
Faune Albert
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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A Dissertation Presented

by

FAUNE ALBERT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of English

A Dissertation Presented

by

FAUNE ALBERT

Approved as to style and content by:

___________________________________________
Asha Nadkarni, Chair

___________________________________________
Emily Lordi, Member

___________________________________________
Laura Briggs, Member

____________________________________________
Randall Knoper, Chair

English Department
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ABSTRACT


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FAUNE ALBERT, B.A., HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Asha Nadkarni

This dissertation explores the affective impacts of historical trauma around slavery and segregation in the US South, arguing for the importance of understanding US Southern history through the ways in which it has lived and continues to live in and on the bodies of Southerners marked by race and gender and class and within emotional life in the South. The texts in this study—Gayl Jones’ Corregidora (1975), Dorothy Allison’s Trash (1988), Ellen Gilchrist’s Net of Jewels (1992), and Natasha Trethewey’s Native Guard (2006)—engage the affective impacts of intergenerational and insidious trauma through portrayals of Southern women struggling to give voice or expression to experiences of trauma that oftentimes elude language or expression. Through works that are largely semi-autobiographical, these writers explore the ways in which racialized and gendered histories of violence and exploitation, and the felt experiences of exclusion and erasure from the dominant narratives of the South and Southern Womanhood that these histories perpetuate, get written onto the body, inscribed in embodied experiences of the everyday, including experiences of reproduction and sexuality. By excavating affective histories of trauma, they show how these living histories, inscribed upon bodily and affective experience, shape individual and collective experiences of shame, loss, and
abjection in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century US South—but they also show how pain and loss and shame co-exist with pleasure and joy and power and vulnerability. In doing so, these narratives open possibilities of experiencing these living histories in different ways, of cultivating new relations to these histories, to sense of selfhood, and to sense of belonging in the South. They map an affective history of the South that is dynamic and multiple, and inescapably relational, challenging the foundations on which the fantasy of the US South has been constructed and asking us to reimagine traditional paradigms of identity and belonging in the South, to consider the embodied nature of trauma and history, and to develop new ways of listening to bodies and emotions and the stories that they tell.
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PREFACE

ON HEALING THE WOUNDS OF HISTORY

In the fall of 2019, I attended a talk by the renowned Southern poet and Pulitzer Prize–winner Natasha Trethewey. Trethewey’s lecture largely focused on the erasure of Black history and Black lives from the historical records of the US South. But she also spent significant time talking about the personal loss of her mother. This would not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with her 2006 collection *Native Guard*, which weaves together these different forms of loss and erasure—the personal and the collective—into a Black geography of the South. Trethewey, a Southerner whose mother was Black and father is white, spoke about seeing her mother, who was murdered by Trethewey’s abusive stepfather, in a dream after she had been killed, a hole from a bullet through her forehead. Trethewey followed her, and her mother spoke, asking her a question—a question, Trethewey explained, that has been the driving force of her work ever since: How do you heal a wound that never heals?

When I began my dissertation several years ago, one of my primary inspirations, a text I knew I wanted to write on, was Trethewey’s *Native Guard*. And when I heard Natasha Trethewey articulate this question all these years later, it helped clarify exactly what it was about this collection of poetry that spoke to me and resonated through the work of each of the texts I had chosen to write on. *How do you heal a wound that never heals?*

The wound has been theorized in trauma studies as a site of traumatic rupture experienced within the psyche, characterized by a fundamental absence that conditions a
sense of loss and longing.\textsuperscript{1} My reading of the wound that Trethewey speaks of understands it, too, as a site of absence and loss, but as an affective site that is bodily \textit{as well as} psychological—the pain of loss and longing rooted in the body and in \textit{feeling}, physicalized through the haunting image of the hole in the forehead and the way that this longing continues to be felt in the body, in that space between mind and body, after the poet has awoken from this dream.

For Trethewey this wound has to do with the loss of her mother. But, as evidenced in her writing, it also extends beyond this personal loss to the violent and violating history of the South, to the ways in which the fullness of Black lives has, for centuries, been erased from this history, and the ways in which Southern African Americans have been denied a claim to the place that, for many, is considered home. The loss of Trethewey’s mother, a loss, as her poems show, that is experienced within the body, resonates against this broader pattern of Black loss in the South, deepening that wound—the loss and longing for a part of herself that can never be recuperated, for a sense of belonging within a narrative that continues to erase her.

The embodied sense of loss and longing for recognition within a narrative of the South, a narrative of belonging that systematically excludes or erases some bodies while idealizing others, is fundamental to Trethewey’s poetics in \textit{Native Guard} and, in different ways, to each of the texts in this dissertation. And yet, while the affective wounds of loss and unbelonging, of violence and shame, that these texts register are indeed the kind that

\textsuperscript{1} In \textit{Unclaimed Experience}, Cathy Caruth describes the term \textit{trauma}, within the Freudian paradigm, as a wound inflicted upon the mind which is experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again.” Trauma, she writes, is thus always “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not other available” (3–4).
‘never heal,’ if we imagine healing as an end that can be finally achieved, what these texts, Trethewey’s among them, show us is healing as an ongoing process—a dialectical process that is affective and embodied, that is made visible through writing and through the bodily inscription of histories.
INTRODUCTION

AFFECTIVE HISTORIES OF SOUTHERN TRAUMA

*In my dream,*
the ghost of history lies down beside me,

rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.
—Natasha Trethewey, “Pilgrimage”

This dissertation explores the affective impacts of historical trauma in the US South, arguing for the importance of understanding US Southern history in its multiplicity and through the ways in which it has lived and continues to live in and on the bodies of Southerners and within emotional life in the South. The texts in this study—Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Dorothy Allison’s *Trash* (1988), Ellen Gilchrist’s *Net of Jewels* (1992), and Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard* (2006)—engage the affective impacts of trauma in the US South through portrayals of Southern women struggling to give voice or expression to experiences of trauma that are psychological and embodied and which oftentimes elude language or expression in any straightforward manner. Through works that are, save for Jones,² largely semi-autobiographical, they grapple with questions of history, memory, and identity as they investigate the ways in which the South’s prolonged history of racialized and gendered violence—from slavery to segregation to post-slavery, and the associated forms of trauma, epic and everyday, that accompanied these phenomena—continues to impact upon the bodies and affective or emotional lives of women in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century South, shaping modes of being and feeling, both personal and collective. They turn their

² Though even *Corregidora* is, according to Jones, based on the stories that were passed down in her family, so it, too, might be considered within the broad frame of semi-autobiographical writing.
attention to the realm of affect in order to capture the intangible, though no less palpable, effects of this continued violence on the bodies and minds of Southerners, specifically US Southern women, and to imagine possibilities of healing. In this way, these writers map an affective history of the US South.

For Rhoda, Ellen Gilchrist’s privileged protagonist, the expectations of Southern white womanhood implicated within the South’s history of racial violence create deep anxiety and instability that coalesce around experiences of reproduction and motherhood and which are displaced onto the Black women in the novel who perform its reproductive labor yet are persistently erased. Gayl Jones, by contrast, writes from the first-person perspective of a young Black Southern woman whose loss of her womb opens up the traumatic histories of violence and sexual abuse that her grandmothers suffered under slavery and initiates a struggle with vulnerability. This chapter, coming directly after the Gilchrist, explores the effects and affects of the erasure that the former enacts and builds on the theme of reproduction that it introduces. Following Jones, Dorothy Allison’s collection of semi-autobiographical stories, *Trash*, also explores an identification, Southern “white trash,” that has been erased from the dominant narrative of progress in the New South; Allison examines the ways in which this state of abjection figures boundaries of the self and the social and considers writing as a form of reproduction that might heal rather than perpetuate legacies of violence, silence, and shame. Trethewey’s embodied poetics of loss in *Native Guard* likewise looks at the effects of historical and ongoing erasure of Black life from the South, showing how the senses of loss and alienation that this creates are written onto the bodies of Black Southerners and onto the
Southern landscape as body of the South, but also how bodies can becomes bearers of history and monuments to these losses.

As such, each of these authors explores the ways in which racialized and gendered histories of violence and exploitation and the felt experiences of exclusion and erasure from the dominant narrative of the South that these histories perpetuate, even as they also constitute histories of violence, get written onto the body, inscribed in embodied experiences of the everyday—experiences of reproduction and sexuality where boundaries of body and selfhood are rendered permeable, but also in the quotidian acts and gestures of everyday life in the South. In doing so, these authors excavate affective histories of trauma; they present affective responses to historical trauma, showing how these histories of violence, exclusion, and erasure continue to circulate within affective life. Through experiments in form and genre, they expose the fractured bodily, psychological, and emotional lives of their female protagonists. But in showing how these histories are inscribed onto bodies and emotional lives, these narratives also reveal their transformational power—the possibility of experiencing these living histories in different ways, of cultivating new relations to these histories, to sense of selfhood, and to sense of belonging in the South. By harnessing the affective power of language and narrative—their capacity to move us to action, and to open up new realms of being—these authors rescript the effects of Southern trauma on Southern selfhood, rewriting vulnerability as powerful, shame as pleasurable, and loss as change.
Why the US South? What are the Stakes?

The history of the US South is marked by intertwined forms of racialized, gendered, and classed violence and trauma whose effects and affects continue to persist into the present, haunting the material, psychic, and affective landscape of the US South and, by extension, the nation. Yet the dominant narratives of the South from the early twentieth century up through the late-twentieth century and into the present have sought to escape, or at the least to modulate, this history of trauma, framing the story of the South either as a story of nostalgia for a glorious past of honor and nobility or as a narrative of progress that leaves the past behind. These outwardly conflicting narratives—one constructed by the Southern Agrarians in the early twentieth century and the other associated with the South’s embrace of industrial capitalism over the course of the twentieth century, which in many ways formed the foundation for the New South—thus perform a similar function, obscuring the violence and trauma of the South’s past and present in their attempt to give it a legible, palatable narrative that fits within a larger national narrative. As such, these narratives, in their quest to disentangle the South from the stigmas that have long been attached to it, leave little room for the messiness of

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3 The New South, as opposed to the Old South, is generally considered to be the term for the South after Emancipation, and especially in the twentieth century; it is often associated, as Melanie Benson Taylor describes in *Disturbing Calculations* (2008), with ideals of change and progress that took hold in the twentieth-century South. Though I don’t employ this term across the dissertation when discussing the South of the twentieth century, I do so where I refer more specifically to the South as associated with these ideals, such as in the chapter on Dorothy Allison.

4 Indeed, as Melanie Benson Taylor claims, Southern capitalism gave way to disappointment as Southerners realized they had simply “[replaced] one lost cause (the plantation) with another (the marketplace)” (*Disturbing Calculations* 13).

5 See *The South as an American Problem* (1995), eds. Larry J. Griffith and Don H. Doyle, for greater exploration of some of the ways in which the South has been persistently stigmatized. As I note shortly, Riché Richardson also discusses this in *Black Masculinity in the U.S. South* (2007), referencing the aforementioned volume.
everyday Southern life—a messiness that attention to the body and feeling necessarily brings into focus.

The dominance of these narratives serves as evidence of the widespread unwillingness, or hesitancy, to engage with the irreducible complexity of US Southern history and history more generally. It speaks of investment instead in sanitized narratives of reconciliation and progress—investments, this dissertation argues, that are largely borne of a cultural and national shame around the violences committed and experienced, violences that are historical and ongoing, and an inability to address this shame and the other complex and messy feelings and emotions that circulate around these forms of violence and around the South as a site of historical trauma within the nation. “We are not done with slavery,” Sharon Patricia Holland writes, “because we have yet to thoroughly investigate its psychic life” (31). Likewise, this project contends, we are not done with slavery, nor segregation, nor the afterlife of slavery whose violence continues to play out on a daily basis, until we investigate its affective life—the ways in which it infuses emotional life in the South and throughout the United States and how it impacts embodied experience. In other words, how it is woven into the textures and fabrics of our lives, even as it is most salient within the South where these forms of trauma have been centered and where their erasure is most palpable.

For this reason, attention to affective histories of trauma and affective responses to historical trauma is vital, for it helps to illuminate the ways in which these forms of trauma continue to circulate in the present—not only through material continuities, such as those described by Saidiya Hartman as the “afterlife of slavery,” but through their

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6 Hartman, in her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother*, describes the “afterlife of slavery” as the continued devaluation of Black lives “by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries
affective impacts, through the circulation of affects that open up past histories and shape bodies and worlds in the present. Looking at the ways in which these Southern authors write affective histories of trauma helps to disrupt the dominant narrative of the South, exposing its inherent multiplicity and relational nature, as well as the ways in which this narrative depends upon the erasure of some identities, which are in fact central to the construction of the South.

The question of how to define the US South has long been a complicated one, subject to much debate and interpretation. For my purposes in this dissertation, I consider the US South both as a region and as a socio-economic, political, and cultural construct that exceeds its geographical boundaries—a construct that is often associated in the national imagination with a specific history and culture but whose ideological boundaries, over the last several decades in particular, have become more permeable. Though the linked traumas of slavery and segregation, and their afterlife, were not geographically limited to the US South, plantation slavery in the US was a distinctly Southern phenomenon (meaning it took place in the South, even if enabled by actions in other

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7 The US South is often defined, both for historical and geographical reasons, as being comprised of the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia and Arkansas (US Census Bureau). While this dissertation takes the US South as a region whose boundaries are roughly coterminous with this grouping of states, the delineation of the geographical borders of the South is ultimately less important to this project, which acknowledges that these boundaries may shift depending on which South one is referring to (the Old South or the New South, for instance—both of which are relevant within this dissertation) and what period in time.

8 Jennifer Greeson makes this argument for the South as a construct in Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature (2010).

9 Indeed, while chattel slavery in the US primarily took place in the South, other regions of the country were complicit in upholding this institution, returning escaped slaves to the South to face certain torture and generally perpetuating the idea that enslaved peoples were not human. Likewise, segregation occurred throughout the country, but it was more through custom in the North and through law in the South. The exploitation of labor through capitalism is also a national (global) phenomenon, which was embraced by the South secondarily and had distinct effects in this region/culture.
regions of the country), and the Jim Crow laws that mandated racial segregation were enacted in what were considered Southern states, even as racial segregation was practiced on a de facto basis throughout the North and other areas of the country. Racial violence in the US South, during slavery but also during the Jim Crow era, was much more flagrant, more ubiquitous and out in the open than in the North or other regions, and, at the same time, the white South developed its own particular and perverse culture of silence surrounding this violence.

While I recognize the importance of examining the ways in which different forms of historical trauma around slavery, segregation, and post-slavery get passed down and reenacted outside of the US South on both on the national and global level, as well as how other aspects of the South’s history and identity resonate with areas of the Global South, I focus here on the US South in order to consider the ways in which affective histories of trauma circulate within the US South and how this region impacts the ways in which the characters in these narratives experience their sense of identity and belonging—which, for all of them in different ways, is tied to the US South. As Riché Richardson argues, region has been a neglected term in pondering primary variables that intersect in shaping identity, such as race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality, even as the US South has played an important and organic role in shaping many prevailing ideologies of race in the US, as well as some of the most dominant and influential

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conceptions of masculinity and femininity (*Black Masculinity* 8, 10). For this reason, the US South serves as an especially fruitful ground for considering the relation between trauma and identity as shaped at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

Additionally, because the US South itself occupies what Richardson refers to as an “abjected” status within the national context, existing as a “pariah region” in which some identities, whether because of race or class or gender or sexuality or other facets of identity, are excluded and viewed as socially undesirable, focus on this region enables attention to the ways in which the terms that provide the foundation for exclusion for some of the characters in these narratives—for instance, the subject of Dorothy Allison’s *Trash*, who is labelled as Southern “white trash”—have to do with their roots in the South, with the pathologizing of the US South and Southern subjects.

The authors explored here are writing between the years 1975 and 2006, a span of just a little over thirty years during which the country experienced the hopefulness and disappointments of the Civil Rights and feminist movements and a subsequent rise in conservativism, alongside the anxieties of the Cold War, which gave way to a growing multiculturalism and the spread of a neoliberal politics. These years brought increased poverty and alienation to the US South, even at times when other areas of the country appeared to thrive. In the face of increased frustration with the limited opportunities and persistent systemic exploitation, marginalized people from various groups sought to reclaim possibilities of resistance, part of which involved examining the effects of inherited trauma, both material and psychic, upon these groups. The texts in this study are part of this push toward re-examining the traumas of the nation, specifically those

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11 As Richardson notes, the South has long been constituted as a “problem” in the nation’s history, serving as a repository of national shame and other undesirable feelings.
grounded within the history of the US South, and the ways in which those traumas continue to impact those who call the South home, yet in different ways are marked as outsiders.

Despite the continued existence within the popular imagination of a romanticization of the South and a narrative of Southern progress, both of which necessarily exclude identities and experiences not legible within these terms and those rendered illegible by these terms, the dominance of these narratives has diminished, particularly within the last thirty years, with the emergence of the ‘New Southern Studies’ from the more traditional (and traditionally white, male, and conservative) field of Southern studies, and with expansions of the fields of Black feminism, trauma studies, and Black studies, among others. This study joins those scholars currently working in and at the intersection of these fields\(^\text{12}\) to examine the effects of trauma rooted in the unique history of the US South. I hope to add to this emerging conversation through a centering of affective responses to trauma—a consideration of the ways in which affective histories of trauma continue to circulate within Southern life and how these histories are encoded on bodies, determined by the cultural codes that map the lives of individuals and communities. The forms of trauma that characterize these narratives complicate the distinction between political ideology and trauma, showing how the positioning of subjects within political and socio-economic systems that render them “other” can have traumatic effects and can in fact constitute forms of trauma.

While these histories of trauma shape feelings of abjection, shame, ambivalence, and loss, they also present possibilities of healing from trauma. In her work on trauma

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\(^{12}\) These include, among others, Ashraf Rushdy, Riché Richardson, Saidiya Hartman, Houston A. Baker Jr., Thadious Davis, Melanie Benson Taylor, Patricia Yaeger, and Tara McPherson.
and memory in African American women’s writing, Jennifer Griffiths argues that, while the dominant cultural scripts work to silence Black trauma and to sever the voice and body of African Americans, testimony that acknowledges and explores the complex connections between memory, language, and body—that enables the integration of body and voice—can provide alternatives to those cultural scripts and restore a sense of connection to the survivor of trauma, which in itself is healing (Traumatic Possessions 10). The texts in this study likewise figure possibilities for connection through the relation and integration of body and voice, and they also engage in the “wake work” that Christina Sharpe theorizes through their imagining of mourning as a process embedded in life—through their explorations of what it means to live with loss without being held captive by it and by the past. By writing affective histories of Southern trauma—exploring the ways in which these diverse forms of trauma impact modes of being and feeling in the South—they rescript possibilities for Southern selfhood, and in doing so they present roadmaps for navigating the resonances of the past in the present and the complicated, messy present while also continuing to move forward.

This project represents only a small sliver of a piece, a possible step toward understanding how the affects and effects of these traumas continue to influence the ways in which people act and respond to one another and to difference and otherness in the South and, by extension, in the United States and the world. But still, the stakes are high, for they have to do with our individual and collective capacities to move toward healing.

13 To live “in the wake” of slavery, Sharpe claims, is “to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding . . . Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased” (In the Wake 13, 15). Living in the wake Sharpe argues, requires a practice of mourning embedded in living—a way of recognizing this continued subjection without being paralyzed by it.
to learn how to live with loss and pain, in the wake, as it were, of trauma, without letting it overtake us—how to negotiate the feelings of shame and ambivalence that traumas of violence, exploitation, and exclusion can create, and how to hold space for those feelings while also creating room for others, for connection and love and pleasure and vulnerability. There are no easy answers; living with trauma is an ongoing process, but learning to recognize the complex ways in which it marks our lives, and our own agency within that, is imperative.

**Southern Trauma and the Narrative of the South**

**The Ideology of True Womanhood**

The works in this dissertation focus on racialized and gendered histories of trauma in the US South and their impacts upon Southern women. These histories of violence and trauma are intimately bound up with the construction of Southern womanhood, initially framed through the ideological discourse of True Womanhood, which defined the boundaries of acceptable female behavior in the South from roughly the 1820s until the Civil War and whose influence on norms of Southern femininity continues to be felt even today. While Southern womanhood is similar to traditional American ideals of femininity more generally in the way that it valorizes women’s identities as wives and mothers, its close connection to Southern patriarchy, white supremacy, and the Southern aristocracy mark it as distinctly Southern. Southern womanhood is also distinct for the way in which the “Southern lady,” the emblem of Southern True Womanhood, became a stand-in for

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14 While historians differ on the exact origins of the Southern lady, with some seeing its roots in class, some in slavery, and some in patriarchy, most agree, Anne Goodwyn Jones contends, that the function of Southern womanhood has been “to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race” (“Belles and Ladies” 44).
the South itself, positioned at the core of the South’s very identity (“Belles and Ladies” 43–44). As such, this ideology of Southern womanhood was integral to the construction of the narrative of the South and the exclusions that this narrative depended (and continues to depend) upon—exclusions, of African Americans, poor whites, and other marginalized populations, that themselves constitute forms of violence and trauma that affect the characters in these texts in terms of their sense of selfhood and belonging within the South.

The ideology of True Womanhood idealized Southern women as pure and innocent and virtuous, qualities that were reflected in their physicality—in features such as pale skin and slim figures. They were supposed to be charming yet appropriately chaste, all expressions of desire and sexuality limited to the realm of reproduction and oriented towards their intended roles as wives and mothers (Carby 27, 23). As such, this ideology left little room for the expression of autonomous female selfhood or desire; in attempting to mold themselves to fit this ideal, Southern women were expected to neglect what desires they might have of their own, thus reinforcing the strength of the Southern patriarchy.

