” Furthermore, the passage further links the relationship between grief and futurity as it moves from the maintenance of graves to the rearing of children. Ward conjures an image of gathering, one in which the graves of those who have died are tied to the persistence and connection of those who remain. The pivot from this image to that of children suggests that both play a crucial role sustaining the community’s survival.

Within these articulations of futurity, Ward also employs the apt metaphor of the hurricane, to suggest a particular relationship with the land of the South as well, one that in itself reflects the generations of strategies southerners have used to survive natural disasters along the coast. Mentions of soil repeat across the line, as they “bow low to the *earth* to crouch in that small space above the *dirt* where the wind will not reach.” Like bell hooks’ turn to the hills of Kentucky in the second chapter, Ward’s emphasis on the physical land of Mississippi acts as an assertion of belonging—a reclamation of the ecological space that makes up the place they call home even as they are ostracized and marginalized by the state powers that demarcate and govern it.

McCormick further affirms this complicated relationship through her attention to Ward’s use of “reaping”:

The contradictory nature embedded in the very term of reaping reflects how Ward deploys the concept to write Black life in Mississippi...Within this definition, we see both removal, in the sense of cutting and clearing away what the land has yielded, and gathering together what has been uprooted. Ward depicts the ways in which Black people are often tragically removed from a place as well as how they endeavor to survive. Through this powerful geographical paradox, she resists the binary that would inscribe Black life in Mississippi only in the contexts of despair and death.²⁴

Through her attention to the dual-edged reaping that Ward employs throughout *Men We Reaped*, McCormick highlights the “geographical paradox” that has come to define many works that take

²⁴ McCormick, 547.

place in the South. In mapping such a paradox, Ward accompanies the prevalence of “despair and death” that so often accompanies configurations of Black life in the South with the immense love that she feels for her family and her larger community. The South that she draws for her reader is one that is shaped by both the cruelty of the state and indomitable will of the people who survive despite it.

I return to this point about contradictions and the paradoxical feelings that define life in the South because they feel even more relevant now in 2025 than they did when I started this project nearly four years ago. In the span of time that I have spent writing this dissertation (or even, in the seven years that I have spent in graduate school), the world has shifted; I have been writing and teaching alongside an onslaught of events that have only deepened a pervasive sense of vulnerability and insecurity. Even the weeks between starting this coda and finishing it have seen damage to federal institutions, unfettered oligarchical and technocratic power, and the targeted erosion of the fundamental rights of marginalized people. Moreover, all of these events trail the lasting consequences of an uncontained pandemic, in which the life and health of the everyday citizen were deemed disposable by a federal government that prioritizes capital above all else. In a moment defined by exhaustion, by a growing lack of faith in institutions, and by a general sense of precarity, the future feels incredibly uncertain.

This tie between economic, social, and affective precarity echoes Astra Taylor’s work in *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*. In attending to this intersection of vulnerability, Taylor underscores the pervasiveness of “manufactured insecurity” as an engine of capitalism in our modern era.²⁵ She highlights that such insecurity is sustained not only through the material conditions of our lives, but the emotional ones as well:

²⁵ Taylor separates manufactured insecurity from what she terms “existential insecurity.” In distinguishing between the two, she writes “This kind of insecurity, which I’ll call “manufactured insecurity,” is quite unlike the existential insecurity

Part of the insidious and overwhelming power of insecurity is that, unlike inequality, it is subjective. Sentiments, or how actual people actually feel, rarely map rationally onto statistics; you do not have to be at rock bottom to feel insecure, because insecurity results as much from expectation as from deprivation...Economic issues, I've come to realize, are also emotional ones...²⁶

Acknowledging such emotional issues feels crucial in our current moment, as senses of overwhelm, hopelessness, and fear spread in the face of the colossal forces of capitalism, authoritarianism, and injustice. But, significantly, even as this moment is repeatedly referred to as unprecedented, our circumstances are not new. Different places across our world and our country have been subject to instability, to draconian laws and government cruelty, to infinite iterations of state-sanctioned violence and the over-reach of power. For some communities in the South, this vulnerability is the norm. And yet, such communities are also sites of vital, continuous political struggle, whether it be in the face of racial oppression, ecological degradation, or the destruction of reproductive rights. At the core of such struggle is a belief in futurity, in the possibility of a different world than the one in which we live.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward maintains an understanding of survival and futurity as something that depends on reimagining and reforming the geographies that define the places that we call home. As Ward makes clear, there is a certain exhaustive labor to imagining such futures—an affective labor that requires us to foster attachments to these places, to invest in them and believe that we have a responsibility to the people around us, even when faced with alienation, violence, and despair. Similarly, Taylor underscores that “how we understand and respond to insecurity is one of the most urgent questions of our moment, for nothing less than the future security of our species hangs in the

that is inherent to human life...Where the latter is an ineradicable feature of our being, the former is a mechanism that facilitates exploitation and profit and is anything but inevitable” (10).

²⁶ Astra Taylor, *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2023), 11.

balance.”²⁷ For such a future, can we imagine and bring to fruition new, sustainable models of solidarity and connection in the face of this profound vulnerability?

The answer to this and similar questions seem to be answered through the titles of Ward’s chapters. While the sections of obituary reflect the names of Roger Daniels III, Demond Cook, C. J. Martin, Ronald Lizana, and Joshua Dedeaux, the chapters of memoir, in which Ward reflects on her relationship to Mississippi, bend toward the collective. They all follow the same structure: *We Are in Wolf Town*, *We Are Born*, *We Are Wounded*, *We Are Watching*, *We Are Learning*, and *We Are Here*. The first and final of these chapters are geographically-minded, assertions of location rather than status or action. In fact, the final chapter—“*We Are Here*”—seems to offer an amendment to the first. In “*We Are in Wolf Town*,” Ward delineates her family’s history as intertwined with the history of DeLisle, which was originally referred to as Wolf Town before being named after a French settler.²⁸ The final chapter removes this specificity, as Ward shifts into the language of survival outlined by the previous passage, survival in the face of violence that goes far beyond the borders of the South. In the ambiguity of “here,” Ward shifts outside of the region. “Here” not only pertains to Mississippi, but the world at large; the geography is something altogether new, contoured by grief and resilience, by the will to survive an environment meant to usher in slow death. As McCormick argues: “‘Here’ implies transience and conditionality, and is arbitrary because it shifts with the subject—therefore being ‘here’ is full of possibility.”²⁹ In shifting with the subject, “here” suggests not just their physical location, whether it be defined in the language of land or borders, but the subject’s own attitudes and attachments. In such a frame, possibility is an orientation toward the world, a necessary mode of persistence.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Ward, 9.

²⁹ McCormick, 548.

In the South, this sense of possibility has long operated as the engine of resistance, as an endless amount of people have felt an attachment to the region in the face of its troubling matrix of history, catastrophe, and injustice. In southern literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these attachments are always at forefront, always intrinsically shaping the Souths produced across each text. The affective geographies that we attune from these reproductions often tell a different story from the man-made borders drawn through conquest and exploitation as they provide alternate models through which the region can be understood—they reveal, they reclaim, they reimagine. And in the precarity of our time and the vulnerability of our space, embracing such geographies matters more than ever. *Here*, we can map the feelings that fuel survival under unjust worlds. *Here*, we can facilitate the building of new ones.

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