In addition to upholding Southern patriarchy, the ideology of True Womanhood justified white supremacy and economic supremacy of the elite classes by excluding Black and poor women from this category of womanhood, and because True Womanhood was central to the South’s identity, it effectively excluded African Americans and poor whites from the narrative of the South. As slaves, Black women

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15 While historians differ on the exact origins of the Southern lady, with some seeing its roots in class, some in slavery, and some in patriarchy, most agree, Goodwyn Jones contends, that the function of Southern womanhood has been “to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race” (“Belles and Ladies” 44).
were generally forced to work long hours outside the home; many worked in the fields, becoming strong and weathered (as opposed to the imagined “delicacy” of the Southern lady). Additionally, their marriages were often controlled by their white slave owners, and familial relationships often disrupted when family members were sold. In other words, Black women, because of the conditions of their enslavement, seldom typified the fragility and propriety of “true” women, though their vulnerable status often led them to strive to be included in this protected class (Jenkins 6, 13). Likewise, poor white women also often worked hard to support their families; as Matt Wray notes, one of the early observations of poor whites in the South was that the women appeared to work harder than the men—which was a sign to the observers of the perversity or backwardness of their way of life (32).

Thus, Black women and poor white women in the nineteenth century were generally understood by whites as existing outside of the bounds of Southern True Womanhood—even as this construct provided an ideal to which they were compelled to strive in order to prove their womanhood, and even as Black female sexuality, and to a lesser degree the sexuality of poor white women and others deemed to inhabit “deviant” sexualities, was used to delineate its boundaries (Jenkins 6–7). Under slavery, Black female sexuality, was figured—to suit the narrative of the white supremacist patriarchy and to justify the gendered and sexualized forms of violence inflicted upon Black women by whites—either as nonexistent or, through the image of the jezebel, as licentious and excessive (the opposite of the “true” woman). The sexualized body of the Black woman, Candace Jenkins writes, “was represented in nineteenth century iconography as the ultimate source of disease and corruption” (8). These representations of Black female
sexuality, in particular the image of the jezebel, were used to justify rape and forced childbearing, forms of racialized and gendered violence used as tools of political and economic domination by white men and ways for plantation owners to increase their labor force (*Black Sexual Politics* 59).\(^\text{16}\)

While white elites had less of a stake in the sexuality of poor white women, whose reproduction did not increase their labor force, poor whites in the nineteenth century began to be recognized as a problem, first to be hidden away and later to be “treated.” As reproducers of this class of people, the bodies and sexuality of poor white women were seen as sources of corruption, which existed outside the bounds of the ideal of Southern womanhood. In other words, their existence at the margins of white society was written onto their bodies and sexuality as marks of their otherness.

Thus, while this ideology of Southern True Womanhood had destructive and traumatic effects on the lives of Southern women, both white and Black, who struggled to meet this impossible ideal, this violence and trauma looked very different for elite white women, non-elite and poor white women, and Black women; while it limited the expressions of selfhood and bodily autonomy for elite white women, it served to exclude poor white women and Black women from the narrative of the South and to justify the violations experienced by Black women.

\(^{16}\) The figure of the “Southern lady” had its counterpart in the “Southern gentleman,” a beacon of charm and goodwill against which Black masculinity was positioned. Black men, like Black women, were portrayed as inhuman and sexually aggressive, and this characterization only gained traction in the decades following Reconstruction, during which Southern whites sought to keep free Blacks “in their place” (i.e., subordinated to whites) through the portrayal of the extreme vulnerability of white women to Black male predation. From the end of the nineteenth century up through the 1930s, numerous Black men were lynched under the oft-invented guise of having made untoward advances towards white women, thereby threatening their inherent purity and, by extension, the purity of the white race.
The Southern Agrarians and the Narrative Construction of the South

The ideology of Southern True Womanhood provided a justification for the plantation South and was essential to the formation of the narrative of the South consolidated by the Southern Agrarians in the early twentieth century. This narrative was developed as a response to the literary stagnation in the South in the post-Reconstruction years up through the turn of the century and to fears about the loss of the glory of the Old South. In the post-Reconstruction decades, the social, political, and economic effects of slavery continued to be deeply felt throughout the South, and racial violence—exacerbated by D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film, Birth of a Nation, which put Southern White Womanhood on a pedestal, presenting racist stereotypes of rapacious Black men seeking to prey on innocent white women—was rampant. This continued violence and discrimination led a substantial number of African Americans, along with many white progressives, to leave the South, migrating north in a movement that came to be known as the Great Migration. The effects of this movement were indexed in the flagging status of Southern cultural production. Notable exceptions include the African American writers, Pauline Hopkins, whose final novel, Of One Blood, was published in 1903, and Charles Chesnutt, who was born in Ohio but moved to North Carolina at a young age, and whose final novel was published in 1905. Thus, though their legacies continued long after, neither of these writers were prolific beyond the very early twentieth century.
Consequently, H.L. Mencken’s influential 1920 critique\(^\text{18}\) of the lack of intellectualism plaguing the post-Reconstruction South cut to the core of white Southern intellectuals’ sense of pride, precipitating a renewed valorization of Southern identity driven by the will to create or recover a Southern literary tradition that would counter this image of intellectual vacuousness. This catalyzed a Southern literary renaissance, or “Southern Renascence,” as it was often termed. At the center of this “Renascence” were the Southern Agrarians (also known as the Fugitive Agrarians), an insular group of poets and scholars,\(^\text{19}\) white-identified and primarily, though not exclusively,\(^\text{20}\) male, who sought to create a core culture of the South through their charting of a Southern intellectual history, particularly in their 1930 anthology *I’ll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays that attacked notions of “progress” and “modernity” as inherently corrupting, setting them up in opposition to a religiosity that they idealized as the foundation of traditional Southern culture (*Inventing* 11). The Southern Agrarians used their power and position in order not only to entrench their narratively constructed history of noble agrarianism as the history of the South but also to solidify “the South” as an already existent and cohesive object—they “deliberately presented a fabricated South as the one and only real thing” (*Inventing* xii).

\(^{18}\) In H.L. Mencken’s 1920 essay “Sahara of the Bozart,” he argued that, while the South had once been a “civilization of manifold excellences—perhaps the best that the Western Hemisphere had ever seen” (158), it had since been reduced to little more than a “vast plain of mediocrity, stupidity, lethargy, almost of dead silence,” a place of “complete sterility,” characterized by a “lack of all civilized gesture and aspiration” (161). The cause of this barrenness Mencken attributes to the loss of the “best blood” of the South, whether through the war, or, in the face of the depression that followed, the evacuation of the region by the remaining Southern elites and intellectuals (161).

\(^{19}\) Influential members of the group included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren.

\(^{20}\) The novelist and eventual wife of Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, was the only female associated with this movement.
While Southern progressives were more interested in the facts of Southern history and looked to the future as “the time in which the meaning of social experience could and would be perfected,” the Agrarians held stubbornly to their nostalgic belief in the honor of the past and their desire to salvage this ‘idyllic’ past from the refuse of history lest it be forgotten (*Inventing* 15). As such, their narrative of the South rested on an exaltation of ‘pure’ and ‘noble’ white Southern femininity as the foundation of Southern identity. The exclusions perpetrated by the ideological bounds of True Womanhood were also important to the Agrarian vision of the South, which depended upon the obscuring of all ‘unwanted’ elements in order to corroborate its idealized version of history. Because the Agrarians were able to present a unified vision of the South, it is this vision that dominated up until the 1960s. While this unified narrative of the South has, in the decades since, faced many challenges, giving way, as I explore below, to multiple narratives attentive to the South’s diverse histories and present, including the narrative of progress tied to the rise of industrial capitalism in the New South, the nostalgic vision of the Southern Agrarians persists in the popular imagination even today—as evidenced in the continued popularity in some areas of the South of Civil War reenactments and the ongoing debates about the presence of Civil War monuments, as well as, for instance, in Donald Trump’s very recent public professions of nostalgia for *Gone With the Wind*.

Though the protagonists of each of the texts in this dissertation experience a feeling of outsiderness in relation to the narrative of the South—they are each cast out of or in excess of this narrative—it is not necessarily the Agrarian narrative that they are responding to (after all, the earliest of these texts, *Corregidora*, was published in 1975), but more so the narrative of Southern womanhood, and, for some more pointedly, of the
New South. But as we see, Southern womanhood, the ideal of the Southern lady, was integrally bound up with the Agrarian’s idealization of the Southern past, for it served as an emblem of the ‘greatness’ of that past—its untouchability, its purity, its innocence. Thus in seeking to open up affective histories of trauma in the South, exploring the ways in which these racialized and gendered histories continue to circulate through their inscriptions on bodily and emotional life, and in seeking to create new narratives that embrace the everyday messiness of bodies and feelings in relation to trauma and history, these authors push back against the Agrarian tendency not only to romanticize the past but to flatten it, to present it as a static mythology.

**The Post-Reconstruction and Early-Twentieth Century South**

Though the ideology of True Womanhood shifted after Emancipation and post-Reconstruction to accommodate the associated shifts in the meaning of race and reproduction, it nonetheless remained a powerful force in the South—one which served to consolidate the identity of the hetero-patriarchal white-supremacist South and which continued to justify violence against Black women and men, and poor and other marginalized women, and to limit the possibilities for women’s expressions of selfhood. The boundaries of Southern womanhood came into focus, perhaps most clearly, at the site of reproduction, which had long been central to the ideal of Southern womanhood and to the identity of the white South. Reproduction, as Alys Eve Weinbaum argues, is integrally bound up with nation formation; racial identification gets consolidated—and disrupted—through the act of reproduction, and, likewise, the continuity and composition of nations is rendered through the reproduction of their differently-racialized citizens (37, 12). In the plantation South, even as elite white women were defined through their roles
as wives and mothers, it was Black women’s reproduction that enabled the flourishing of the South because of the law that dictated that any child born of a slave mother was born into bondage. Black women’s reproduction therefore increased the plantation labor force that was the driving engine of the South’s economic prowess.

After Emancipation, however, reproduction in the South no longer served those purposes. Instead, as racial significations shifted in the post-Reconstruction era, so too did the meaning of reproduction. While white women’s reproduction became tied to the creation of property in the form of white citizens, Black women’s reproduction, no longer the production of a slave labor force and now the production of non-white citizens, became refigured as a threat to the white nation (Weinbaum 21, 41). The reproduction of poor white women was also increasingly seen as a threat to the South and the nation because it represented the perpetuation of a class of people who did not conform to the narrative of civilized whiteness, and it thereby represented the possibility of internal corruption and decay—which was, for some, more threatening even than the production of a Black citizenry (Wray 63).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, amidst a climate of heightened racial tensions and incipient class distinctions, emerging eugenic discourses sought to stabilize the perpetually shifting ground of reproduction by linking narratives of civilization, progress, and national belonging to white women’s reproduction, thus shoring up once again ideologies of White Womanhood and directly connecting them to the future of the United States. This placed renewed pressure upon white women in the South to fulfil their ‘duty’ to have children and be obedient wives and doting mothers and led to the forced sterilization of many Black and poor white women throughout the
country, and especially within the South where there was a larger concentration of Black and poor women. Those threatened with sterilization were women who did not fit the ideal of the Southern lady and whose reproduction was deemed a threat to the image of the nation as a nation of progress and to the South as a region of progress—a region that was seeking to escape its pariah status and reputation as backwards (a status that the Agrarian narrative had ironically helped to enforce) and be recognized as modern, civilized, and respectable.

Reproduction had long represented a site of conflict and contradiction for Southern women, a site of bodily regulation but also an area where women had some limited measures of autonomy—how much depended on their racial and class identifications and positioning within these systems of power—and a place where the precariousness of bodily boundaries was thrown into relief and where the messiness of embodiment was difficult to deny. It is fitting then that reproduction is a central theme in the majority of the texts in this dissertation—represented as a site of both trauma and possibility around which the imaginative work of creating new modes of being and feeling and new relations to the South often coalesces.

The histories of trauma that these authors explore include trauma from slavery but also from the violences of the Jim Crow era in the South and the insidious culture of boundaries and silence that this era perpetuated. While *Net of Jewels* is set in the midst of the Civil Rights movement at a time when racialized boundaries were being challenged and eroded, the taboos of this era loom large within the text, and Rhoda’s struggle with selfhood has to do in part with her inability to navigate these shifting boundaries. *Native Guard* is the other text in this dissertation that deals explicitly with this time period, and
many of Trethewey’s poems index the felt effects of segregation, showing how, for instance, the violence of the anti-miscegenation laws was inscribed onto her own body as well as the geographical boundaries that marked her life. Though parts of Corregidora do take place in the segregation-era South, the novel is more concerned with the boundaries between Black women and men than between Blacks and whites—but the silences that mark the novel, which surface in Native Guard and which also run through Trash, much of which is set in the 1960s and ‘70s, might be considered in part to evoke or resonate with the culture of silence that Jim Crow wrought in the South.

The Jim Crow laws, state and local laws that mandated racial segregation in most public places, were passed, along with anti-miscegenation legislation, in much of the post-Reconstruction South by white Southern elites fearful of losing their power and dominance. While racial segregation was the de facto norm throughout much of the country, the South was the only region where it was codified into law. Segregation, especially as it existed in the South, was a rigid system that necessitated the maintenance of clear boundaries between racial groups. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, under this system “an obsession with racial classification, racial identity, and monitoring interracial sexual contact became central to the edifice of racial meanings” (Black Sexual Politics 62). The rigid boundaries of segregation were, as Lillian Smith explores in Killers of the Dream, mapped onto bodies and onto spaces such that they permeated all aspects of

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21 The term “miscegenation,” meaning racial mixing, began to circulate during the Civil War. While some states had laws outlawing racial mixing going back centuries, it was in the decades of the early twentieth century that over half the states in the US (30 out of 48) ratified laws outlawing miscegenation.

22 Smith writes, “Signs put over doors in the world outside and over minds seemed natural enough to children like us, for signs had already been put over forbidden areas of our body. The banning of people and books and ideas did not appear more shocking than the banning of our wishes which we learned early to send to the Dark-town of our unconscious” (76).
Southern life, creating an atmosphere of perpetual anxiety and dread—which we see reflected in Gilchrist’s novel in Rhoda’s anxiety.

These boundaries were enforced by and through violence, with lynching and rape emerging as “interrelated, gender-specific forms of sexual violence” used to keep Black women and men in their place (Black Sexual Politics 63). Whereas during slavery lynching was primarily used to silence white abolitionists, it became in the post-Reconstruction years one of the favored mechanisms used by Southern whites to enforce violence against Blacks who they felt in some way threatened their own supremacy or disturbed the existing (white-dominated) power structures in the South. The primary justification for lynching was the rape or sexual assault of white women by Black men—even as studies show this was a much rarer occurrence than was promoted and much of the lynchings were actually carried out for other reasons. One of the ways that poor white Southerners, relegated to the margins of the South, gained access to an identification with whiteness and a feeling of racial superiority was through their support for lynching.

The vilification of Black men in the Jim Crow era corresponded with a return to and strengthening of gender norms for Southern white women, as white Southern womanhood was held up with ever more forcefulness as a beacon of purity and innocence. As a result, many white Southern women, particularly women of the growing middle and upper classes, continued to experience the demands of Southern womanhood as constrictions on their selfhood and autonomy. At the same time, the image of the immoral jezebel also continued to circulate and to be used as justification for the unrelenting sexual predations of white men on Black women. The possibility, post-Emancipation, of an autonomous Black female sexuality and desire constituted, for white
Southern men, a threat to the social order, which, along with increased fears around miscegenation, led to heightened efforts to police and exploit Black women’s bodies and sexualities—including through the campaigns of forced sterilization that were part of the early eugenics movement (Black Sexual Politics 72, 71). The harmful effects of the stigmatization of Black women’s sexualities are indexed in Corregidora through the character of Ursa, and this novel likewise calls up the history of forced sterilizations as a form of violence perpetrated on Black women’s bodies, showing, I argue, how that history is connected to Black women’s feeling.

Amidst the continued threats on Black women’s bodies and selfhood, the persistence of lynching and other forms of racial violence in the South, and the limited opportunities for upward mobility, many Blacks left the South in the early decades of the twentieth century in search of better conditions and more opportunity, and many who stayed in the South, such as Jones’ Ursal, migrated from the rural areas to cities. The early-to-mid-twentieth century also saw the rise of industrial capitalism in the South. Though the South’s transition from an agricultural economy premised on slavery to an industrial economy under capitalism had begun in the late nineteenth century after Reconstruction, it was slow to embrace this change, in part because of the widespread nostalgia for its agrarian (i.e., slaveholding) roots and the racial hierarchies that accompanied that way of life that the Agrarian vision of the South instilled. The promise

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23 As Matt Wray discusses, eugenic researchers in the early twentieth century, researching poor whites throughout the South and other areas, found evidence to support the fact that poor whites had higher levels of criminality and other unwanted qualities, which they attributed to “cacogenics”—that is, kinds of sexual reproduction deemed deviant and unhealthy, most often in the form of incest but also in the form of cross-class and interracial sex (Not Quite White 18). Poor white women were subsequently targeted through legislation that mandated forced sterilization and involuntary institutionalization; this was codified into law with Buck v. Bell in 1926.

24 For many Black women, the move to urban areas helped them to avoid the trappings of rural domesticity (Black Sexual Politics 71).
of capitalism, by contrast, was a promise of economic opportunity and the rewarding of hard work irrespective of race. It was the promise of a “New” South not bound by its violent and shameful past, depicted instead through a new narrative of growth and development and infinite potential.

And yet, despite the promise embedded in this ideal of the New South, its reality, as Melanie Benson Taylor argues, was ultimately one of exploitation and alienation felt by white and Black Southerners alike. While some did benefit from the new economy, it was often the same people who had benefitted under the old economy—the white Southern elite class. The majority of Blacks, as well as poor whites, were shut out from the gains of Southern capitalism, excluded from this narrative of Southern belonging just as much as they had been excluded from the Agrarian vision (Disturbing Calculations 13).

For Southern women of all racial backgrounds, the shift to a capitalist economy, bolstered by women’s suffrage in 1920, did bring some increased opportunities to escape the expectations of Southern womanhood that had been, in different ways, thrust upon them. The early twentieth century saw more women joining the workforce and a relaxation of the moral code within the broader United States and especially in urban areas (Disturbing Calculations 96). But the South remained more conservative than much of the rest of the country in terms of its gender norms, which were, as we have seen,

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25 The early-middle decades of the twentieth century also saw class distinctions emerging within the Black community. As a heterogenous Black middle class formed, social class began to emerge as a key differentiator in African American populations, creating rifts within the Black community around issues such as “respectability” and access to resources. See Angela Davis Women, Race & Class, especially Chapter Three “Class and Race in the Early Women’s Rights Campaign,” for a more detailed discussion of these developments.
inextricably tied to its sense of identity—which, though evolving, was still attached to ideals of virtuosity and nobility embodied by the Southern lady and gentleman.

Additionally, because capitalism was founded on the same racialized and gendered principles of exclusion that belonged to the Old Order in the South, and because the South remained a heavily patriarchal culture, the possibilities for women’s realizations of independence, financial and otherwise, were limited (*Disturbing Calculations* 128). Southern women from varied backgrounds therefore found themselves engaged in a struggle for autonomy within a system that allowed them more room for self-definition while at the same time refusing them the space necessary to cultivate autonomous selves. The character of Rhoda in *Net of Jewels* in many ways exemplifies this paradoxical positioning; as a privileged white woman of the elite class, she enjoys substantial freedom in her life, and yet her economic attachments to her patriarchal father expose the limitations of that freedom—even where she makes her own decisions, the novel shows us the gendered constraints that inform those decisions.

This was especially pronounced for Black women in the South, who carried the double burden of racism and sexism, both within the dominant white society and their own community. The struggles faced by white Southern women were compounded for Black Southern women by issues of racial discrimination, sexual exploitation, and systemic oppressions, including the fact that many raised families alone due to the increased incarceration of Black men. The differential socio-economic circumstances of Black and white Southern women’s lives shaped the ways in which they experienced gender and sexuality. While many Southern white women grasped at an identification not centered around reproduction and motherhood, Black women still struggled with being
viewed as subjects rather than as objects of possession and sought to shed the damaging stigmas surrounding the image of the jezebel and an excessive Black female sexuality.

Additionally, while Black Southern women, too, sought identifications not bound up with motherhood, their relationship to reproduction and motherhood was very different than that of white women, as these areas of womanhood had, for Black women, historically been regulated and exploited by whites. As a result, Black women often experienced conflicted relationships to both domesticity and sexuality; even as sexuality was one of the few realms in which many Black women during this time could exercise autonomy and thereby distinguish themselves as free women, their desire for respectability often led them to embrace more conventional norms of Southern femininity.\(^\text{26}\) We see this struggle represented in Ursa’s conflict around vulnerability, sexual and otherwise, in Corregidora; if we compare Ursa’s cautious and precarious relation to her sexuality to Rhoda’s unbridled flaunting of her sexuality, these differences come into stark relief.

These cultural shifts were, to some degree, reflected in the literature coming out of the South in the early twentieth century, even as publishing in the South continued to be largely dominated by elite white men up through the mid-to-late twentieth century. While William Faulkner, whose epic vision of the Southern past resonated with the Agrarian vision, was the undisputed darling of the burgeoning Southern literary canon,

\(^{26}\) See Candace Jenkins’ *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007) for a more detailed examination of the ways in which sexuality functioned, for Black women in the early decades of the twentieth century, as both a realm of opportunity for the realization of autonomy and a site of danger that required self-policing so as not to reinforce the harmful stigma of the jezebel that plagued Black female sexuality. Jenkins describes what she terms the “salvific wish” as a “black, largely female, and generally middle class desire—a longing to protect or save black women, and black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity” (14).
the 1920s and ‘30s nevertheless saw a variety of new voices entering the Southern literary sphere—among them the African American authors Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Yet, though these authors wrote from the positions of Southerners, questioning and engaging with the complex history of the South, African Americans were not generally considered “Southern” writers until many decades later—perhaps because many of these Black Southern writers refused to present the nostalgic, mythic version of the South that so occupied Faulkner and that the Agrarians sought to propagate and preserve.

While the Agrarians maintained their hold upon the Southern canon through the 1960s, the societal shifts in the South and throughout the country in these early-middle decades of the twentieth century made history and specifically the topic of race impossible to ignore. W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, published in 1929, served as a veritable indictment of the Agrarian desire to preserve the myth of Southern—privileged, white—identity. Cash’s book helped open the door to other critics of the South, such as his friend Lillian Smith, whose 1949 semi-autobiographical novel, *Killers of the Dream*, functions as a psychological critique of the South. Additionally, the early-mid twentieth century—the ‘30s, ‘40s, and ‘50s—saw a proliferation of representations of what Gary Richards terms “sexual otherness” in Southern fiction.

More Southern women writers also emerged during this time and in the 1960s, writers like Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Katherine Anne

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27 Though this will be discussed in more detail later in this Introduction, I will say here that this speaks, again, to the longstanding entrenchment of the division between “African American” and “Southern” writers that Patricia Yaeger seeks to upset in *Dirt and Desire*. *Dirt’s* 2000 publication date also belies the idea that there ever came a point, 1970s or otherwise, when African American writers writing from or about the South in general began to be unproblematically accepted into the Southern canon or even simply as Southern writers.
Porter, among others, whose writing drew attention to the particular experiences of women in the patriarchal South. Yet, this was still primarily writing by white Southern women—Black Southern women had less access to publishing, and when they did, as with Zora Neale Hurston, their work was less apt to be considered within the rubric of Southern literature. As Michael Kreyling writes, in considering the Southern canon, the 1960s might be thought of as belonging to the white female author more than anyone else. While women’s writing, even that of white women, still remained peripheral at best in relation to the Southern canon, these texts and others were engaged in the task of reconfiguring traditional Southern notions of place, community, and sense of self—a reconfiguration that became even more pronounced in the following decade (Inventing 125). The visible appearance of these writers on the Southern literary landscape corresponded with and undoubtedly helped to precipitate a shift in the ways in which the South and Southern identity were conceived of and eventually opened the door to a greater and more diverse proliferation of voices within the field of Southern literature and representations of Southern identity.

**Shifting Ground: Civil Rights and Second-Wave Feminism, and Beyond**

The frustrations over lack of opportunities for advancement and continued racial discrimination became even more pronounced during and after WWII, which precipitated shifts in the American family structure and in gender norms, as more women of varied racial and ethnic identifications entered the workforce and headed their families while the men went to war. After the war, these frustrations continued on multiple fronts: women did not want to go back to the domestic sphere, and there were simultaneous pushes for greater opportunities for women. At the same time, this was met by renewed efforts to
(re)consolidate the traditional family structure, with women in the home and men at work. Likewise, African Americans, many of whom had fought in the war, demanded greater equality and sought an end to segregation. This, too, was met by renewed efforts to keep Blacks from gaining power.

The simultaneous momentum towards societal change and conservative reactionism that developed in the face of these pushes for change ultimately led to the emergence of the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement. The Civil Rights movement, which began in the early 1950s and lasted through the late 1960s, was largely understood as a response to the prolonged local and systemic violence and exploitation, vestiges from slavery and from a failed Reconstruction, faced by Blacks in the United States and in the South in particular. The events of the movement dramatically shifted the landscape of the country and the region in a variety of ways: the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling declared segregation in schools unconstitutional; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting; and the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision in 1967 ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional. These legislative changes were accompanied by changes both small and large in social relations between whites and African Americans and other minority groups, as well as between men and women of various racial and ethnic identifications.

During these decades, Black and white women and women from other underrepresented groups also began to come together, to varying extents, to agitate more forcefully for their rights, with attention on social inequalities, the family, and issues of
sexuality. The second-wave feminist movement was born out of this organizing, but, as with earlier feminist organizing,\(^2\) it was often plagued by the lack of intersectional analysis from white women, especially middle and upper-class white women. Issues such as access to birth control, the renewed use of sterilization on Black, poor, and other underrepresented women, racial discrimination and violence against women—issues that had long plagued women and had been the subject of previous efforts at feminist organizing, too—as well as equal opportunity in the workplace and questions of sexual autonomy and sexuality, were dividing women as much as they were uniting women. This ultimately led to a fracturing of the movement and the emergence of Black feminism as its own strand of feminist organizing distinct from the mainstream feminist movement—which was itself composed of various strands, such as socialist feminism, radical feminism, and Marxist feminism.

The Civil Rights and feminist movements created new paradigms for understanding the relations between race, class, gender, sexuality, and other facets of identity in the United States; these movements reshaped understandings of the country’s

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\(^2\) While I have not spent much time in this Introduction on the feminist organizing of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were indeed significant efforts at feminist organizing made by Black and white women. This organizing tended to be more centered around legal issues, in particular the issue of suffrage, and the feminist organizing of this time was closely tied to the abolitionist movement. As Angela Davis discusses in *Women, Race & Class*, free Black women, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs, were some of the strongest advocates for abolition and against lynching (Ida B. Wells in particular) and were also some of the most eloquent and compelling voices arguing for women’s suffrage. But their voices were not always heard or valued by white or Black men and white women engaged in these struggles. While, Davis argues, one of the key things that made Black women so persuasive in their arguments was their lived experience at the intersections of these marginalized identities, Black and woman—lived experience that informed their passionate advocacy for social justice—this positioning was not always, or often, recognized, and Black women’s voices and knowledge were often subordinated to those of white men, Black men, and white women. See *Women, Race & Class*, Chapter Two “The Anti-Slavery Movement and the Birth of Women’s Rights,” Chapter Three “Class and Race in the Early Women’s Rights Campaign,” and Chapter Four “Racism in the Woman Suffrage Movement,” in particular (though other chapters also take this up), for a more nuanced discussion of early feminist organizing in the US.
history, of the relationships between systems and individuals, and of power and resistance. And they had a significant impact on literary production in the South and the nation more broadly, opening up space for a proliferation of new voices—especially the voices of African Americans, women and men, and white women. Whereas until this point Zora Neale Hurston represented the sole Black female voice on the twentieth-century Southern literary scene, the 1970s finally saw the emergence of other Black female Southern authors, many of whom were influenced by and identified with Black feminism. Most notable among these were Alice Walker, who cites Hurston as a primary influence, as well as Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler, who, while not Southern, addressed issues of slavery and Black Southern life in their writing. Gayl Jones, too, emerged on the literary scene as a Southern writer. Much of the Southern fiction around this time, particularly that written by Black women, takes up questions about historical memory, slavery, and violence in relation to sense of self. Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man*, the former published in 1975 and the latter in 1976, deal explicitly with these themes while also addressing the question of healing: how can Black women and men, whose bodies and minds have been subject to untold historical violence, find space for healing, for joy, for connection with one another? While there continued to remain a categorical divide between Southern literature and African American literature, these writers helped to reshape understandings of Southern history and its relation to identity.

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29 Alice Walker is credited as one of the founders of “womanism,” which was a key tenet of the Black feminism of the ’70s and which refers to feminists of color or Black feminists.

30 Several of the essays in Walker’s 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, as well as her 1975 essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” take up her relation to Hurston as one of her literary foremothers.
The 1970s and the following decades saw continued shifts in the types of literature being produced as well as the forms of criticism that were developing; and these shifts, as they often do, coincided with those taking place in the social, political, and economic spheres. The 1976 election of the first US president from the Deep South, Jimmy Carter, a staunch Democrat, did much to further the changes in the meanings of Southern community and Southern history that had already been percolating for some time. However, though Carter was a vocal and adamant supporter of Civil Rights, he also sought to create unity between the South and the rest of the country, which resulted in efforts to shift the rhetoric surrounding the South from focus on its problematic history of racial violence and exploitation to emphasis on the more benign ideal of Southern community (*Inventing* 52).

While the massive change taking place across the country and in the South in the ‘60s and ‘70s held the promise of a new era for many Southerners, especially Southern Blacks and poor whites, this promise would ultimately turn to disappointment for many of the most vulnerable populations. Despite the political victories of Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the gains of the feminist movements, the conservative, white backlash against equal opportunity together with the dismantling of efforts for equal opportunity from the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush in the ‘80s and early ‘90s led to the stalling (or rather lack) of the promised economic development envisioned by Civil Rights and feminist activists (*Black Sexual Politics* 80). The ‘90s saw the end of the Cold War, which had for decades fueled a kind of insidious anxiety throughout the country, and with it the rise of neoliberalism and global expansionism, along with emerging discourses of multiculturalism, which widened
the wealth gap, both globally and domestically, while promoting a vision of progress and possibility that sought to mollify the narrative of the country’s violent and complicated history. These shifts were reflected to varying degrees within the South, where the region’s economy continued to struggle, causing higher rates of poverty and feelings of loss and frustration.

At the same time, these decades saw an expansion within the academy of areas of academic study and political thought. The work of Civil Rights and Black feminist/feminist activists and scholars had already begun to enter the academy, reshaping the growing fields of Black studies and feminist studies and reorienting considerations of identity around intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Trauma studies, too, which had long been dominated by the Freudian paradigm, and to a lesser extent perhaps, the Lacanian one (both perspectives that professed a kind of objectivity rooted in a universalist, white, male subject position) underwent major shifts. While trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman built on the Freudian paradigm through their theorizations of trauma as fundamentally a crisis in representation, and their linking of trauma to narrative, other voices in trauma theory sought to think further about the ways in which trauma is connected to various facets of identity, both group and individual. Much of the work in trauma studies to that point had been focused on the Holocaust; this included theorizations of intergenerational or inherited trauma, such as the work of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, which argued that unresolved trauma containing gaps and absences could be passed from one

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generation to the next such that descendants of trauma survivors feel as if they have
directly experienced the trauma,\textsuperscript{32} and theories of collective memory and trauma, which
were initially invoked by Freud and then taken up by others and eventually applied to
events outside the Holocaust, such as slavery in the Americas.\textsuperscript{33}

Trauma theorists, drawing on the lessons of Civil Rights and the feminist
movement, also began to pay more attention to the gendered dimensions of trauma and to
argue that violence is an integral and everyday part of women’s sexual and domestic
lives—that “patriarchy itself traumatizes women” (Horvitz 15). The considerations of the
relationship between trauma and structural oppressions, how structures of power cause
trauma to vulnerable individuals and populations, were taken up by feminist
psychotherapist Maria Root, who developed a theory of what she termed “insidious
trauma” to describe the cumulative effects of the damage inflicted upon those marked as
different or ‘other,’ particularly by racializing discourses, by and within hegemonic
structures of power. This concept was elaborated and defined by Laura Brown as
“traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or

\textsuperscript{32} Nicholas Abraham’s 1987 essay “Notes on the Phantom” describes intergenerational trauma through the
figure of the phantom, as the passing of unresolved trauma containing gaps and absences and secrets from
one generation to the next, such that descendants of trauma survivors feel as if they, too, have experienced
the trauma (289). This theory was elaborated in Abraham’s 1994 book, \textit{The Shell and the Kernel}, written
with Maria Torok, and has more recently been theorized through configurations such as postmemory
(Marianne Hirsh \textit{The Generation of Postmemory} 2012) and haunting (Marisa Parham \textit{Haunting and
Displacement in African American Literature and Culture} 2008).

\textsuperscript{33} Integrally connected to the notion of collective memory, which was articulated by Maurice Halbwachs in
his 1950 \textit{The Collective Memory}, the concept of collective trauma has more recently been taken up by
scholars such as Pierre Nora (\textit{Realms of Memory} 1996–1998), Jeffrey Alexander (\textit{Trauma: A Social Theory
2012}), and Ron Eyerman (\textit{Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity
2002}). The identity of a people and its constitutive individuals is tied to their collective memory, Eyerman
argues, which can be described as “the combined discourses of self: sexual, racial, historical, regional,
ethnic, cultural, national, familial, which intersect in an individual” (Singh et. al. qtd. in Eyerman 7). These
intersecting discourses form a metanarrative that a community or group of people shares and within which
the meaning of individual lives and memories is oriented. Collective trauma, in Eyerman’s view, has to do
with “a tear in the social fabric,” a disruption to the affective system that affects a group of people, often
resulting in a crisis of identity or meaning (Eyerman 2).
threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (“Not Outside the Range” 107). The concept of insidious trauma—which breaks down the traditional idea of trauma as an event that disrupts a sense of universalized normality, instead pointing to the fact that everyday “normality” varies drastically across different individuals and social groups—helps to explain the sustained ways in which everyday heterosexism, racism, classism, and other forms of interpersonal and systemic discrimination cause trauma that may not be immediately evident as such because it is integrated into the self over time. Many of the forms of trauma in the texts that this dissertation examines can be understood through this framework, as well as through the frameworks of inherited and collective trauma. Rhoda’s persistent anxiety and instability, Allison’s class shame, the shame and fear of exploitation and vulnerability that Ursa experiences—these can all be understood within the rubric of insidious trauma.

Alongside, and connected to, these shifts, the ‘80s, ‘90s, and 2000s saw further attention paid to formerly under-recognized and under-studied populations, such as the subjects of colonialism and queer people in the US and across the world. The rise of

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34 Feminist theorists working at the intersections of trauma and affect theory have, in recent years, also sought to challenge the conventional view of trauma, with Lauren Berlant advocating a move away from the term “trauma” altogether—a term that suggests the rupture of the ordinary by the extraordinary—in favor of “crisis ordinariness,” which accounts for what happens when “crisis” supplants the “ordinary” as a mode of living (p. 4, Cruel Optimism 2011). Ann Cvetkovich, alternatively, develops a queer approach to trauma that seeks to break down the divisions between the public and private (what constitutes “public” and “private” trauma) that have long held sway in this field (An Archive of Feelings 2003). Though her work focuses largely on sexual trauma, she addresses traumas of racism in the US, writing, “The challenge is that these national traumas are buried more deeply in the past than the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and other geopolitical sites of trauma where there are living survivors, and thus they require different theoretical and memorial strategies. At the same time, they continue to haunt the present, and they take surprising forms, appearing in textures of everyday emotional life that don't necessarily seem traumatic and certainly don't fit the model of PTSD. Whether the language of trauma is used or not, the project of investigating racial histories needs to be part of an interdisciplinary trauma studies. Everyday forms of racism, many of which are institutional or casual and thus don't always appear visible except to those who are attuned to them, are among the effects of longer histories of racial trauma (6).” Another way to think about trauma that departs from conventional understandings of trauma as a catastrophic event is through Ron Eyerman’s claim that one should speak not of traumatic events but traumatic affects—that it is not the event that is traumatic but the way that it is interpreted or assimilated (Griffiths 4).
postcolonial and queer theory in the ‘80s and ‘90s, along with the proliferation of innovative approaches in feminist theory and Black feminist thought and ethnic studies in general, going back to the late 60s, drew increased attention to questions around embodiment and subjectivity and incited a desire on the part of literary scholars to re-think issues of place and movement in relation to marginalized people in both the US South and Global South.

Likewise, these decades saw the continued emergence of new voices in literature addressing Southern identity in powerful and previously unexpected ways, presenting pictures of the South and Southern identity that had previously been ignored or undervalued. For instance, Dorothy Allison’s exploration of Southern lesbian “white trash” identity, and her uncensored representation of the profound shame of severe poverty, forced readers to confront a reality that had heretofore been hidden away.35

While the Southern fiction of the early twentieth century tended towards the epic, attempting to come to grips with a history envisioned as monolithic and monumental, the fiction of the later twentieth century, by contrast, saw the history of the South as less fixed and more complicated and contingent. These new waves of writing, including the emergence in the late ‘90s and early 2000s of authors engaged in exploring the relationship between Native American identity and the US South,36 and poets like Trethewey engaged in exploring the relation between individual and collective history in relation to the South, were invested in uncovering the multiplicity of histories that belong to the Southern US and exploring the ways in which those histories continue to manifest

35 This is especially significant because, though Allison writes primarily about ‘white’ subjects, the differently racialized identity of the “white trash” subject disturbs the conflation of whiteness with purity and nobility that the Agrarians, for instance, had once sought to uphold.
36 Linda Hogan and LeAnne Howe are two Native, Southern writers who address this relation in their work.
in the present in different ways. As such, they are more focused on the messiness of the everyday than the mythologized past. Though Southern literary criticism has generally been slower to embrace these shifts than other branches of criticism, the need to broaden the critical horizons of this field has become palpable within the last several decades, driven by a new wave of literary critics.

**The New Southern Studies**

The New Southern studies describes this movement in Southern literary criticism towards a reconceptualization or remapping of the boundaries of the US South and the issues or themes—space, nation, region, body, identity, objecthood—that have been central to its study. One of the endeavors of scholars engaged in this work has been to re-center attention onto the materialities that make up Southern life and culture and the everyday lives of the people who inhabit the US South—their material and affective attachments and embodied experiences. The research of scholars working at the intersections of Black studies and Southern studies, such as Riché Richardson, Houston A. Baker Jr., and Thadious Davis, as well as others located more definitively within the bounds of Southern studies, such as Patricia Yaeger, Tara McPherson, and Melanie Benson Taylor, has helped give renewed attention to the historical violences of slavery and post-slavery and their manifestation in the present in psychological and embodied forms.

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Yet despite the growth of the emergent field of New Southern studies over the past few decades, the history of the field of Southern literary studies is still marred by its own racism and exclusion of perspectives outside of the white male elite. And one of the legacies of that history of literary criticism is an enduring categorical and conceptual divide between “Southern literature” and “African American literature.” Though some of the most well-known texts to come out of the South in the nineteenth century were the writings of Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs, for instance, those works are traditionally considered within the rubric of slave narrative, and by extension African American literature, rather than being recognized as belonging to the Southern canon. The same is true for the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones—while the authors are, to varying degrees, recognized as Southern, their works are considered foremost within the category of African American literature, while white Southern authors are generally classified simply as “Southern.”

Riché Richardson, who self identifies as working at the intersections of Black studies and New Southern studies, explains that this divide has caused many Black scholars to turn away from the field of Southern studies, believing that it has little to offer them (Black Masculinity 9). Patricia Yaeger likewise acknowledges this divide in her 2000 study Dirt and Desire, professing her aim to “dynamite the rails” that hold this separation in place through her outlining of a new grouping of categories through which to read Southern women’s writing—categories that involve different ways in which bodies, represented as distorted and grotesque, function to signify racial anxieties (13).

Uncle Tom to Gangsta (2007), and Marisa Parham Haunting and Displacement in African-American Literature and Culture (2008) for additional work in or around Southern studies that takes up questions of trauma, violence, and embodied memory.
While there is a growing number of scholars considering the work of Black Southern writers within the context of Southern literary studies, this divide nonetheless continues to affect the ways in which the literature of Black and white-identified Southerners and those writing about the US South gets read and anthologized. This project, like Yaeger’s, attempts to breach this divide through its consideration of a range of texts—the work of Black, white, and mixed-race Southern female authors—within the frame of Southern studies. This is not to say that some of these works might not be considered within other categories—Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* certainly also belongs within the canon of African American literature—but for my purposes here I consider the ways in which their narrativization of trauma and identity/selfhood is influenced by their connection to region, to the US South.

The work of the New Southern studies makes a compelling case for more critical attention to be paid to the everyday encounters, both embodied and en-minded, that structure modes of being in the contemporary US South. As Tara McPherson, whose work looks at what it means not just to *be* but to *feel* Southern, argues, “Southern feeling is tightly tied to the politics of everyday life” (245). Work like Yaeger’s, in particular, but also that of scholars like Jay Watson and Jennifer Griffiths, working in Southern studies, and African American studies and trauma studies, respectively, prompts us to look more closely at the material bodies that inhabit the South—bodies inscribed with the histories of trauma that shape them. Yaeger is particularly interested in the ways in which bodies in Southern women’s literature offer an index for thinking about the “unthought known,” what is implicitly known or understood but never thought or openly acknowledged—a
term that encapsulates the toxic culture of silence that grew up in the Jim Crow South
(Dirt and Desire 25).\textsuperscript{39}

Watson, too, is driven by the desire to make the body the primary analytic
category in his examination of Southern literature (24). Our bodies, these studies suggest,
are entrenched within social, political, and economic histories and are constructed by and
through those histories even as they maintain a material existence that can appear on the
surface to be separate from them. As Watson writes, “If we are never not our bodies, it is
equally true that we are never only our bodies” (319). For this reason, reading for the
body—as this dissertation also does—is also always a means of “read[ing] beyond [the
body]” for its “human dimension” and the stories that it tells (Watson 318).

Thus, while critical scholarship in Southern studies that focuses on the body and
on affective and emotional life is still comparatively scarce, the limited proliferation of
work around issues of inherited and embodied trauma and Southern feeling that has
gained traction in recent years suggests that this is a vastly important and heretofore
understudied area that will continue to remain at the forefront of the New Southern
studies. This is also suggestive of the need for greater understanding of how trauma from
slavery and segregation continues to impact individuals and groups within our society
through its racialized and gendered inscription on bodies and in affective life, therefore
affecting society as a whole. In order to read for the ways in which histories of Southern

\textsuperscript{39} Through close readings of depictions of bodies in Southern women’s writing and the simultaneous
overidentification and destabilization of identity that their encounter provokes, Yaeger argues that white
Southern women’s literature often uses “frightening, nonintegral bodies to depict the horror of being white”
in a culture in which racial identification plays such an integral role (30). This “horror” has to do with the
unconscious yet affectively registered recognition of one’s necessary implication in the violence at the core
of whiteness, and of the paradox that underlies this construct: that is, the all-encompassing, all-powerful,
and yet extremely tenuous nature of whiteness—at once both everything and nothing.
trauma, as represented within these texts, are inscribed upon bodies and within affective life, I employ an affect-oriented framework.

**An Affect-Oriented Framework: Affect as Methodology**

The texts that I look at in this dissertation narrate affective histories of Southern trauma. While my framework looks to a variety of different theoretical models, it is grounded in affect theory, which enables me to unpack the ways in which these authors and texts explore how the prolonged history of racial violence in the US South has shaped modes of being and feeling. Reading these texts through the primary lens of affect theory entails looking at the ways in which feelings circulate between signs and objects within these texts, how and where they accumulate value, how they open up these racialized and gendered histories of Southern trauma, and how the bodies that populate these narrative landscapes are shaped by and through these histories—how these histories are inscribed upon bodies.

Contemporary affect theory is a relatively young discipline, which came to prominence in the mid ‘90s with the articulation of two distinct approaches to affect: one, popularized by the social theorist and philosopher, Brian Massumi, which sees affect as a more universal life force vitalizing *all* matter, and the other articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, who followed the psychologist Sylvan Tomkins in describing affect as a “biologically-based system” comparable to though distinct from the

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The Sedgwickian approach—whose focus on the body and embodiment has made it influential in queer and feminist theory and which underlies my own readings of the bodies in these texts—understands affect as “thoroughly embodied, as well as more or less intensively interwoven with cognitive processes” (Touching Feeling 18). As such, it allows for a more capacious understanding of embodied subjectivity and an attunement to the body as a dynamic field of potentialities, and it also illuminates—as Sara Ahmed’s work further clarifies—the way in which affects can mediate the relation between the psychic and the social, and the individual and collective, aligning individuals with collectives and bodily space with social space.

Affect, existing between the domains of body and mind, as both and neither, according to Michael Hardt in his preface to The Affective Turn, is intangible, ephemeral—something that does not belong to individuals, that cannot be contained by individuals, and yet is the force that connects us to ourselves, to each other, and to the world (x). While some theorists of affect, particularly those in the Massumi camp, draw clear distinctions between affect, emotion, and feeling (arguing, for instance, that emotion signals the intellectualization of affect, which exists as ‘pure’ sensation), the texts in this dissertation figure affect in a variety of ways, seeming to support Sianne Ngai’s argument that “feeling slips in and out of subjective boundaries, at times becoming transformed into psychic property but at other times eluding containment” (40).42

41 While the drives generally attach to specific objects, the affects enjoy more freedom in terms of time and object; the fact that “any affect may have any ‘object’” was for Tomkins the primary source of the complexity of human behavior (Touching Feeling 19).
42 For further elaboration of this position, see Sianne Ngai Ugly Feelings (2007).
Jones, for instance, uses the language of feeling throughout *Corregidora*, but she uses it to signify different states—sometimes it is associated with bodily sensation, as in pain or arousal, sometimes with a sense of self created through memory, sometimes with love or connection. Gilchrist, by contrast, often represents the states of anxiety and instability, showing them as psychological while also portraying their felt effects on and within the body of the protagonist. The shame that infuses Allison’s stories—the affect that, Sedgwick argues, is most connected to the development of self, one which appears on the surface of the body (the blush of the face, the quickening of the pulse, eyes averted) but which cuts to the very core of the subject’s sense of identity and value, and as such has the capacity to “turn the subject inside out, or outside in”\(^{43}\)—is rendered through her depictions of bodies and bodily boundaries. The ulcer that threatens her insides is a manifestation of her shame, but this shame is also shown through her physical responses to her systematic invisibilization by others and in her figuring of the permeability of her own boundaries—the inside made outside.

The affective experience that haunts Trethewey’s poetics is that of loss, which can be both an experience and a feeling. Loss in *Native Guard* is sometimes expressed as acute emotion, a painfulness tinged with longing, and is also inscribed on bodies and spaces as a kind of felt emptiness. But Trethewey also figures affect as a form of crossing where space and time and language and identity meet and are constructed and transformed. Indeed, each of these writers, while showing affect to be embodied, inscribed upon bodies, also explore the relationship of writing as an affective process, a process through which the inscription of affect is made legible and an active process of

\(^{43}\) *Touching Feeling*, p. 116.
meaning making that circulates affect and opens up affective histories, enabling them to be resignified and transformed.

Through their figurations of and attention to affect, these authors show how affect shapes bodies and worlds—how experiences of feeling create the effect, as Sara Ahmed argues, of surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds (“Affective Economies” 117). Allison shows, for instance, how shame at her abject poverty and “white trash” identity shapes her experience of her body and the boundaries that separate her from the world of academia or the other worlds that she encounters yet never feels quite at home in (Allison’s ulcer also shows how affect can go beyond simply shaping the surface of the body to impacting the textures of the body, its insides, and its relation between inside and outside); Jones illustrates how shame and fear and hurt shape Ursa’s experience, as a young Black Southern woman, of her body as subject to exploitation; Gilchrist shows how affective instability renders Rhoda’s world of white Southern privilege, and her white female body, permeable, such that she grasps to negate that permeability, her fear solidifying additional boundaries; and Trethewey, too, shows how loss shapes the boundaries that limn the different, intersecting worlds of her poetics—the world of the Native Guard, of the South at mid-century, of herself as an adult missing her mother—and leaves its marks upon Black bodies, Xs that render the body a surface of writing. These texts, then, show how the experiences of belonging and unbelonging to and within the South that their protagonists experience are shaped by the ways in which they experience their bodies and selfhood, marked by race and gender, but also how their bodies and senses of self are shaped through these experiences of exclusion—experiences that have real, material effects.
The bodies of these protagonists and the boundaries that contour the worlds in which they navigate are shaped by affect through its circulation. As ephemeral sensations or experiences that do not ‘belong’ to anyone, that cannot be ‘possessed’ even at the moment in which one experiences said affect, affects exist in a constant state of circulation. As Ahmed argues, affects circulate between signs, figures, and objects, sometimes “sticking” these phenomena to one another and creating “affective intensities” or accumulations of “affective value” that give certain signs, figures, or objects the appearance of “containing” the affect; some signs increase in affective value, that is they seem to become more invested with affective intensity, the more they circulate (“Affective Economies” 121). For instance, the image of the “white trash” Southerner, as exemplified in Allison’s text, might operate as a sign that the affect of shame attaches to. As that affect of shame circulates and attaches to other related signs and objects (other signs of abject poverty for example), the body that is marked as other through discourses of “white trash” seems to become more shameful; the body seems to become more suffused with shame, such as that shame is a property of that body. Through this process of circulation, and through the sticking of the affect of shame to these signs and objects, the history through which shame becomes attached to the label of “white trash” and anyone who inhabits a body marked in this way becomes erased. Ahmed writes, “Feelings appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production (labor and labor time), as well as circulation or exchange” (“Affective Economies” 121).

In other words, affects are shaped by histories—raced and classed and gendered histories of labor and production, circulation and exchange. Shame and loss and anxiety
and vulnerability and ambivalence—the affects that shape the bodies and landscapes of these texts—are formed by and through their circulation in history, and specifically, for the affects within these texts, through their circulation in Southern histories of trauma. And ideologies of race and gender and class and nationality, developed through these histories, determine the ways in which affect circulates, how certain affects stick to certain objects and signs, which objects accumulate which affects and through what intensity. It is through these histories—histories of racialized and gendered violence and exploitation, of class abjection and exclusion, of Black loss and erasure—that these various affective experiences come to have different meanings and values and come to be attached to certain bodies, bodies marked by these histories of violence and exclusion.

These affects, as we see within these texts, ‘stick,’ in Ahmed’s terms, to bodies that are not legible within the strict parameters of the ideal of Southern womanhood—bodies that don’t fit the demands of being white and ‘delicate’ and submissive. Thus Allison’s “white trash” lesbian body, like Trethewey’s mixed-race Black body, like Ursa’s Black female body, even like Rhoda’s undisciplined white female body—the bodies of each of these characters are marked with shame, abjection, ambivalence (as well as, for some, with loss and fear, and anxiety). They are marked affectively as “other,” as objects of fear or shame, as bodies (in)capable of experiencing loss, as bodies defined by loss and abjection. These affects, formed in the crucible of Southern histories of trauma, shape the ways in which the subjects in these texts feel separate from or connected to others, and in doing so they shape the collective body of the South and of the nation—socio-political bodies predicated on exclusions, whose boundaries are limned through collective feelings of pride and of belonging.
In this way, affects, through their circulation and their shaping of bodies—through the ways in which they inscribe the histories that have shaped them upon the bodies to which they stick—open up histories, bringing the past into the present through their evocation of embodied feeling shaped by and through these histories. As Jonathan Flatley writes, “We actually feel these emotions from the past. There is […] a definite resonance between our own personal past and a historical collective past” (73). Affect occupies a unique temporality, described by Flatley as “continuous becoming” (60) and José Muñoz as a perpetual “not-yet,” whereby it sweeps over the subject as if for the first time, its intensity undiminished, every time it makes its appearance. As such, affects, such as shame or loss or longing, can bring the past to life through their inscription of bodies in the present.

Likewise, in shaping bodies, affects leave their imprint upon these bodies, and consequently bodies serve as archives of affect and feeling. As Flatley argues, affects contain within themselves felt “archive[s] of [their] previous objects,” through which subjects can gain access to the “the historicity of [their] affective experience” (81, 4). In other words, affective experience in the present can call up the histories to which that affect has previously been attached. The bodies of US Southerners, shaped by histories of racial violence and trauma (and the threads of resistance that run through these histories), thus serve as archives of the affects and modes of feeling that these histories shape and circulate. We can see how affects open up past histories in the way that Trethewey’s loss of her mother, deepened by the realization of her erasure in the present, evokes another.

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See Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) for more on his vision of affective temporality. According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, this “not-yet” derives from Spinoza’s infamous claim that no one yet knows what a body can do (3).
collective, form of loss that echoes against and amplifies her personal loss—the historical loss of Black lives and their erasure in the South. Her own body, as a mixed-race Black Southern woman, becomes an archive of this loss, just as the body of the Southern land is also an archive of loss—her depictions of the abandoned graves of the Native Guard and her mother’s untended grave, sites of erasure marking the Southern landscape, shows this resonance and how these multiple histories can exist, side by side and overlapping.

Indeed, as Darieck Scott notes, the disruption to the present produced through the affective encounter does not represent one coherent entity (the past) breaking into another (the present), but rather exposes the incoherency of both of these entities—that is, the “hybrid” nature of the past and present. This hybridity can be seen throughout these texts in their nonlinear forms—the way that Trethewey and Allison move, for instance, between dreams and memories—but it is especially notable in the ritualized dialogues that characterize much of Jones’ novel, in which the voices from the past speak and figures from the present speak those voices from the past; these dialogues, which surface latent fears, anxieties, and desires connected to historical trauma from slavery, resonate with the present, with “reality,” such that it becomes at times difficult to tell which is which, the past intermingling with the present, becoming present.

Throughout the chapters in this dissertation, I use affect as a methodology, reading for the ways in which bodies are inscribed with affective histories of trauma and how these bodies serve as sites of possibility and transformation. I consider affect in its manifestation as feeling and emotion and also as gesture, which Juana Maria Rodriguez, in her work on queer affect, describes as referring both to the literal movement of

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bodies—“the ephemera of affect that leaves no trace” (4)—and, on a metaphorical level, to the actions of the body politic. Rodriguez describes gesture as “multi-sensory, asynchronic, polysemous, perverse, and full of promise” —a site where affective histories of trauma might be resignified (1). Gestures within these texts are affective in nature, carrying the traces of multiple histories within them. In Trethewey’s poem “What the Body Can Say,” for instance, the poet explores precisely that—the way that gestures such as sticking out one’s thumb or a certain kind of glance at another conjure up meanings through the affective histories that they surface, a look of desire or wanting, a gesture meant to signal approval. But, as the poem shows us, gestures also require interpretation, and because of their relation to the body—they are of the body yet immaterial—they exemplify the temporality of affect as continuous becoming or perpetual not-yet (a characteristic of affect that signifies its transformative potential). Gesture is also important to understanding the affective work of Corregidora. Ursa’s gesture on the final page of the novel, as she drops to her knees, calls up familial and collective histories of sexual violence, as well as possibilities for pleasure and resistance. These moments in the texts show us how bodies, through the circulation of affect, can open up past histories—how bodies can provide access to past histories, histories that are written on bodies though not contained within them.

Ahmed refers to the movement or circulation of affects as constituting an affective economy in which the individual comes into being through its alignment with the collective⁴⁷—accordingly, it is this economy that works to contain the bodies of those

⁴⁶ See Juana Maria Rodriguez Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings (2014).
⁴⁷ Flatley’s concept of “affective mapping” can be useful here for thinking about how subjects navigate their material worlds affectively and how our lives as we experience them through feeling are informed by
marked as ‘other’ and expand or enable the bodies of those marked as normative ("Affective Economies" 128). Thus, the characters and bodies in these narratives cannot be thought apart from their imbrication within these US Southern histories of racialized and gendered violence and exploitation (as well as these histories of resistance). For, as the texts show us, it is these histories that shape the characters’ experiences of feeling and thus of selfhood and the ways in which they struggle to realize and connect with themselves and with others. Through their engagement with affect and feeling, and with these histories of Southern trauma, the texts map an affective economy of the South woven of shame and loss and ambivalence. But at the same time, by showing how bodies can open up affective histories of trauma, bringing the past into the present through its affective resonances, these texts also explore how these affective histories might be transformed—how the inscription of histories of trauma on bodies enables the possibility of new relations to those histories not solely defined by shame or loss or hurt.

Bodies, as affect theory, perhaps more than most other theoretical orientations, enables us to see, are irreducibly complex, dynamic fields of potentialities through which past histories, including the South’s particular racialized and gendered histories of violence and oppression, can be brought into the present and transformed (Rodriguez 7–8). If we look again to the example from Corregidora of Ursa kneeling at the end, we can see how Jones takes this gesture that calls up the history of Black female sexual subjugation that is at the center of the novel and, through Ursa’s inhabiting of that gesture, resignifies it, harnessing the power that exists alongside that other history of

the feeling-scapes of the histories that we belong to, our personal history and the collective histories within which our lives unfold.
violence and oppression. This is not, then, to erase the reality of that history of violence, but rather to show that it is not the only story, not the only possibility for meaning in that gesture. Like Jones, the other authors in this dissertation, exploring how bodies constitute archives of feeling that open up histories of Southern trauma, also show, through their narratives, the power of affect to transform these histories—to rescript affective histories of shame, abjection, loss, and ambivalence that continue to haunt the present, excavating the potential within them for pleasure, for change, and for connection.

Chapter Summaries, and a Note on My Archive

This study focuses on works by US Southern female authors—authors who are from the region of the US South and who are also writing about aspects of Southern history and Southern life. I have chosen to focus on female authors writing female, often semi-autobiographical, characters here in order think more deeply about the gendered dimensions of the traumas of slavery and segregation in the US South as they have been passed down through generations, and how the work of writing or narrating the self can serve as a form of response to trauma. While the Southern female authors whose work I look at identify as African American and as white, even as their identifications also challenge the boundaries of these categorizations,\(^48\) I do not intend this as a reinforcing of the Black/white binary in the South.\(^49\) Certainly, the experiences of Southerners of

\(^{48}\) Several of the authors in this study complicate these categorical divisions, however. Natasha Trethewey has a white father and Black mother and addresses the experience of being a mixed-race Southerner in her writing, even as she identifies as Black. While Allison identifies as white, her family’s racialized categorization as “white trash,” which occupies a primary role in her life and writing, situates her both in and outside of the bounds of whiteness.

\(^{49}\) As Melanie Benson Taylor argues, “A flat, two-dimensional, biracial past haunts the inhabitants of the postremoval and post-slavery South; the map’s mathematical lines and borders colonize territory and identity, while separating and subsuming difference … Southern blacks remain essential to the biracial order and persistently abjected within it” (Disturbing Calculations 163).
diverse racial and ethnic identifications—Native American Southerners, Asian Southerners, Jewish Southerners, etc.—merit further consideration, as these groups are also affected by the lingering resonances of slavery and segregation and other forms of historical trauma in the US South. But even as I do focus specifically on the experiences of Black and white women, I attempt, through my readings and analyses, to remain attentive to and to draw out the variations and differences between the diverse experiences of the women in these narratives around trauma, identification, and belonging. I do not intend to flatten the experiences of any one group or, likewise, to make generalizations about Southern female identity, but rather to open up the diverse nuances of embodied and affective experience in relation to trauma as it is experienced by women whose identities are forged by a confluence of mitigating factors.

The first chapter in the dissertation explores the precarious construction of the narrative of the South, arguing, through an examination of Ellen Gilchrist’s 1992 semi-autobiographical novel *Net of Jewels*, about a young Southern white woman’s struggle to claim a sense of selfhood amidst the toxic attachments of family, that the narrative of the South in the mid-to-late twentieth century is predicated on the erasure of nondominant identities (Black, nonwhite, poor) in service of the consolidation of whiteness. This chapter situates racialized reproduction as central to the construction of the South; its portrayal of ambivalence around reproduction and motherhood shows the ways in which the ideal of White Womanhood enacts trauma on white women, which gets displaced onto Black women in order to uphold this ideal and the coherence of the South.

The remaining chapters explore those identities whose erasure this narrative of the South is dependent upon, looking at the ways in which Southern histories of trauma cause
that erasure and exclusion in the present—how affective histories of trauma from slavery and segregation continue to circulate and exert their influence in the present, but also how these writers, through the exploration of these affective histories, are rescripting them and reimagining what belonging in the South looks like. The second chapter looks at Gayl Jones’ 1975 novel *Corregidora* and the ways in which racialized histories of sexual and reproductive trauma in the South impact Black Southern women’s experiences of shame and vulnerability, examining in particular the dilemma that the novel traces between the need for self-preservation in the face of potential exploitation and the desire for connection that necessitates opening up. This chapter builds on the theme of reproduction that chapter one introduces through its exploration of how the loss of one’s reproductive capacity, when it has historically been a site of exploitation, can open up possibilities for new relations to self and other, and, perhaps, new ways of imagining the South.

The third chapter, which looks at Dorothy Allison’s 1994 collection of semi-autobiographical stories, *Trash*, takes up the category of Southern “poor white trash,” an identity that has been abjected, cast out of the narrative of progress in the New South even as its existence reveals the falsity of that narrative. This chapter looks at how Allison, through writing, reconfigures the boundaries that mark the exclusion of her family, and others like them, from the narrative of Southern progress, rescripting affective histories of raced, classed, and gendered trauma to excavate the pleasure within the shame that has long marked her existence and to resituate the abject Southern poor from the margins to the center of the narrative of Southern belonging. This chapter, too,
takes up the theme of reproduction, figuring the healing work of writing trauma as a form of reproduction.

The last chapter, through an examination of Natasha Trethewey’s 2006 poetry collection *Native Guard*, focuses on the history of Black loss and erasure within the South—on the ways in which the Black lives and bodies that have provided the foundation for the South’s very identity have been systematically erased from its history, even as the white South has embraced a narrative of loss that has to do with its defeat in the Civil War and which functions to obscure the Black loss that underlies this narrative. This chapter looks at how the historical and ongoing erasure of Black lives in the South is mapped onto the bodies of Black Southerners and the landscape of the South—landscapes of loss and longing but also of beauty and of constant change. In this way, Trethewey shows how bodies are surfaces on which Southern histories are inscribed, and how the South’s racialized histories of violence and erasure get written onto Black bodies, but also how those bodies can be understood as monuments to those lives that are erased. My analysis of this collection reveals the inherent changeability in this seemingly fixed narrative of the South built on erasure and exclusion. The permeability of this narrative is apparent in the ways in which it is inscribed on individual bodies and the body of the South—all testaments to these affective histories of trauma that continue to circulate but which, in doing so, contain possibilities for reimagining these histories, rescripting them in the present and future.

In this way, taken together, the chapters tell a story about Southern belonging and exclusion from the hegemonic narrative of the South—a narrative that is predicated on the exclusion and erasure of Blackness and other abjected forms of identification. The
authors whose writing I look at in this dissertation are engaged in the work of rewriting the narrative of the South, shifting these erased and abjected identities from the margins to the center of this narrative. For many of them, this involves resituating the role of reproduction—which has long been the mechanism in the South whereby some identifications have been excluded and others idealized—in relation to the construction of the South. In doing so, these narratives imagine new ways of reproducing a different vision of the South. Through their depiction of bodies inscribed by histories of trauma and the circulation of affect and feeling as they shape the worlds and bodies that inhabit these texts, these authors show how pain and loss and shame co-exist with pleasure and joy and power and vulnerability—they map an affective history of the South that is dynamic and multiple, and irreducibly messy.
CHAPTER 1

“WHAT A TERRIBLE DARK WORLD IT WAS”: THE ANXIETY OF WHITE SOUTHERN FEMININITY IN ELLEN GILCHRIST’S NET OF JEWELS

The Lie of Freedom, a Dialectic of Presence and Erasure

Ellen Gilchrist’s 1992 semi-autobiographical novel *Net of Jewels* is written as a memoir from the perspective of an older white Southern woman looking back at a tumultuous period of time in her life—her late teens through her thirties—which coincided with a turbulent time in US history spanning the middle decades of the twentieth century during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Yet, despite the proximity of this movement to the protagonist, Rhoda Manning’s privileged lifestyle as a descendant of the Southern aristocracy, the novel seems mostly to relegate explicit treatments of race to the margins of the text. Instead, the story is framed, through its preface and corresponding coda, as a de-racialized search for “freedom”—specifically, freedom from Rhoda’s domineering father, a traditional Southern patriarch who pines for the Old South and a narcissist who considers his children extensions of himself. As Rhoda writes in the opening, “In the end I got free, so it sort of has a happy ending. That’s what this country is about, isn’t it? Getting free. Freeing people from their pasts. Creating our own crazy dazzling lives” (3–4).

The irony in this passage is, of course, that, while this glamorized depiction of hard-won freedom resonates with a common narrative of US identity, it functions to obscure a more fundamental truth about freedom in this country—the truth of the painful struggle of American Blacks to gain their freedom and achieve equality in the face of
ongoing US imperialism and white supremacy.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, as Toni Morrison reminds us, the ideological imperative of freedom has historically occupied a central role in the construction of Americanness, even as this identification has been predicated on a construction of difference and otherness whereby Blacks were relegated to the realm of the unfree (33, 38). While Gilchrist via Rhoda situates her own journey to freedom within the terms of national belonging, it is a vision of sanitized belonging void of historicity, framed instead, in Morrison’s words, as the “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes,” in new “raiments of self” (34). Rhoda’s articulation of selfhood through this lens is just that—an opportunity to remake herself unencumbered by her own past—and it is thereby dependent on the elision of the history of racial violence that makes this articulation possible.

By framing the narrative of Rhoda’s journey in this way—as a progression toward freedom—Gilchrist reveals a desire for coherence, one that makes the attenuation of freedom possible and which is consolidated in the body of the white female protagonist and immune to the complications of history and the attachments that it carries. Yet, as Rhoda’s commentary, above, makes clear, this coherence is tenuous at best; as much as the novel traces a path toward an uncertain freedom (\textit{sort of} a happy ending), it unfolds as a persistent striving toward an ideal of bodily, emotional, and psychological coherence that is continually interrupted or problematized by the messy reality of Rhoda’s embodied and affective experiences (particularly around reproduction and motherhood). The narration of these experiences thus serves to index the novel’s deep anxiety around

\textsuperscript{50} While this is not something I explore in this chapter, the framing of the novel around “freedom” might also be interesting to think about in terms of its publication in the post-Cold War moment—a moment when “freedom” has supposedly triumphed, yet which raises additional questions about what that freedom really means, who is excluded and who is included in that freedom.
Southern white femininity and its contradictions, highlighting the permeability of boundaries and exposing the fundamental instability of the construct of white Southern femininity—and thereby complicating the novel’s idealized narrative of national belonging whereby the past can be shed like a skin, the brutality of its violence forgotten in the “dazzle” of the new.

In this first chapter, I argue that Net of Jewels shows how the construct of white Southern femininity functions both as a site of trauma and a locus of power in the post-Emancipation South, repeatedly shoring up and disrupting ideologies of regional and national identity and belonging. On one hand, Gilchrist explores the traumatic effects of the racialized and gendered expectations attached to the construct of white Southern femininity. The novel shows how these traumatic effects are registered affectively, through the shame, anxiety, and ambivalence that circulate throughout the novel (throughout the South), gaining legibility and intensity through their attachments to Rhoda’s white female body. At the same time, the novel also exposes the complicity of white femininity in the interlocking systems of patriarchy and white supremacy, showing how it consolidates itself (and, by extension, enables the reproduction of the South) through the violence and erasure of Black lives and labor—specifically the labor of Black women. This, too, is shown through the work of affect, through the way that Rhoda’s ambivalence in relation to reproduction and motherhood is transferred onto the Black women whose labor enables her reproduction and motherhood—the reproduction of the nation.

As such, this chapter lays the groundwork for those that follow through the way that it sets up the centrality of reproduction—a theme in many of these chapters—to the
South, showing how racialized reproduction (which Alys Eve Weinbaum describes through the prism of the “race/reproduction bind”) functions as a site of trauma that reveals the instability of the foundations of the South. Additionally, it shows how affective experiences of shame and ambivalence, which also surface again and again throughout this dissertation, are woven into the fabric of the South—linked through the ideal of Southern womanhood to US Southern women’s everyday embodied and affective experiences. These experiences index an affective history of Southern trauma that is gendered and racialized and, even as it surfaces through its attachment to individual bodies, is fundamentally about relationships and relationality. It is a history woven of unequal relationships, monstrous intimacies\(^{51}\) and perverse dependencies—a history defined by the dialectic of presence and absence, the simultaneous presence (and desire for) and erasure of difference that both connects and separates Black and white Southerners and that is experienced in very different ways for Black Southerners, whose lives and labor have long been erased, and white Southerners, whose own precarious identifications have been predicated on that erasure.

**A Note on Blood: Reproduction and the Anxieties of Kinship**

In addition to her framing of the novel as a journey toward “freedom,” Gilchrist via Rhoda describes, in the preface, the process of writing the novel, stating, “I meant this as a book of short stories [Gilchrist’s preferred form] and I started writing it that way.

\(^{51}\) Christina Sharpe describes “monstrous intimacies” as forms of racial violence that are “familiar and intimate” and that, citing Jacqueline Rose, register the proximity between “antagonism and identification”—they are defined as, she argues, “a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often acknowledged to be monstrous” (*Monstrous Intimacies* 3).
Then the stories started to bleed into each other and I decided to go on and let them bleed” (3). This description situates the act of writing as a form of reproduction—prefiguring the way that the book itself, a testament to its author’s life, is implicated in the narrative’s drama of racialized reproduction—through its use of blood imagery and permeated boundaries. As such, it introduces the novel’s preoccupation with blood, a symbol of abjection that surfaces at multiple points throughout to indicate anxieties around difference and the permeability of boundaries. As Toni Morrison notes, the fetishization of blood is often used by white writers to establish “fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal” (68). In other words, blood is used to inscribe specific ideas about racial identification within a text. This is especially true for Southern texts, as blood holds an especial significance within the South, having been used historically to determine racial identification: the one drop rule, made law in the early twentieth century when fears of miscegenation were rampant and eugenics was on the rise, stated that anyone with even one ancestor with “one drop” of “black blood” was considered Black. In this way, blood inextricably linked racial identification to kinship.

The novel’s interest in blood, expressed through Rhoda’s fascination with her own blood, therefore signals its latent anxieties about racial identification and purity and the (in)stability of whiteness, and it also serves to communicate ambivalence surrounding, on one hand, Rhoda’s pride of embeddedness within a racialized family mythology and, on the other, the horror of the reality of family, whose toxic attachments she cannot seem to escape. The fact that these anxieties surface most prominently, through the signifier of blood, during scenes of menstruation and reproduction—
moments that both shore up whiteness and in which the boundaries of the white female body are rendered permeable—shows how anxieties about racial identification and the precariousness of white femininity are intimately linked to anxieties about reproduction. These moments within the text, as we shall see, represent disruptions, places where the ideological mandates of whiteness come undone and where blood is revealed, finally, to be, not an all-powerful keeper of secrets, nor a definitive sign of power, but something messy and uncontainable, as well as a source of violence and trauma.

**An Ambivalent Foundation and the Search for Selfhood**

Ellen Gilchrist was born in Mississippi in 1934, during the Great Depression. She came from a wealthy family and spent parts of her childhood on her grandparents’ plantation. Though she studied creative writing under renowned Southern writer Eudora Welty when she was in college, Gilchrist did not begin to publish until the late 1970s and early ‘80s. Much of her work takes up the theme of Southern white femininity, and whiteness in the South more generally, and, like *Net of Jewels*, often features wealthy white Southern women struggling to realize their own identities in the face of complicated attachments to family and tradition. *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist’s third novel, is part of what have been termed her “Rhoda stories”: its protagonist, Rhoda Manning, was first introduced as an obstinate and precocious child in her 1981 collection *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* and has since featured in many of Gilchrist’s short stories.

While the character of Rhoda is not fully autobiographical, she bears significant similarities to Gilchrist, who has suggested that Rhoda, with her entitled and abrasive personality, provides an outlet for her to release emotions and frustrations that she might
not otherwise be able to—a provocative statement given Rhoda’s ambivalence around Blackness and issues of racial inequality (“Introduction,” *Rhoda*). Gilchrist, throughout her Rhoda stories, sometimes alters the events of Rhoda’s life, such as when she lost her virginity and to whom. While the fact of these alterations may offer us clues into Gilchrist’s writing practice, such as how her writing offers a space to experiment with the telling of her own life, this chapter focuses on *Net of Jewels* as a singular text, and thus does not include consideration of additional Rhoda stories.

*Net of Jewels*, which begins and ends with a narration by a late-in-middle-age Rhoda looking back upon her life, is a long and winding novel, tracing Rhoda’s journey from an athletic and intellectual college student with high ambitions whose life is uprooted when her parents move the family back to her father’s hometown in Alabama, to a young married mother of two who drowns her deep shame and unhappiness in pills and alcohol. While Rhoda is shown to have a strong personality, she also experiences deep feelings of instability and lack of grounding, which derive, in part, from the novel’s setting in the segregated Deep South of the 1950s when the Civil Rights struggles were underway and major shifts were taking place. Gilchrist’s choice to set her novel during this time allows her to examine (and, as the case may be, relive) the white Southern nostalgia for a “simpler” time that characterized that period and also to explore the anxieties surrounding change and difference that it evoked—anxieties not thoroughly dissimilar to those evoked in the post-Cold War era of the early ‘90s when the novel was published.

The former were centered on racialized difference and otherness within the nation (the potential to ‘corrupt’ the nation from within that whites feared), while the anxieties
around otherness within the nation that the Cold-War era wrought had to do with its undetectability—with “outsiders” infiltrating the nation, unseen. This era also saw an expanding global consciousness and awareness of the proximity of developing nations, which in turn brought fears around protecting American borders and interests. In this way, through the figure of Rhoda, the novel’s setting registers shifting anxieties around difference and otherness, and the ability to recognize that difference and otherness, over the last half of the twentieth century, showing how those anxieties were mapped onto the bodies of white women—who, particularly in the South, were charged with maintaining the purity of the region and, by extension, the nation.

What is generally considered to be the Civil Rights era began in the early 1950s and lasted through the late 1960s. The novel opens in 1955, just one year after *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruled that separate but equal in the school system was unconstitutional. In the years leading up to and following this, other well-known cases had similar outcomes. This pervasive sense of change, indexed in the shifts that these decisions created, both in terms of systemic changes and changes in mindset and behavior, presented a threat to white dominance—which, while persistent throughout the country, was especially prominent in the South, which had been built upon the ethos of white supremacy. As such, the Civil Rights movement brought out deep fears and resentments among the South’s white elite and instigated renewed efforts to consolidate their power through the consolidation of white femininity. This is plainly visible in the novel’s depiction of Rhoda’s father, who, once established in Alabama, holds court on

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52 These include, among others, *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), which outlawed racial discrimination in property ownership, *Bailey v. Patterson* (1962), which prohibited racial discrimination of transportation facilities, and *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which held that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional.
their porch in Dunleith every night, drinking bourbon and ranting to his cousins and relatives about the deterioration of Southern society and the concomitant dangers of miscegenation.

An emblem of the Old South and champion of the Lost Cause, Rhoda’s father represents the South’s adherence to traditional (i.e., white, elitist) structures of power. Rhoda’s relationship to him is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, she idealizes him, echoing his nostalgia for the Old South in her own nostalgia for the summer of 1955, the so-called “golden summer” (57). This nostalgia for an innocence since lost is connected to Rhoda’s affiliation with whiteness and the safety this identification provides, which is reflected in the positioning of her father as the symbol of the Southern patriarchy and primary sense of order and solidity. It is he who makes the decisions in her family and who Rhoda looks to for help when she gets into trouble: “He would never let anything happen to me. No matter what happened he would fix it … I was safe in his presence. He would not let me die. No matter what the world did, this man would save me. He would not let me die from anybody’s madness” (63, 319). Through this figure, Gilchrist shows how the sense of order and solidity in the South is, for Southern whites, integrally tied to the white supremacist heteropatriarchal order of its slaveholding past—which is why the dissipation of this order surfaces latent insecurities in Southern whites’ sense of themselves and of their lives.

At the same time, the novel also reveals, through the figure of Rhoda’s father, the inherent falseness of the stability provided by the ‘Old Order’ and the precariousness that underlies its foundations. While Rhoda looks to her father again and again to provide her with protection and a sense of safety, he is ultimately unable to provide his daughter with
the love and support—the emotional grounding—that she craves. Even as she continually turns to him to save her from difficult decisions and situations, his inability and unwillingness to provide the love and affection that she truly longs for makes him the source of her psychic and affective instability. In the same breath as she praises his perfection, she notes his impossibility, stating, “Nothing I would ever do would make him love me … I wanted him to adore me. I adored him. Why couldn’t he adore me?” (320). Her perceived inadequacy in relation to her father underlies Rhoda’s search for that elusive stability and, with it, a tangible sense of selfhood and self-worth, and it gives the lie to the notion that there was ever true stability or security within the South, for whites or Blacks.

The instability felt by Rhoda fuels the search for a sense of selfhood and value that propels the novel forward (with often erratic motion). This searching for selfhood, while integrally connected to the shifts in social relations occurring in the South and across the country in the 1950s and the anxieties that these changes evoked around questions of identity and difference, is also connected to the South’s transition from an economy based on chattel slavery to a capitalist one, a transition that, as Melanie Benson Taylor discusses in Disturbing Calculations, led to pervasive feelings of loss and disappointment for many Southerners across the social spectrum. While this transition represented for many Southerners, and for the region as a whole, the hope for a New South—the promise of equality, of opportunity based on individual merit rather than the color of one’s skin, of satisfaction in the world of material possessions—because the marketplace “abstracts rather than fulfills desire,” it inevitably gave way to disappointment as Southerners realized they had simply “[replaced] one lost cause (the
plantation) with another (the marketplace)” (13). The transition to capitalism in the South—which, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, is registered in the framing of the novel as a search for freedom that also functions to obscure the ongoing struggle of American Blacks for freedom and equality—thus left many Southerners, Black and white, with a sense of emptiness and yearning.

At the same time, many white Southern women in the mid-twentieth century, like Rhoda, were beginning to grasp at the possibilities of a newfound independence and an identification not centered around reproduction and motherhood. The early twentieth century saw an emphasis on women’s liberation, suffragism, more women joining the workforce, and a relaxation of the moral code within the broader United States and especially in its urban centers (Disturbing Calculations 96). During WWII, many women joined the workforce, gaining newfound feelings of independence and causing further shifts in traditional familial dynamics. However, with the return of men from the war, women were pushed back into the home in renewed efforts to consolidate conventional structures of domesticity. And while these efforts at consolidation took place within the context of a changing landscape wherein women were more actively seeking to define their own lives, they nonetheless effectively limited the possibilities for women outside of the domestic sphere, especially in the heavily patriarchal South. Thus, while white Southern women experienced some optimism about their possibilities for advancement outside of the traditional frame of Southern domesticity—this was true for Southern Black women as well, though their opportunities were more limited and they also

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53 The same was true for Black Southern women, but their struggle was amplified by their former status as slaves, and their relationship to reproduction was thus very different (see later sections in the chapter and other chapters in the dissertation for more on this).
experienced different relationships to Southern ideals of domesticity—they often experienced despair and disappointment when it came to the options presented to them (Disturbing Calculations 96).

Consequently, many Southern women, young women in particular, continued in the mid-century to feel the unrequited desire for independence, reflected in Rhoda’s statement, early in the novel, that “I had no dream of marriage. I had no desire to run a house or be a wife or live forever with a man. I wanted to be popular and have dates and act like I was normal, but I didn’t want to belong to anyone. I belonged somewhere else. Somewhere I had never been . . .” (95). Though she knows the conventions of Southern lady-hood are not for her, she is unable to articulate what it is she seeks, as there is no form for its articulation. She imagines its existence in spatial terms, perhaps as a counter to the South’s sense of rootedness, of conventions tied to place; whereas the South is a concrete place for Rhoda, her desire is located in a vague elsewhere, somewhere both possible and impossible. This sense of belonging “elsewhere” fuels her search for selfhood and value, but because this elsewhere remains as yet unknown—because there are no identifiable structures outside of the conventional patriarchal ones within which a Southern woman’s self-worth can be realized—the search is destined to be a futile one, returning instead to familiar structures of femininity and domesticity. In other words, because Southern womanhood places a women’s value in her position as wife and mother, leaving no space for the valuation of her selfhood in and of itself, Gilchrist via Rhoda is driven in her search for value back to the very structures that she

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54 This is why the search for value can end up enacting a return to familiar structures of sociality and domesticity.
seeks to escape—back to marriage and reproduction and the disciplining of her body as means of deriving a sense of value.

**The Southern Lady: Disciplining the Body and the Self**

Prior to moving to the South, the novel suggests, Rhoda was more comfortable—less anxious—in her identity, reveling in the powers of her body and her mind: she was a champion swimmer and accomplished writer—“I was a writer. I could write things and win. Nothing mattered in the world but that” (19). As if to emphasize her lack of preoccupation with traditional standards of femininity, when we first meet her, at the start of the novel, she is having her red hair—a physical marker of her fiery temper and of her perpetual outsideness—cut into a style “as short as a boy’s” (8). This haircut is poignantly interrupted by her mother’s phone call announcing the move to the South. This move, which is coincident with Rhoda’s entry into the novel itself, signals a shift in how she views herself, igniting her own self-consciousness and desire to be accepted and to have her selfhood validated within this new social landscape. This shift in perspective has to do with the expectations attached to Rhoda’s inhabitation of femininity that are thrust upon her in the South. It is not fully clear if these expectations would have existed for her had her family remained in Illinois—while her parents come from the Deep South and evidently value conservative Southern norms of masculinity and femininity, those norms, from Rhoda’s perspective, seem to come into focus upon their move. This is likely due to their environment and surroundings, having moved to the town built and inhabited by Rhoda’s father’s family, Southern traditionalists who mourn the end of slavery and measure all women, all white women, against the ideal of the Southern lady.
As Anne Goodwyn Jones argues, the ideal of white Southern femininity, embodied by the figure of the Southern lady, has long been at the core of the South’s identity (“Belles and Ladies” 43). While Southern womanhood is similar to American true womanhood more generally in the way that it denies women authentic selfhood, this link to a “patriotic impulse (the conflation of the Southern woman with the South itself), as well as its connection to racial attitudes and the Southern aristocracy, mark it as distinctly Southern (“Belles and Ladies” 43–44). Southern womanhood, defined by the Southern lady, was originally made legible through the prism of the Cult of True Womanhood, the rigid ideology that defined the boundaries of acceptable female behavior in the South from roughly the 1820s until the Civil War. This ideology functioned to justify patriarchy and white supremacy, as well as the supremacy of the upper and middle classes, in the South. It connected external qualities, such as pale skin and “delicate” features, to internal qualities and disposition, such that racial and gender identity were integrally bound up with affect, emotion, and sensibility.

Within the dictates of “true womanhood,” women were supposed to embody a perfect mixture of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Carby 23). The “delicacy” and “sensitivity” of Southern “ladies” were considered markers of their femininity, and, although they were expected to exhibit charm, they were not supposed to engage in what were considered overt displays of sexuality: any expression of desire or sexuality that fell outside of the purview of reproduction was prohibited, for the life purpose of a “true” (i.e., upper class and white) woman was held to be as a wife and

55 While historians differ on the exact origins of the Southern lady, with some seeing its roots in class, some in slavery, and some in patriarchy, most agree, Goodwyn Jones contends, that the function of Southern womanhood has been “to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race” (44).
mother whose place was in the domestic sphere and whose duties and responsibilities revolved entirely around the home, her husband, and her children (Carby 27, 23).

In contrast to Southern white women, Black women in the South were categorically denied access to the status of true womanhood, even as their sexuality was used to define its boundaries (Carby 30). In this way, the Cult of True Womanhood served as a means of “balancing” these different definitions of womanhood and motherhood by justifying the relegation of both white and Black women to distinct and separate roles and bringing a semblance of “coherence and order” to the contradictory material circumstances of the lives of Southern women, specifically the differential circumstances of Black and white women regarding their place in the perverse plantation logic of sexuality, mothering, property, and reproduction (Weinbaum 24). Yet while the ideal of Southern womanhood served to shore up social structures in the South—structures of family, of gender, of race, and, above all, of power—offering justifications for the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy, it also had destructive effects on the lives of Southern women, both white and Black, who struggled to meet this impossible ideal.

The impact of these effects has been long-lasting; as Goodwyn Jones argues, one of the additional distinguishing factors of Southern womanhood, as opposed to “American true womanhood,” has been its endurance even into the present. For Black Southern women and white Southern women, the damage wrought by the ideal of Southern womanhood has been very different, however. While Black women, after

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56 Lillian Smith describes this through what she terms the “race-sex-sin spiral,” writing, in Killers of the Dream, “The more trails the white man made to backyard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal, when he returned to the big house. The higher the pedestal, the less he enjoyed her whom he put there, for statues are after all only nice things to look at” (165).
slavery, have not been thoroughly excluded from the possibilities of Southern womanhood—as some critics have argued, upwardly mobile Black women or those of the wealthier classes have been shown to ‘achieve’ this ideal, whereas it has primarily remained out of reach for poor women, white and Black, signaling to its classed dimensions— the ways in which this ideal and the accompanying figure of the Southern lady served to stigmatize Black femininity under slavery and in its wake as hypersexual and dangerous continues to affect Black women, leading to a complicated relationship to respectability politics—something which the following chapter explores in more depth.

White Southern women, those whose class identity does not preclude them from the potential of reaching this ideal, do not have to navigate the same stigma that Black women do, though they may experience heightened expectations to meet this ideal. For most Black and white Southern women, “Southern womanhood” has remained a primary concern—whether they choose to “reject, revise, or adopt” this ideal—leading many to repress their true feelings and desires, sometimes to the point of losing their sense of self (“Belles and Ladies” 47). As such, Southern womanhood can serve as a form of insidious trauma in the lives of Southern women—while it may not cause overt violence, it does a kind of violence to the soul and spirit. This is the trauma of Southern womanhood—Southern white womanhood in this case—that Gilchrist explores in Net of Jewels.

57 See Anne Goodwyn Jones “Belles and Ladies,” pp. 45–46. Here she discusses the possibilities for Southern ladyhood for Black women, as tied up with upward class mobility, in Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and, by contrast, the impossibility of Southern ladyhood for the lower-class white woman Fay in Eudora Welty’s The Optimist’s Daughter (1972).

58 See Candace Jenkins’ Private Lives, Proper Relations (2007), which provides theoretical grounding for the second chapter in this dissertation, for a more comprehensive discussion of the stigmas around Black women’s sexuality and how these have affected their relation to respectability politics.

Through Rhoda, she shows the simultaneous desire to adhere to the norms of Southern womanhood, to measure up to this impossible ideal (and the possibility that it holds out that if one can simply reach it than one will find fulfillment) against the recognition, however unconscious it may be, of the dangers of this ideal—the stigmas it has caused, its impossibility, the loss of self and self-sacrifice that it requires. These conflicting desires inform the ambivalence that circulates within the novel and lead to feelings of shame at the impossibility to measure up—as well as shame at the desire to measure up.

While Rhoda’s personality is proud, vibrant, moody, and abrasive—the opposite of what a Southern lady should be—her mother, Arianne, is the embodiment of the ideal Southern lady, ever gracious and self-effacing. Upon arrival in Alabama, the first thing Rhoda’s mother says to her is “My goodness, honey. You’ve gained so much weight” (21). In this way, Rhoda’s induction to the South is registered through her body as a problem of not being enough, or rather of being too much—of inhabiting a body that overflows the boundaries kept intact through white Southern femininity. Her body is thus figured as a source of shame, a feeling that is subsequently internalized by Rhoda and continues to intensify throughout the novel. As anxiety about individual bodily boundaries generally indicates a broader anxiety about the integrity of the body politic, Rhoda’s mother’s concern can be read as tied up with larger fears about maintaining the purity of the Southern populace and way of life. Rhoda’s body becomes the vehicle by which this maintenance is achieved (and revealed to be impossible).

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60 In Purity and Danger (2002), Mary Douglas argues that anxieties about political boundaries are often reflected in anxieties about bodily boundaries. She writes, “the threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body” (153).
Rhoda’s mother’s attempt to regulate her body, to make her into the Southern lady that her parents’ and white Southern ‘polite’ society would wish her to be, entails taking Rhoda to the doctor, who prescribes Dexedrine. The pills leave her feeling “marvelous,” a high that serves to obscure her feelings of emptiness, and they deplete her hunger, leading, to the delight of Rhoda and her mother, to rapid weight loss. On the outside, then, Rhoda’s diminishing body helps to restore a kind of order, signifying her conformity to the expectations of white Southern femininity and her proximity to the sense of belonging that she seeks. But as her body literally shrinks, so, too, does her vibrant sense of self, as the pills begin to destabilize her sense of reality and ability to be present. Rhoda’s weight loss also leads to a persistent fear of being ‘fat,’ a fear that it will make her unloved and unworthy, a visible symptom of her inability to adequately conform to the standards of Southern womanhood.

Rhoda’s fear of being “too much,” of inhabiting an uncontainable body, registers the novel’s anxieties around the (in)stability of the social and the instability of the construct of white Southern femininity (white womanhood is a stand-in for the South—thus the instability of white womanhood signals the instability of the South). These anxieties are thrown into relief in a scene early in the novel, shortly after Rhoda has begun to take the Dexedrine and is settling into her new life in the South, in which she finds herself suddenly face to face with her own whiteness, the violence of whiteness and her implication in the system of white supremacy in the South. This encounter unsettles her already tenuous sense of bodily security, throwing the stability and coherence of whiteness into question.
“Into the real dark heart of the night”: The Violence of Whiteness

This encounter with the violence of whiteness, a singular episode whose strangeness is quickly forgotten within the novel but which haunts it throughout, occurs when Rhoda and her friend Charles William—her semi-closeted queer neighbor and fellow insider-outsider who quickly becomes her closest friend and confidante, both a stabilizing force and an enabler to her rashest impulses—visit the Klan. The Klan was founded after the Civil War in response to a crisis in the dominant racial and sexual order caused by shifts in the meanings of race and reproduction. The aim of this group of white men was to keep free Blacks, women and men, but especially men—"in their place," and they used violent tactics to achieve this. While the original Klan was ruled a terrorist organization and disbanded in the early 1870s, a second Klan was founded in 1915 in response to the fear of Blackness and the glorification of Klan violence stoked by the film release of Birth of a Nation. This Klan had similar aims to those of its original iteration. Its members used the ideal of Southern womanhood as a pretext for their racist violence, claiming that they were protecting white Southern women from the imminent threat of Black men.

Lynchings, in particular, became a common practice used by whites to “punish” and terrify Blacks and other Southern minorities, including even some sympathetic whites. Between the end of Reconstruction in 1871 and the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of Blacks were lynched throughout the South. Many of those killed had been accused of an offense against a white woman, and thus against white womanhood—which stood for innocence personified. These offenses, often unsubstantiated, ranged from rape and murder, though often without evidence, to simply looking at a white woman the “wrong”
way. As lynching activist Ida B. Wells argued, many lynchings occurred because of consensual interracial relationships instigated, in fact, by white women.\(^1\) Southern womanhood had always been used to uphold white supremacy by justifying white violence against Blacks, including sexual violence against Black women, and lynching in the post-Reconstruction decades served that same purpose. It also served to overshadow the ongoing sexual violence by white men against Black women.

While there were some white women who spoke out against the practice of lynching, most remained silent, content to receive the “protection” of so-called ‘Southern gentlemen’ and to maintain their privilege, therefore remaining complicit in the violence. This created an atmosphere in which the threat of racialized violence hung over everything and everyone in the South. As Lillian Smith writes in her psychological memoir of growing up as a white child in the early-to-mid-century South, “Even its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud. To them it was a vague thing weaving in and out of their play, like a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the household sleeps—fleeting mystery, vague menace to which each responded in his own way . . . This terrifying sense of impending disaster hung over most of us” (25, 92) This threat manifested in very different ways for whites and Blacks, however; while for Blacks it was realized as an imminent threat of bodily harm, for whites it manifested through a calculated silence around this violence.

This silence is visible in Rhoda’s initial response to the invocation of the Klan. When Charles William invites her to a cockfight staged on land belonging to the Klan,

\(^1\) See Ida B. Wells “Lynch Law in all its Phases” (1893).
Rhoda readily agrees on the premise that she “[doesn’t] know what they do” (31). “I didn’t know what they did,” she reiterates, “I had not lived in the Deep South since I was a child. Everything I knew about the Klan I had read in Gone with the Wind. I thought their job was to keep black men from raping me. I didn’t even know about the hangings” (32). While this proclamation is seemingly offered as a justification for Rhoda visiting the Klan, the narrative repression of this knowledge of racial violence serves to maintain Rhoda’s innocence, figuring white femininity as innocent of complicity in this violence.

The hangings she refers to are both de-racialized and negated, and yet the specter of the violent and rapacious Black man remains vivid. Rhoda’s insistence that she “didn’t even know about the hangings” is belied within the next few pages, however, where her memory is reignited by the vision of a “black burning cross against the sky.” Gilchrist writes, “It was the most evil thing I had ever seen. Somewhere, I could not remember where, I had seen a photograph of such a thing or heard a story of it. There was a blackened corpse on it in my memory. A figure hanging from a rope” (36). Though the repression of a knowledge of violence is still at work here, evident in Rhoda’s apparent inability to remember where her memory comes from, the content of the memory renders its repression incomplete. The image of the “black burning cross” prompts the connection to a “blackened corpse”—a body blackened through burning but also through its racial identification. Rhoda’s fragmented memory of the hanging “figure” is both disruptive of and consistent with her claim that she did not know about the hangings, indexing Gilchrist’s simultaneous desire to repress and expose the racial violence of the South and signaling to what Patricia Yaeger refers to as the “unthought known”: that is, the white obliviousness to racial violence, even as one remains complicit in it (Dirt and Desire 12).
As Lillian Smith writes in *Killers of the Dream*, “You shut the bad away and remember only the pleasant . . . so easy to see the scuppernong vine you used to climb in the summer . . . It is easy to see this. So hard to see Something swinging from a limb—because you never saw it” (71).

The disruption created by the surfacing of this memory of grotesque racialized violence is quickly mitigated by the narrative’s subsequent consolidation of Rhoda’s possession of white femininity. Gilchrist does this in part through the use of tropes of darkness as associated with danger and desire. Darkness here is used not in connection with the portrayal or invocation of African Americans (who, again, are conspicuously absent in this encounter), but rather with what Rhoda refers to as “white trash,” i.e., the Klan (32). Nonetheless, this troping serves the same function—even while potentially trying to disguise that function—linking darkness with fantasies of primitiveness and evil: “this primitive unsafe place” (38). When speaking about her and Charles William’s intention to visit the Klan, Rhoda explains, in an approximation of Conrad’s famous dictum, “We wanted to drift down into the real dark heart of the night and see what we could see” (32 emphasis mine). What can they see? A cross burning? A hanging body? Or only their own refusal to look?

After Emancipation and the failed efforts at Reconstruction, the forms by which whites maintained their power in the South shifted, moving from overt to more covert forms of violence and coercion. At the same time, the meaning of whiteness itself, which had been defined through its subjects’ freedom, was changing, as the status of Blacks shifted from objects of property to citizen-subjects. In order to maintain the fiction of the nation as white, whiteness became used as a signifier of citizenship (Weinbaum 21).
Because whiteness (and, by extension, white femininity), according to legal scholar Cheryl Harris, is premised on a “right to exclude”—that is, it is a construction used to demarcate otherness—it became the basis of “racialized privilege” in the post-Reconstruction era (qtd. in Weinbaum 21). White people no longer measured their property possession according to the slaves they held, but rather according to the value held in their own bodies through the very attribute of whiteness, which determined their belonging in the (white) nation (Weinbaum 21).

The designation of the Klansmen as “white trash” therefore both racializes them and denies them access to the privilege of whiteness and belonging within the white nation—in turn, conferring that privilege upon Rhoda and Charles William, whose queerness renders him another outsider of sorts. In doing so, it allows Rhoda to reject any identification with them, deflecting her shame at being like them, at sharing an identification with whiteness. Gilchrist further emphasizes Rhoda’s difference from these figures through references to their lack of intelligence, long used as a racializing marker of civilization—“It’s the worst place in Alabama. These people can’t even read. The white people can’t even read” (33)—as well as through her rhetorical blackening of them. As they arrive, Rhoda “shrinks” in her seat when confronted with a face at the window, making her previously undisciplined body smaller and emphasizing her femininity. In doing so, she notes, “The dark-faced white trash of the Delta always made me feel this way, as though some disaster was already happening, as though at any moment I might be captured and become one of their pale frightened women” (34 emphasis mine). Though these “white trash” Klansmen are by all accounts white, Gilchrist’s figuration of them as racially other creates a necessary distance between them and Rhoda, even as the
possibility of Rhoda’s becoming one of their “pale frightened women” shows the limitations of that distancing.

If this troping serves to shore up Rhoda’s own possession of white femininity, the fragility of this construction is exposed through the blood that is spilled in the ensuing cockfight. The cockfight is both the premise of Rhoda and Charles William’s visit to the Klan and a means of displacing the implied violence against Black bodies onto another form of life, figured as both innocent and inhuman. The details of the birds’ restraints are laid out with grotesque clarity, as Rhoda stands “transfixed” (37). While she wants to turn away, she cannot move; a combination of fear and fascination hold her in place, as she fantasizes about the bird “cutting [her] face to ribbons with his deadly legs” (37). In this moment, not unlike Miranda’s infamous confrontation with the trapeze artist in Katherine Anne Porter’s story “The Circus,” Rhoda is confronted with the physicality of white violence, internalized as an imminent threat to her own selfhood.

As soon as the fight begins, “blood flew out in all directions . . . before I could scream, the birds were at our feet and blood was all over me” (38). Rhoda’s contact with this blood serves to implicate her in the violence, and the realization of her complicity—through the unavoidable visceral contact with blood—fragments the subjective coherence established through the troping of darkness. Looking into the mirror, “A terrified Rhoda looked out at me. An initiate of some pagan blood cult, kidnapped, plundered, pressed into service, recruited from my dreams into the rank and file of White Trashdom, Inc. I

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63 By making the threat specifically to her face, it is registered as a threat to her beauty, a marker of her femininity.
looked into the cheap wavy mirror lit by a yellow electric light bulb festooned with dead insects and knew that I was lost. I was in some great swamp or marsh, walking without direction” (39). The textual recognition of complicity in the violence of whiteness becomes figured as a forced participation—“kidnapped, plundered, pressed into service”—and then, ultimately, as a loss of identity figured in spatial terms, a fundamental—and racialized—instability registered through her not knowing where, or who, she is (a recurrent theme in the novel).

Rhoda’s sense of identity is, however, very quickly restored with another “without expression” look at herself in the mirror. By masking her affective response to this violence, Rhoda is able to reclaim the “I,” linguistic marker of selfhood, and claim, “I was not a part of this bathroom or this store or this goddamn cockfight. I could leave anytime I wanted to” (39). The coherence of her selfhood is thus dependent here on the assertion of her distance from this whiteness, figured as darkness for its violence, which threatens to take her hostage—to reveal the violence of her own white femininity to herself such that she cannot escape it.

Again, the linguistic troping of darkness returns to solidify this re-consolidation. Yet this time her reflections on the Klan are punctuated by question marks, signaling her newfound uncertainty: “Did they really kill people? Did they really march around in those capes and kidnap people and hang them from trees? What a terrible dark world it was. How could I live in a world with terrible dark things in it?” (40). While the acknowledgment of the racialized nature of this horrific violence remains unspoken, it is present in the “terrible dark world” and “terrible dark things” attached to this description of Klan violence. Yet Gilchrist via Rhoda seems finally unable within the space of this
encounter to differentiate the source of the violence, instead figuring both the Klan and the implied blackness as threats to Rhoda’s white femininity. Thus, while this encounter enables Gilchrist to explore anxieties about racial difference, and in doing so exposes the violence of whiteness, her figuration of this violence through the trope of darkness ultimately enacts a rhetorical violence that leaves whiteness as such—not “white trash”—relatively undisturbed.

The episode ends with Rhoda—sense of self temporarily restored—professing guilt over the visitation with the Klan. She expresses this guilt through the promise to start swimming, to discipline her body, and to be a “lady”: “It was all right. Warwick County had nothing to do with us. We were right on the porch of my momma’s house in Dunleith” (40). Being a Southern lady, she concludes, provides another way to consolidate her white femininity, an imagined path to recovering her sense of self-worth and finally experiencing the feeling of belonging, one which will presumably offer protection from the violence that surrounds her. Yet as we see throughout the novel, the opposite is, in fact, the case, for as the novel has already shown, this violence implicates white femininity; it is in her blood, the blood staining her face and skin, inescapable.

“In which each jewel contains the reflection of all the others”: Blood, Sexuality, and Reproduction

Rhoda’s encounter with the Klan and the visceral experience of white violence that it generates disrupts her sense of self, creating feelings of shame and disgust at her own proximity to this violence before she casts it away from her through her figuration of the white Klan members as racially other, as not-white (i.e., not the same as her). The shame and ambivalence that the experience arouses within her, at her implication within
this violence that she both abhors and cannot look away from, get translated into guilt as these feelings are externalized once she reaches the “safety” of her parents’ house and her sense of self is restored. In the wake of this encounter (with the Klan and with something undesirable within the self), Rhoda turns back to the conventions of Southern womanhood, begins to pursue them avidly (manically even) as a means of escaping the dangers she perceives to be out there, too close for comfort. But, as Gilchrist shows, the promise of white Southern womanhood is a false one, and Rhoda’s pursuit of this ideal yields only more shame and more fragmentation of her sense of selfhood—for, as the body becomes more ‘disciplined,’ it also becomes more unstable.

In this section, I chart Rhoda’s struggles, after her encounter with the Klan, to find coherence and stability through adherence to the conventions of Southern womanhood, in particular through reproduction and motherhood. These struggles are fraught with ambivalence, for as much as Gilchrist seems to seek coherence for her narrator within these conventions, she also attempts to challenge them, to present Rhoda as a “liberated” woman—even as this inevitably results in falling back on these conventions. As such, I examine the portrayals of the shame and ambivalence that circulate around these experiences and the trauma that they inflict as Rhoda tries to shape her body, mind, and emotional life to fit what she imagines she is supposed to be in order to be a Southern lady and to realize the sense of belonging that she so desires. Likewise, I look at the ways in which Gilchrist, even as she seeks to expose these sites of trauma (the trauma of white Southern femininity), seeks to consolidate Rhoda’s sense of self at key moments of ambivalence, shame, or anxiety within the text. She does this, I argue, as in the previous section, through the invocation of Blackness, most often (though not always)
in the form of Black women whose labor enables Rhoda’s existence but whose subjectivity is largely denied within the text. Gilchrist’s use of African American identity to shore up Rhoda’s own precarious access to whiteness and white femininity is highlighted by the emphasis on blood that connects these scenes of sexuality and reproduction—showing them to be key sites of ambivalence where desire and terror, along with hopefulness and fear, come together in the formation of white identity. As such, I argue, *Net of Jewels* exposes not only the fundamental instability of white Southern womanhood, which has long been seen as the foundation of the South, but also the ways in which this construct seeks stability through the bodies and lives of Black Southern women who have been relegated to the margins in the South.

Blood in Rhoda’s encounter with the Klan is used to signify the violence of whiteness, as well as Rhoda’s, and, by extension, white womanhood’s proximity to and implication within that violence. Shortly after she returns from this encounter, vowing to become a “lady,” blood is again invoked, but this time in a different context, as an object of pleasure and desire. The character of Rhoda has been preoccupied with menstruation since her first appearance as a young child in Gilchrist’s short story “Revenge,” in which she scandalizes her mother by exclaiming, untruthfully, in front of ‘polite company’ that she has her period (a testament to the figuration of menstruation as something dangerous and unladylike and to Rhoda’s inherent unladylike-ness). In *Net of Jewels*, this preoccupation again comes to light, made explicit in a scene—the one that gives the novel its title—that highlights Rhoda’s ambivalent relationship to her whiteness and the privileges of her white femininity and the way that this ambivalence is written onto the Black women whose labor sustains her reproduction:
All I knew of sex was menstrual blood. I loved the sight of it upon my panties... The panties floated down the wooden chute, landing atop my father’s dusty work clothes on the basement floor. A hidden tribute to Electra, Sophocles, Freud. Ah, my poor innocent father. Indra’s net, the net of jewels, in which each jewel contains the reflection of all the others... Into the white tub they would go, there to mix their blood and dust and eggs with bleach and lye and water and emerge like vestal virgins to hang out on the clothesline... A week later I would... wear them off to spend my daddy’s money or drive his car. He, meanwhile, would be off somewhere... never knowing his pockets contained the last vestige of a packet of his genes. Ah, sweet mysterious, boundless feast at which we so often wander blind and bound and starving...

Later, when I came home with my babies, my father would add another servant for each grandson I delivered. I certainly never imagined taking care of them myself. They had come unbidden into the world and they were welcome to it but somebody else would have to keep them amused and fed...

All of that was waiting for me, presaged by the blood on my underpants, but I did not know or sense it. It was the golden summer, the summer we came home to the South to live among our people. (56–57)

The pleasure that Rhoda takes in her menstrual blood is communicated here through the invocation of poetry and through its play upon the role that blood has historically assumed in Southern culture as an agent with the power to both reveal and conceal. Here, however, rather than revealing, or concealing, racial identification, her blood conceals a mythological linkage that endows her with a kind of feminine power. Coming shortly after her encounter with the Klan, during which Rhoda was confronted with the otherness of the self/the self in the other, this passage rewrites Rhoda’s vulnerability by connecting her, not to the “white trash of the Delta,” but to mythological and historical figures. By linking her menstrual blood to the story of Electra, dramatized by Sophocles and pathologized by Freud, Gilchrist places Rhoda within a tradition of female power that is also predicated upon a kind of violence against the father, the patriarch.
At the same time, the invocation of the father through the figure of Freud also gestures to a history of the regulation of white femininity. In this way, Gilchrist exposes the inextricable bond between female power, desire, and subordination that informs the psychic life of the novel and which ultimately makes it difficult, if not impossible, for Rhoda to realize a version of selfhood outside of these bonds—Southern white womanhood, it suggests, at least for elite white Southern women, is predicated on this complex mix of power, desire, and subordination, which create selfhood while denying it at the same time.

Further, Gilchrist’s linkage of Rhoda’s femininity to a mythic time, whose history of violence is much dissociated from the materiality of the racial violence of Southern history, has the effect of obscuring that history. In other words, the use of mythology in this passage, and in the text as a whole, which contains numerous mythological allusions, serves a de-historicizing function that reifies the purity and innocence of white femininity and whiteness—to the point where Rhoda can call her own father “innocent.”

The blood that figures white femininity as purity and innocence also, however, serves as a marker of dirt and abjection. As Julia Kristeva has noted, the abject signals a disturbance of the social and a breakdown in the distinction between self and other, drawing attention to the permeability of bodily and social boundaries.\(^6\) Here it helps us understand the contradictions in Southern femininity—the ways in which femininity is both prized for its purity and understood as something shameful within the culture. This is reflected through the mixture of “blood and dust and eggs with bleach and lye and water”—symbols of dirt and bodily fluid and birth blending with the decontaminating (if

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chemically harmful) agents. Ultimately, though, purity is restored, catalogued in the vestige of her father’s genes that mark the dependence of her own white femininity on his claim to whiteness—"Ah, sweet mysterious, boundless feast at which we so often wander blind and bound and starving . . .”

How is it that this purity, momentarily interrupted and shown for the amalgamation at its core, is recovered? It is through the work of the family’s Black female servants, who “every morning” collect the clothes, including Rhoda’s bloodied underwear, and bring them up for washing. Though the recognition of the selfhood of these Black women goes unarticulated in this passage—and for the vast majority, if not the entirety, of the novel—only visible when we read for what has been omitted, it nonetheless performs a crucial function here, which is precisely to absorb the ‘dirtiness,’ the shame and abjection, associated with Rhoda’s menstrual blood and with this dangerous mixing/miscegenation of elements that occurs within the “white tub.” This Black female labor, invisible and unacknowledged, thus enables the textual reproduction of Rhoda’s white femininity, her purity, and, later, the fruits of her biological reproduction—for, again, it is the Black female labor that makes possible her own childrearing, as she “never imagined taking care of them [herself].”

Reproduction, which has always been central to the ideal of Southern womanhood, is, as Alys Eve Weinbaum argues, a “racializing force” integrally bound up with nation formation. That is, racial identification gets consolidated—and disrupted—

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65 There is one notable encounter that Rhoda has with one of their Black servants right before she goes to try to save her nanny at the end of the novel (which I discuss in the final section of this chapter). This encounter, which I don’t explore within the context of this chapter, depicts Rhoda’s disregard for her servant, Fannin’s, separate subjectivity but also does seem to show an awareness of this disregard and Rhoda’s ignorance in that moment.
through the act of reproduction, and, likewise, the continuity and composition of nations is rendered through the reproduction of their citizens. The “race/reproduction bind,” as Weinbaum terms it, is an ideological construct that describes the form by which nations define themselves and governs the rubric that determines scripts of national belonging (Weinbaum 37, 12). Reproduction has to do with the propagation of national subjects and citizens—what kind of citizens are produced and how this shapes the nation. During slavery, white Southern women of elite classes were defined through their roles as wives and mothers. Black women, by contrast, were labelled as asexual or hypersexual—stigmas which denied them access to true womanhood and figured them as sexually available to white men, who used them to satiate their desires but also to enhance their labor force. Their children, due to the one-drop rule, would be slaves rather than citizens.

However, while reproduction had been, under slavery, the axis upon which the slave order turned and the force by which white planters increased their property and advanced the white race, in a post-Emancipation South reproduction no longer served those express purposes. Instead, as racial significations shifted in the post-Reconstruction era, so too did the meaning of reproduction—as Weinbaum notes, the black maternal body was replaced with the white maternal body as the guarantor of national belonging (Weinbaum 33). Black women’s reproduction, no longer the production of a slave labor force and now the production of non-white citizens, became refigured as a threat to the white nation, while white women’s reproduction became tied to the creation of property in the form of white citizens (with Blacks no longer existing as “property,” property came to inhere in the possession of whiteness) (Weinbaum 41, 21).
In the early decades of the twentieth century, amidst a climate of heightened racial tensions, emerging eugenic discourses sought to stabilize the perpetually shifting ground of reproduction by linking narratives of civilization, progress, and national belonging to white women’s reproduction, thus shoring up once again ideologies of white womanhood and directly connecting them to the future of the United States. This led to the forced sterilization of many Black and poor white women—those that did not fit the ideal of the Southern lady—throughout the South, as well as to a renewed pressure exerted upon white women to fulfil their ‘duty’ to have children and be obedient wives and doting mothers. But it did not ultimately alleviate the anxieties around citizenship and national belonging tied to the perceived threat to white hegemony, especially in the US South, which continued to play out in the field of reproduction.

This is illustrated in the novel in Rhoda’s father’s proclamation, after the integration of the school systems, that “the [Blacks] will be all over us. They’ll take us over. They’ll mongrelize the races” (233). His concern gets transferred onto Rhoda as the keeper of the white race, charged with preventing that “mongrelization” through her own procreation. And, as the passage above shows us, the work of Black women continued to shore up white femininity, performing the labor needed to stabilize white reproduction and further the project of Southern, and, by extension, belonging—consolidated here through the racialized invocation of “[coming] home to the South to live among our people.”

Between the beginning of the novel, when Rhoda is still enamored by the power of her own menstruation, and Rhoda’s marriage and birth of her children, which come much later, Rhoda experiences a sexual awakening. Benson Taylor argues that white
Southern women writing in the early-to-mid-twentieth century often attempted, though ultimately with little success, to write against the conventions of white Southern femininity by portraying their female characters as desirous, sexual beings, liberated from the confines of marriage and domesticity (*Disturbing Calculations* 96). And, while I would argue that this is more complicated for Gilchrist, who seeks to show Rhoda’s struggle with and within these confines, Rhoda’s sexuality is nonetheless an active and integral part of her character, something that simultaneously affirms her femininity and situates her dangerously outside the bounds of traditional Southern femininity. But if sexuality is, on one hand, a way for Rhoda to escape the confines of Southern womanhood, it also ultimately serves to further entrench her within those conventions, thereby highlighting the ambivalence of Southern (white) womanhood (how even the thing that situates her outside the bounds of Southern womanhood brings her back into it, and is still ruled by it).

Rhoda is introduced to Malcolm, the man who will become her husband, slightly less than midway through the novel. Malcolm is, as she describes him, “a boy as vain and cold and unloving as [her] father,” a perfect replica of the Southern patriarch who disallows her selfhood to flourish while providing her access to a version of security premised in the power of whiteness. Rhoda loses her virginity to Malcolm and is quickly enthralled by sex, professing her unbridled desire and lack of guilt again and again in no uncertain terms. For a woman to take pleasure in non-reproductive sex is still taboo in the 1950s Southern culture that Rhoda belongs to. Thus, by characterizing Rhoda in this way, Gilchrist challenges the norms of Southern femininity, even as she also depicts yet
another way in which Rhoda fails to adhere to (or flagrantly disregards) those norms, proving again how she is simply ‘too much.’

However, even as sex is connected to desire—sexual desire but also desire for power—within the text, it is also fundamentally linked with two other thematic elements: marriage and death—at once the antithesis of each other and synonymous. Directly after Rhoda loses her virginity to Malcolm she tells him that she loves him: “I think I love you to death” (137). And then shortly thereafter, “I had done it. I was as good as married” (138). On the one hand, this mitigates the naked desire of her sexuality, linking it to a socially appropriate form, though even then the section ends with “rich red blood [pouring] out of [her] body.” This blood assuages her fear of pregnancy, assuring readers that this sex is not intended for procreation and harnessing the power she feels imbued with through her claim to sexuality (in particular, a taboo kind of sexuality). But it also points to the permeability of the white female body—its uncontrollability, signified by the “pouring” of the blood—precisely at the point where the stabilizing form of marriage is evoked. The link to death, which is another major theme within the novel, is also telling, for it points to the death of the self that marriage within this context may signify. Taken together, these different signifiers might be understood as indexing a kind of chaos brought on by the prohibitions and expectations around sex and marriage. The figuration of menstrual blood at the end serves to ease that chaos, providing a release from those expectations in the form of pure physicality—"rich red blood" that, even if a sign of her feminine uncontrollability, also connects her to her family lineage, thereby reaffirming her whiteness (and innocence).
What ultimately propels Rhoda into marriage is, in fact, her sexuality—she wants to have a place to “do it” any time they wish. But this is also coupled with a desire to belong and the promise of happiness that she sees within that vision of belonging, a promise that is revealed as false shortly after her marriage: “My mania was rising to a fever pitch. I am married, I kept saying to myself. Now I will never be alone, never be afraid, never be sad again. Isn’t that true? It must be true. If getting married doesn’t work, nothing will. If getting married doesn’t work, I’ll never be happy. Never, never, never, never, never . . . (190). With this, Gilchrist emphasizes not only the inevitable disappointment of marriage as a means for Southern women to gain a sense of self-worth, but also the way in which its promise of happiness is so deeply internalized and connected to an ideal of fulfillment through a return to normative structures—an ideal that is destined to fail precisely because these structures are unable to provide the fulfillment that they promise, unable to assuage loneliness and sadness. This failure is encapsulated by Rhoda’s “never,” which is repeated over and over, echoing into space before it is repressed entirely, destined to return again—infinitive deferral of fulfillment.  

Thus, the liberating possibility of Rhoda’s wild sexuality gives way, quickly, to loneliness and disappointment within the confines of a marriage.

The novel moves quickly from marriage to childbirth. After a brief encounter with Blackness via Black patrons at a jazz club—one of few such encounters in the novel—in which Rhoda is “too drunk and high to register anything but fleeting images” (208)—again, her inability to see beyond the fog of whiteness—Rhoda returns to Malcolm. And,

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66 The passage is reminiscent of a key moment in Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, one of her ‘Miranda stories,’ which sees Miranda left with only “nothing”: “Nothing, nothing is mine. I have only nothing…” (114). But, unlike Rhoda’s disappointment here, Miranda finds solace in this nothing.
as if to shore up her whiteness, threatened by her dancing with a Black man, within the space of five intervening pages she finds herself pregnant. Her second child comes in a similar way only fifteen pages later, after she has vowed vehemently never to become pregnant again. These pregnancies are rendered without detail or sentimentality: she has a premonition of her pregnancy, and the next page opens with the lines, “Eight and a half months later I woke up in the surgical recovery room of the Dunleith General Hospital and it was over” (213). Both children are born with C-sections, and, bizarrely, there is virtually no description at all of Rhoda’s experiences of pregnancy.

In a novel of nearly 400 pages where ample time is spent on describing Rhoda’s sexual drives and general idiosyncrasies, why doesn’t Gilchrist choose to include what many would consider to be a key component of her experience as a woman? Why instead does the novel jump so blithely from her musings on the possibility of pregnancy to its outcome?

Rhoda’s lack of narration surrounding these pregnancies might be understood within this context as Gilchrist’s own rejection of the maternal imperative seen as an impediment in the continued search for selfhood. For many, pregnancy is the period of time when the mother begins to develop a relationship with the unborn fetus. In choosing to skip over that almost entirely, Gilchrist maintains a focus on Rhoda as a singular being—her experience of having someone living inside her, dependent upon her, is absented. As such, her body remains, to the limited extent that it can, her own.

Additionally, Southern mothers from the white upper-middle class were traditionally supposed to dote upon their children, such as Rhoda’s own mother does upon her. By openly expressing her ambivalence, through the lack of pregnancy narration as well as
her overt statements about motherhood. Rhoda resists that expectation. Though the act of reproduction, and especially her birthing of two healthy boys—heirs of the Southern patriarchy, whom her father adores—situates her within the conventional norms of Southern femininity, her maternal ambivalence challenges those norms, enabling her to maintain something of herself and drawing attention to motherhood as a key site of antagonism for Southern white women.

Yet, despite Gilchrist’s apparent disinterest in describing Rhoda’s pregnancies and in the maternal more generally, she does focus more extensively on specific aspects of Rhoda’s births—in particular, the traumatic effects that they had on Rhoda herself. Blood plays a central role in Rhoda’s memory of both births. After the first one, Rhoda claims, “There was blood everywhere. You’ve never seen so much blood. I keep dreaming about it” (222). Likewise, after the second, she describes, “huge pads soaked with my blood” next to the operating table (229). The blood associated with these births, grotesquely figured in its excess, has to do with the body getting “cut open,” thus signaling to the reader the permeability of her white female body. Birth, as such, becomes a horror fantasy in which the white woman’s body is literally cut open to produce the next generation of white male heirs. At the same time, this portrayal transfers the violence historically visited upon the bodies of Black women—women whose children were often taken from them, whose bodies were often abused and mutilated—to the body of a white woman. Thus, while it signifies a kind of violence done to white women, it also has the effect of erasing violences enacted specifically upon Black and non-white

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67 Rhoda describes motherhood as a “wolf” and openly expresses distaste for taking care of her children on multiple occasions.
68 This fact is thrown into relief later in the novel when Rhoda has an abortion in order to avoid being cut open, thereby refusing the dictates of white nation building.
women, effectively reinscribing the white woman as the (ambivalent/reluctant) keeper of national belonging.

Following the birth of her second child, Rhoda and her on-again off-again husband move further South to Louisiana, where Rhoda grows increasingly restless and unsatisfied. Her achievement of these outward markers of Southern womanhood—a husband and two healthy boys—rather than bringing her fulfillment as she’d once hoped, results in an even more acute sense of lost selfhood. The shame and anxiety that she experiences for her seeming inability to take to motherhood and domesticity get transferred onto her body, into her resurgent fears around being ‘fat’—being ‘too much,’ inhabiting a body that is out of control—and her obsessive need to be thin, which she equates with being desirable, leads her back to pills and alcohol, which in turn spin her further and further into a state of dissociation. Again, Gilchrist seems to point to the toxicity of Southern white womanhood, how the aspiration toward that ideal leads women away from themselves.

The only things that seem to bring Rhoda some semblance of happiness or relief during this time are the fact that she has hired a maid to look after her children so that she does not have to do the work of motherhood herself—a strong Black woman whose presence is the only bit of stability Rhoda and her children know, given her own volatile emotional state, and whose unfortunate fate, which I discuss below, operates to shore up Rhoda’s fragmented sense of self—and her feverish affair with a married friend. This affair, predictably, soon leads to a third pregnancy. Unsure of who the father is and in a state of extreme agitation, Rhoda decides to abort this pregnancy in order to “save [her] life” (a point reiterated by her multiple times). This act explicitly situates (white)
reproduction in opposition to white female selfhood, suggesting that having another child might literally cause her death because of the bleeding she experienced in past births and might figuratively cause her death because of the utter lack of bodily and psychic autonomy it will bring to her.

While on one hand, Rhoda’s abortion might be read as a threat to the white South and nation—the refusal to reproduce whiteness—at the same time the novel is invested in consolidating the selfhood of the white female protagonist, thus the abortion serves to prevent her body from being “cut open” again, to prevent the bleeding and the messiness of birth that might highlight the permeability of the white female body, its own difference. The abortion thus allows for Rhoda to resist the conventions of Southern femininity while actually furthering them—the novel therefore participating in the work of maintaining a regional and national hegemony premised on whiteness even as it appears to challenge that through its challenge to traditional norms of Southern womanhood.

This is emphasized through several points in the novel. Most notably, it is Rhoda’s father, emblem of the white Southern patriarchy, who arranges the abortion (329). While Rhoda seemingly gains agency through making this decision—one of, if not the most, decisive moment for her in the novel—she also loses agency through her

69 The fact of this abortion is even further complicated by Rhoda’s doctor uncle, who suggests, after learning that she did not take a pregnancy test, that Rhoda was in fact never pregnant to begin with, that it was only a hysterical pregnancy. While Rhoda rejects her uncle’s suggestion, because she has thus far been an unreliable narrator, frequently engaging in manic episodes, it nonetheless has the unsettling effect of making the reader question her. Her ability to know herself and her body are thrown into relief and we are left uncertain whether this pregnancy—one in which the father was unclear—was in fact true or imagined. It can be read as an attempt by white masculinity to control the narrative of white women’s reproduction, to erase uncertainty and ambivalence around birth/pregnancy, even as it has the consequences of highlighting this uncertainty even further.
return to her father. In leaving Malcolm for the last time in the novel, she returns to the safety and security of her father’s house. This frees her from the demands of domesticity, as her children are cared for by her parents’ Black servants—whose labor, as we’ve seen already, thereby nurtures these white children, heirs of the Southern patriarchy, and enables the continuation of Rhoda’s ambivalent motherhood. While Rhoda gains safety and security, this action further bonds her to her father, from whom she has throughout the narrative been attempting to extricate herself. Thus it ultimately prevents her from achieving the independence that she desires and that would actually allow her to forge her own life and selfhood outside of the influence of Southern patriarchy. Though under her father’s roof she has in some ways more freedom, because of her ability not to worry about money, she is also beholden to her parents, specifically her father, and subject to their expectations. The end of the novel shows her returning home from a trip to Mississippi in a plane that her father has chartered to retrieve her. It is a vision of his masculine power and Rhoda’s acquiescence to that power, which is also, for her, a reprieve from the trials and tribulations of the world: “He took dominion everywhere. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep” (356).

Even as the novel depicts Rhoda’s abortion, it also figures another kind of birth in the writing of the novel itself as Rhoda’s autobiography. As I cited earlier in the chapter, she notes in the preface, “I meant this as a book of short stories and I started writing it that way. Then the stories started to bleed into each other and I decided to go on and let them bleed” (3). But if these stories are the fruit of that belated act of reproduction, it begs the question—what precisely do they reproduce? The violence of white silence and
forgetfulness? The shame of complicity? The failure of Southern womanhood as the very predicate for national belonging itself?

Conclusion: What is Reproduced?

*Net of Jewels* is engaged in a kind of complicated and conflicted work that indexes the ambivalence and anxiety of white Southern femininity. On one hand, it wants to show the ways in which the imperative of Southern womanhood, specifically Southern white womanhood, can have traumatic impacts on the white women who aspire to and fail at this ideal, causing deep shame and anxiety that get written onto the white female body. But it also wants to challenge the norms of Southern white womanhood by showing how white women challenged those through inhabiting desires outside of procreation and through embracing their sexuality—even if, and this is part of the conflict it represents, these paths often lead them back to the very norms they sought to escape.

But, beyond that, this is also a novel, constructed as a semi-autobiographical memoir, invested in protecting or recovering the coherence of its female protagonist, in showing how, in the face of the trauma she experiences around her fraught, ambivalent relationship to white Southern femininity and the shame this creates for her, she manages to nonetheless find “freedom,” to reach a place where she could look back with, dare we say, nostalgia.

While Rhoda’s purported “freedom” is only realized through a rhetorical leap in the coda of the novel, the novel does present a vision of freedom in Derry—Charles William’s cousin, a white woman who is a Civil Rights worker and whose sense of value derives not from the validation of others but from her own work, who possesses “some
kind of power [Rhoda] had never seen in a woman . . . a full and complete woman who was free to act” (244; 248). This form of freedom, however, remains inaccessible to Rhoda, whose shame at her ambivalent attachment to her privilege prevents her from abandoning or even, in any sustained way, questioning it. For Rhoda, that kind of freedom—the kind that doesn’t come at anyone else’s expense—is still ultimately untenable as long as she remains caught within these structures, convinced that “there was nothing [she] could do to be worthy of it” (247).

As such, Rhoda is not free to act—Gilchrist, it seems, is unable or unwilling to imagine this possibility for her narrator, unable to imagine what it might look like or mean for her to realize a kind of freedom that is not necessarily tied to the attainment of coherence. She is unable to reconcile the dilemma of what true freedom might necessitate letting go of—the very narratives that sustain her. Instead, Gilchrist shores up Rhoda’s identity—throughout the novel and particularly at the end—through the troping of the Black “other,” a figure that, even when Rhoda is failing most miserably at Southern womanhood, serves to enable her consolidation, to validate her wholeness—and her whiteness. We see this when she first arrives in the South, her initial trepidation quickly assuaged by the magnificent “chocolate-colored” house her parents have bought, a seemingly unconscious gesture to the Black labor this new life of hers has been constructed upon; we see it again shortly after in her encounter with the Klan and throughout in the Black female labor that, though sparsely acknowledged, props up her experience of motherhood.

This is especially visible through the figure of Klane Morengo, Rhoda’s no-nonsense maid and nanny in Mississippi, who takes care of her children and, because she
is seemingly incapable, of Rhoda herself. While Rhoda’s encounter with the Klan stands 
out as an anomaly within this novel for the visceral nature of its violence and its depiction 
of whiteness (even whiteness troped as darkness), its resonance continues to plague the 
新型 throughout, particularly through the resurfacing of blood at key moments. Klane’s 
name likewise calls up this encounter through its orthographic similarity. After Rhoda 
has gone back to her parents’ house to rest after having the abortion, she finds out that 
Klane has been accused of the murder of her own sister. Rhoda, ever the good white 
savior, becomes convinced that she alone can save Klane and that it will serve as penance 
for her own misdeeds—for her inability to adequately conform to the dictates of white 
Southern femininity: “I’ll make up for it now. I’ll save Klane and that will make up for 
it” (347). Klane’s life, it seems, is intended as the bargaining chip for Rhoda’s shame. 

However, upon arrival in Louisiana she is told that Klane has died—killed herself 
by hanging, a suicide with uncanny echoes of a lynching. As Rhoda lies in bed later with 
her lawyer friend, whom she has unsuccessfully attempted to seduce, she speaks: “God, I 
keep seeing Klane’s body hanging from a rafter. Seeing her dead. I don’t know how I got 
into all of this. I don’t know what I’m doing here” (355). Indeed, the novel supports this: 
Rhoda does not know where she is—she never did, perhaps she never will, attached as 
she is to the safety of her privilege and her trauma. Yet even in her (futile, empty) search 
for selfhood, she is made whole through the othering of the Black figures who populate 
the novel, whose stories go untold and unexamined—who hang suspended, like Klane, 
and like the Black bodies swinging from the trees, the “blackened [corpses] . . . [figures] 
hanging from a rope” that haunt her vague half-memories.
In the end, then, white Southern womanhood, long held to be the very foundation of the South, is revealed as perpetually unstable, just as whiteness itself is—a construct whose rigidity conditions its failure. This instability or precariousness is written onto the bodies of white Southern women, felt in the shame and ambivalence of toxic attachments, in the deceptive clarity of blood. It is an instability that threatens the coherence of the South and, by extension, of the nation (hence where it emerges, the need to always shore up that fragmentation), while also being integral to the persistence of that nation. What the novel shows us, after all, is that it is not in fact white Southern womanhood but the sacrifice of the Black woman and Black womanhood that enables the reproduction of the nation and the South.
“BARBED WIRE WHERE A WOMB SHOULD BE”: THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY IN GAYL JONES’ *CORREGIDORA*

Narrating Affective Response to a Racialized History of Reproductive and Sexual Trauma

In one of the ritualized dialogues that is a hallmark of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, the protagonist, Ursa, expresses the loss of her womb after her hysterectomy through imagistic metaphors: “Sperm to bruise me. Wash it away. Vinegar and water. Barbed wire where a womb should be. Curdled milk.” The invocation of “vinegar” and “curdled milk” here suggest Ursa’s equation of her own body, and by extension her sense of selfhood, with something spoilt, and her identification of herself with the abject—that which reveals the permeability of the subject’s boundaries. Beyond that, however, the figuring of barbed wire in the place where the womb “should be” gestures to a contradiction at the heart of the narrative. While the womb is traditionally a space of protection and comfort, signifying creation and new life, its absence here negates these significations. Instead, it is figured as “barbed wire,” which is typically used to construct fences, or boundaries, designed to keep people from trespassing. In particular, barbed wire is used in the construction of border fences, the barriers ostensibly used to protect the homogeneity of a nation and to keep difference out. Thus, rather than being a space of warmth and comfort, Ursa’s womb, her absent womb, is reimagined as closed off, guarded—both protected from invasion and utterly inaccessible.

This affective tension between opening up and remaining closed off, signaled here by the replacement of the womb with the figuration of a violent boundary, is in many ways the central theme of *Corregidora*, a novel based on the stories passed down through
the author’s own family, which focuses on a young Black Southern woman’s struggle to forge her own path and find her voice in the face of the painful legacy of trauma from slavery that she has inherited.

This legacy of abuse and resistance, of spoken truths to witness and strategic silences kept, has been passed down, through the medium of storytelling, from her great-grandmother through the maternal line, creating a family narrative of trauma that, while purposeful, lacks affective tenor and is rigid and unchanging. Ursa’s own loss of the womb at the outset of the novel initiates a disruption in the rote transmission of this legacy, throwing its contradictions—the need to tell countered by the impulse to hold in, the desire to feel and to love against the perils that feeling brings (the danger of opening up), the necessity to protect against vulnerability and hurt and the healing that the recognition of hurt and realization of vulnerability can bring—into relief. In this way, and as I argue in this chapter, Ursa’s womb loss opens up affective histories of racialized trauma in the South, showing how forms of historical sexual and reproductive trauma continue to shape Black Southern women’s experiences of feeling, of shame and vulnerability, in the present. The novel’s excavation of these affective histories of racialized and gendered trauma enables their rewriting and resignification, making room for the possibility of new feeling relations to these historical traumas and, by extension, to oneself and to others.

Like *Net of Jewels*, the affective histories of trauma that *Corregidora* surfaces are marked as Southern in part through their relation to reproduction. As we see in the former, reproduction is integral to the project of nation building and to the related project of the hegemonic consolidation of the (white) South. Within this framework, Black
women’s reproduction has historically situated them as central or peripheral to the nation—central to the increase of the nation’s labor force under slavery and, after slavery, peripheral because of their propagation of a non-white populace. Both of these positionings have been used to justify violence, physical and sexual, against Black women in the South—and the ideal of White Womanhood, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been integral to these justifications and to the concomitant stigmatization of Black women as hypersexual and sexually deviant, thereby marking them as sexually available to white men and, after slavery, as easy targets of eugenic measures that sought to curb their reproduction. As such, for Black women, particularly Southern Black women—whose womanhood has historically been figured against the ideal of White Womanhood, which has greater weight and significance in the South—sexuality has long been intimately tied to reproduction: the deep-rooted stigmatization of Black women’s sexuality was historically used, and continues to be used, to justify the regulation of their reproductive capacities, and both sexuality and reproduction have been and continue to be used to negate Black Southern women’s claim to personhood and to belonging within the white South.70

70 It should be noted, too, that Jones’ consideration of the South is not limited to the Southern US, as her grandmothers were enslaved by Corregidora in Brazil, a nation of the Global South with its own legacy of chattel slavery and its own complex history in regards to sexual and reproductive violence against Black women. In Brazil, as the novel depicts, Black female slaves were often prostituted by their slave masters as a way to generate additional profit. See Martha Abreu’s “Slave Mothers and Freed Children: Emancipation and Female Space in Debates on the 'Free Womb' Law, Rio de Janeiro, 1871” for an in-depth discussion of this practice, and Stelamaris Coser’s Bridging the Americas: The Literature of Paula Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones (1994) for a discussion of this history in the literature.

71 For more comprehensive discussions of the way in which Black womanhood has been figured in opposition to White Womanhood and as outside the frame of the South and nation, see—among many other works—Alys Eve Weinbaum Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought (2004), who looks more closely at the relationship between race and reproduction in nation formation, Patricia Hill Collins Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism (2004) and Angela Davis Women, Race & Class (1981), each of which trace histories of race and reproduction in relation to Black womanhood, Candace Jenkins Private Lives, Proper Relations:
Jones, who was born in Kentucky in 1949 and grew up in the deep South during the height of the Civil Rights movement, complicates and dramatizes these racialized, sexualized, and gendered histories of abuse—and the resistance to this abuse that Black Southern women also engaged in—in *Corregidora* through representations of feeling, showing how Black women’s relationship to feeling (to sexual feeling, to the fear of feeling, to the desire for feeling and emotional expression), and by extension to sense of selfhood and capacity for connection, has been shaped by and through these histories of trauma. As Candace Jenkins argues, African Americans, especially women, experience a “doubled vulnerability” due to the persistent stigmatization of their sexuality and selfhood—they are vulnerable both to racist appropriations of their bodies and being and to the universal fears of intimacy that govern human beings (5).

This layered relation to vulnerability is central to *Corregidora*, which shows how the racialized histories of sexual and reproductive trauma that have been passed down to Ursa inform the dilemma of opening up while protecting oneself that is at the root of her struggle and the core of the narrative. For even as the South of Jones’ novel is a Black South in which few, if any, white characters appear, the threat of whiteness, as Jennifer Cognard-Black has incisively pointed out, lurks at the edges—and the center—of the novel, visible in the stories of the slave master Corregidora’s abuse and violation of Ursa’s grandmothers and in other stories of abuse under slavery that have been handed down to Ursa, in the conspicuous loss of Ursa’s womb at the hospital, which calls up the history of forced sterilization of Black and poor women in the South, and in both of...

*Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007), which I discuss in more detail further in the chapter and which examines the stigmas attached to Black femininity.

Ursa’s ex-husbands’ violence and misogyny, which, despite their Blackness, can be understood within the rubric of existence within a white supremacist patriarchy. This lingering threat of white violence shapes Ursa’s response within the novel, but it is also palpable in the novel’s own narrative strategy, which, like its protagonist, seeks to testify to this trauma without having it be exploited.

*Corregidora*, similarly to *Net of Jewels*, explores the use of narrative as a form of reproduction; storytelling, in particular, is figured as the way in which the legacy of racialized sexual trauma at the center of the narrative is passed down, inscribing this trauma on the bodies of its inheritors (serving as a means of bearing witness even as it also perpetuates this trauma). But whereas for Gilchrist narrative ultimately serves as a means to consolidate her protagonist’s white female selfhood—and, by extension, the hegemony of the (white) South—through the systematic erasure of Black female selfhood, for Jones, as a Black female author writing a Black female character, narrative serves a more complicated function. Through the first-person narrator of Ursa, Jones uses the narrative as a means of grappling with these histories of violence and trauma, but in doing so, she (Ursa as well as Jones) also engages in a struggle to preserve her sense of selfhood—a struggle defined by the desire to share the truth of her experience and testify to the racialized and gendered violence that has impacted her family across generations and, at the same time, to protect her story from the co-optation and exploitation that can come with visibility. As such, while the narrative attempts a kind of self-preservation of its Black female protagonist, it also works to complicate and to fragment, to open up contradictions and ambiguities. This is a different kind of reproductive work, one that reproduces the complexity—the messiness—of human feeling (rather than attempting to
distill that feeling into something ‘palatable’). Within this frame, the *telling* of the story as a narration of selfhood, of Black female selfhood, becomes less important than the emotional work that underlies that telling (or not telling)—work that has to do with, for Black women, the protection of a sense of selfhood that is made always already tenuous through its exposure.

The affective negotiation of vulnerability at the heart of the novel—an ongoing negotiation of psychological, emotional, spatial, temporal, and interpersonal boundaries—is expressed through the narrative’s interrogatory structure, which counterposes the desire to know, and to tell, with the refusal to reveal, thereby enacting the push and pull of the contradictions created by these histories of trauma. This structure manifests in the novel’s alternation between readerly intimacy and withholding, as evidenced through the vivid bursts of feeling and intensity seen in its ritualized dialogues—rhythmic ‘blues’ dialogues that take place between two characters, sometimes real and sometimes fantasy, within which emotions are often heated and what remains unsaid or inarticulateable in the quotidian life of the novel is brought to the surface—contrasted with the slow reveal of Ursa’s personal life and memories, many of which are not surfaced, if at all, until the last sections of the novel, which take place decades after the first. The repetitious use of bodily symbols of opening and closing—the fist, the womb, the hole—performs another iteration of this negotiation of vulnerability that takes place through the push and pull of boundaries; in this way, Jones shows how this negotiation is bodily as well as emotional, how the response to histories of racialized sexual and reproductive trauma is encoded on the body as much as it is within affective life.
What I am referring to as the novel’s interrogatory structure is likewise palpable in the rhythm of the novel, an incessant back and forth in which questions are posed to Ursa—by her former husband, by old man Corregidora, by Ursa’s own traumatized psyche—asking her to account for pieces of her history or feeling. These questions, sometimes occurring within ritualized dialogues, go largely unanswered or are answered in the negative, drawing attention to the silences and omissions within the text—places where, in particular, feeling is missing or unable to be articulated. These invocations of silence, absence, and unfeeling serve as perpetual disruptions to the telling/passing on/witnessing that Ursa’s ancestors demand of her through the act of ‘making generations.’ Thus, while the novel itself performs the work of witnessing through its charting of this legacy of trauma, it makes those silences and omissions apparent in order to point to its own fundamental inadequacy as a means of resolving the trauma at its core (its inadequacy to the task of witnessing this trauma in such a way as to bring resolve).

In this way, Jones makes clear that, for Black women and men, there is no easy or straightforward mechanism for telling stories about the complex desires and violences of the slave past and for living in the wake of this history, as the legacy of pain is often unspeakable, of loss, unfathomable, such that posterity may only live it—just as Ursa experiences her womb loss—as a hauntingly overdetermined presence and, at the same time, an indefinable absence. The guarding of her interior self, through the structure of the narrative and through Ursa’s own refusal to reveal her feeling—even as she struggles to understand the depths of that feeling—functions as a mechanism to protect her from hurt and exploitation (by the persons and institutions of whiteness, by male violence and abuse, and also, potentially, by readers), but it also prevents her from having real
connections and from knowing that she can love and be loved, and it is ultimately ineffective in fully protecting her from loss and hurt—the hurt inflicted upon her by others and her own potential to inflict hurt upon others (and upon herself).

In what follows, I explore the ways in which the racialized and gendered politics of vulnerability and of feeling shape the narrative’s engagement with questions of embodied trauma and memory, which coalesce around the loss of Ursa’s reproductive capacity—a loss that accentuates Ursa’s fears of being hurt but also opens up the pathway for new relations to selfhood and to the past. By looking at these questions through the lens of affect and feeling, which reveal the subject as a corporeal site of contradictions held in tension, we can understand the novel as working through the concomitant perils and necessity of opening up for Black Southern women whose subjectivities encompass a legacy of trauma and abuse yet who, like Ursa, are seeking ways to recognize themselves both within and outside of this legacy.

Lost Womb: Affective Numbness and Disruption of Self

The womb, or rather, the lost womb, is arguably the focal point of Corregidora—it is this loss, at the outset of the novel, that opens up the affective histories of trauma that Corregidora surfaces and which catalyzes the novel’s engagement with vulnerability. Throughout the narrative, the womb as such remains conspicuously absent yet hauntingly present, a site of loss and longing but also deep ambivalence. In contemporary Western culture, the womb is often used to symbolize fertility, hope, and possibility, the abundance that a new child brings. However, for Black women, who have long been
subject to various forms of sexual and reproductive violence and exploitation, the womb has historically served a kind of dual function as, on one hand, a site of maternal love, care, and possibility and, on the other, a site of violence and exploitation.

Under slavery, the law of *partus sequitur ventrem*—meaning “that which is brought forth follows the womb”—dictated that the condition of the child follows the mother, which meant that any child born of an enslaved mother was born into bondage. This gave white slave masters additional incentive (beyond their sexual desire for Black women, bound up with their desire for dominance) to rape and impregnate their slaves, increasing their labor force by effectively making slaves of their own children. Some slave women were also marked as breeders and given the ‘job’ of bearing children with other slaves. Their children were kept so long as economically expedient, but were often sold, separated from their mothers forever. Pregnant slave women who labored in the fields were generally treated the same while pregnant, which meant long hours and poor working conditions. This in combination with the fears they faced for their children and for losing their children made pregnancy and the anticipation of motherhood a fraught time.

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73 During slavery, Black women experienced systematic rape and the exploitation and control of their reproduction. Post-slavery, their sexual and reproductive lives were controlled through continued threats of sexual violence, forced sterilization, the welfare state, population control groups, and experimental medicine (primarily, though not solely, white individuals and institutions). The perpetuation of this violence has been justified through the characterization of Black women as licentious and hyper-sexual, a (mis)characterization designed to obscure the stake of white supremacy in the regulation of Black reproduction. Many have written about this; see, among others, Angela Davis *Women, Race & Class* (1983) and other writing, Dorothy Roberts *Killing the Black Body: Race Reproductive, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997), Patricia Holl Collins *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), and Candace Jenkins *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007).

74 Jennifer L. Morgan discuss the complexity of slave women’s relations to the womb and reproduction in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004), noting how slavery changed the meaning of reproduction for the enslaved, but also how, even as reproduction was a site of exploitation of slave women which demanded that they participate in their own commodification, it could also serve as an assertion of humanity and autonomy (10). See, in particular, Ch. 6, for a discussion of slave reproduction and resistance. See also Stephanie Camp’s *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004) for more on the ways in which slave women practiced forms of resistance in the everyday.
experience, even as pregnancy and motherhood could also serve as a site of some resistance by bestowing a degree of humanity and autonomy where it was denied. Rape and forced breeding—as well as other tactics of exploitation, such as medical experimentation, that slave women endured—created complicated relationships to the womb and pregnancy, robbing slave women of a sense of bodily autonomy and reinforcing the idea that their bodies were not their own.

After Emancipation, Black women’s reproduction no longer served to expand the labor force (which had, by turn, enabled the reproduction of the white South and nation) but instead constituted a danger to the future of the white nation and to white supremacy. Fears around miscegenation, augmented by the possibility, post-Reconstruction, of an autonomous, unregulated Black female sexuality and desire, constituted, for white Southern men, a threat to the social order, which led to heightened efforts to police and exploit Black women’s bodies and sexualities (Collins 72, 71). The eugenics movement of the early twentieth century was one means by which this policing occurred, and the early decades of the twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in the number of poor and non-white, especially rural and especially southern, women who were sterilized without their consent. At the same time, Black women across the country were advocating for reproductive rights and access to birth control. But this struggle was not supported by all African Americans, many of whom, particularly Black men, remained skeptical of these efforts. In the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power

76 Again, see Collins’ and Davis’ aforementioned work for more on eugenic efforts to regulate Black reproduction. In particular, see chapter 12 in Women, Race & Class “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights.”
movements, Black women’s wombs became a site and symbol of the contestation over their role within the race.\textsuperscript{77} As Stephanie Athey notes, “Although opinions on reproductive freedom within [black nationalist organizations] varied, birth control devices and abortion, as well as sterilization, were condemned by many as schemes to annihilate the race” (“Reproductive Health” 8–9).\textsuperscript{78} Within this context, Black women were charged with carrying children as a sign of their loyalty to the race, leaving those who did not wish to or could not conceive in precarious positions vis a vis their political and social community.

*Corregidora* emerges out of, and in conversation with, this debate about Black women’s reproductive choice and autonomy in relation to the past and future of the Black race. Jones inverts the paradigm of womb as symbol of futurity, extinguishing any illusion of hope for a child at the outset of the novel when doctors remove Ursa’s womb, the fetus inside it—as we find out later, Ursa had been in the early stages of a pregnancy—seemingly forgotten. It is unclear whether the loss of the unborn child is too painful for the novel to grapple with, if this loss is inconsequential compared to the loss of Ursa’s reproductive capacity, or if it simply deepens that loss and is embedded within it—but the loss of the unborn child is barely spoken, a trauma that remains out of sight, at the very edges of the novel. Instead, it is the loss of Ursa’s womb, occurring on the second page of the novel, that propels the narrative. Indeed, all of Ursa’s fantasies and

\textsuperscript{77} As Stephanie Athey argues, this struggle played out in Black revolutionary movements, as well as in the homes and relationships, familial and sexual, of African Americans (“Reproductive Health” 10). One of the major issues in this struggle was Black women’s need and desire for access to birth control. While African Americans had long been negotiating their own needs for means of procreative regulation against racist, white-led efforts to curb their reproduction, the ramped-up efforts by Black women to gain access to birth control in the ’70s caused unprecedented “accusations of genocide” from those within their own race.

\textsuperscript{78} The Black Panthers were notably the only one of these groups to openly support birth control in Black communities (“Reproductive Health” 9).
imaginings seem to circle around this loss, which is psychological as well as bodily and affective.

The impact that this loss has within the narrative comes from the importance of the procreative womb to Ursa’s sense of self and her connection to her heritage—a connection that is disrupted by her presumed inability to bear children. This has to do with the familial charge to make generations, which has long been engrained in her through the stories passed down by her grandmothers. Prior to her accident, Ursa’s felt identity is integrally tied to the legacy of familial trauma that she has inherited and the charge passed down to her to “bear witness” to that trauma by “making generations”—that is, by having girl children to whom she can retell the stories of her grandmothers’ abuse under slavery as a form of remembrance and resistance. As she relays to her second husband, Tadpole, “My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part [of the abuses under slavery in Brazil] she lived through that my grandmama didn’t live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget. Even though they’d burned everything to play like it never happened. Yeah, and where’s the next generation?” (9).

Aside from her passion for singing the blues, which is a significant form of self-expression discussed in much of the novel’s criticism,79 Ursa does not appear to have goals or dreams for herself outside of producing female progeny to whom she can pass on her familial legacy. This is further evident when Tadpole asks her, as she has just come

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79 While this aspect of Jones’ work has been taken up in various ways by many of her critics, see, in particular, Emily Lordi’s discussion of Jones’ use of “blues writing” in Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature (2013).
out of the hospital, “What do you want, Ursa?” She can only reply, “What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations” (22). When, unsatisfied with this answer, he asks again, Ursa cannot answer; she does not know how to respond, as she has never before claimed the space to articulate any desire beyond that which has been passed down to her. Without this integral part of herself, one which—both in its literal capacity and as metaphor—informs all other aspects of her life, Ursa’s own sense of identity is fraught with uncertainty, her vision of her future bleak, as seen in her comment to Tadpole, “[It’s] as if part of my life’s already marked out for me—the barren part” (6).

In this way, the loss of the womb disrupts Ursa’s sense of self through its disruption of her preordained future and her relation to that future. But it also has profound effects on her sense of identity through its impact on her sexual feeling, pleasure, and desire, and on her feeling more broadly—her affective connection to the world. These effects serve to further undermine her felt identity as a woman, already tenuous because of her inability to bear children, both in terms of her sense of herself (her internalization of cultural ideals of femininity) and how she is perceived by others. Her felt sense of selfhood, as the narrative shows, is deeply tied to her identification as a sexual being, even as that identification is fraught with ambivalence. This has to do with the cultures that have shaped her. The Brazilian culture of her ancestors—Ursa’s great-grandmother and grandmother were raised in Brazil in the household of the Brazilian slave master, Corregidora, whose name continues to define Ursa’s existence—reduced

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80 As many theorists of affect argue, feeling is the primary mode through which we interact with and understand the world and through which human beings connect to self and others. See works from The Affective Turn to Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Touching Feeling for various understandings of affect and feeling, all of which, in different terms, position it in this way.
Black female slaves to their sexuality, as they were often prostituted by their owners. 81

The US Southern culture in which Ursa has been raised has likewise long stigmatized
Black women, figuring them as hypersexual, and thereby reducing their subjectivity to
their sexuality in order to justify their violation by white men, as well as the violent and
violating regulation of their sexuality and reproduction.

These intersecting histories of sexual trauma are distinct from, though linked to,
the reduction of the women in Ursa’s family to their reproductive capacities wherein their
ability to “make generations” is figured as their primary source of value. This invocation
to make generations works to obscure or cut them off from their sexuality—a sexuality
that has historically been exploited. We see this in both Ursa’s and her mother’s fear of
sexuality, even as they are seemingly aware of its power. Yet, even as she fears her own
sexuality, Ursa also recognizes it as somehow at the core of this inherited legacy of
trauma 82 and thus at the core of her own identification. 83 Prior to her accident, Ursa is
described, through flashbacks and reflections, as a sexual being. When she meets Mutt,
she is inexperienced and shy, but as their relationship progresses, she learns to take
pleasure in sex—so much so that when Mutt becomes jealous and vindictive, he

81 See Martha Abreu’s “Slave Mothers and Freed Children: Emancipation and Female Space in Debates on
the 'Free Womb' Law, Rio de Janeiro, 1871” for an in-depth discussion of this practice, and Stelamaris
for a discussion of this history in the literature.
82 As I discuss in a later section of this chapter, sexuality has to do with what remains unsaid in the history
of trauma passed down through Ursa’s family—with the nuances of Ursa’s grandmother’s sexual
relationship, based on his ownership of her, with Corregidora. This complicated knot that goes unspoken
has to do with sexuality and feelings.
83 In Extravagant Abjection, Darieck Scott refers to what he calls the “twinning of blackness and the
sexual,” asserting that “sexual(ized) domination is in part what makes us black” (7, 9). While Scott’s
argument focuses primarily on Black men, others have also pointed out the mutual constitutiveness of race
and sexuality in the United States, showing how, for Black women, their sexuality has been historically
figured through their racial identification (and their racial identification through their sexuality).
withholds sex and sexual pleasure from her as punishment. After the operation, however, Ursa seems unable to feel pleasure and desire, sexually and otherwise. The lack of feeling that she experiences suggests her inability to experience feeling of her own without the frame of her futurity marked out for her—her inability, connected to the inability to imagine what it is she desires that surfaces when Tadpole queries her, to connect affectively to herself and to the world without having this map, which the invocation to make generations has heretofore provided to her.

But the inability to feel that seemingly results from the hysterectomy also serves another function in the novel, suggesting, through the manner in which it is conveyed, a lack of agency inherent in the experience of the operation that extends from Ursa’s sense of selfhood to the narrative itself. This initially comes through in the affective numbness with which Ursa, as narrator, describes the accident and its immediate aftermath. Her tone in this is affectless and matter-of-fact, as she shows Mutt drunkenly accosting her outside of the club where she works as a blues singer before stating, “That was when I fell. The doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out” (4). This initial description of the fall and its aftermath is palpably ambivalent, notably void of the kind of angry passion Ursa is told that she exhibited in the hospital. Instead, the passive nature of Ursa’s claims—“The doctors said my womb… They said that when I was delirious…” (my emphasis)—evokes a sense of helplessness and resignation, while also highlighting her lack of firsthand knowledge of her own bodily experience. This points to the ambiguity surrounding the cause of the accident and Ursa’s subsequent operation. Given the context in which this story occurs, we can read that gap in vital information as

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84 Thus, even as Ursa comes to seemingly embrace her sexuality, it also remains connected to a history of male violence and domination.
potentially suggestive of Ursa’s lack of autonomy or choice around the decision to have a hysterectomy—indeed, it appears as if the decision were made for her while she was incapacitated.

This question of choice or consent in relation to Ursa’s sterilization has been largely neglected within the criticism of the novel, despite the mysterious circumstances under which this operation occurs. This is likely because Jones provides us with no real evidence to suggest that foul play has taken place, and the doctors disappear from the narrative as inconspicuously as they had come. Yet the precariousness of this operation, foregrounded as it is within the first pages of the novel and forming the basis for the narrative that follows, merits further consideration—in part because its integral connection to Ursa’s womb loss, but also because it links that loss, and the affective histories of trauma that it opens, to the fears around violation and vulnerability that circulate in the novel.

We know that the doctors told Ursa that her womb had to come out, but we are never given the specific medical reasons for this; the book accepts it as a fact, an inevitability. Given the setting of this section of the novel, Kentucky in 1948, and the date of the novel’s publication, 1975—both heightened moments of forced sterilizations of Black women, especially poor Black women in the South—and given the fact that many of these women entered health care facilities for other conditions only to emerge without their wombs intact, it is easy to read the novel as suggesting that Ursa’s operation—whether willing or coerced—may be a part of this violent and violating racialized, gendered, and classed history. Reading the novel in this way emphasizes the threat of whiteness within the narrative as something visible at its periphery that reaches
down into its very core, and it also insinuates Ursa’s precariously control over her own body while linking this to her also-precarious control of her own narrative, suggesting an intimate connection between these domains wherein neither her body nor her story are ever fully her own.

As previously stated, this inability to feel dramatically affects Ursa’s sense of self; without the ability to feel, the foundations of her selfhood, which are grounded in her sense of herself as a sexual and procreative being, are fundamentally destabilized. This destabilization causes Ursa to experience shame for her inability to feel and for not feeling like a woman—shame that drives her to hide this lack of sexual feeling, but which is also driven by her premonition of the response its disclosure would incur. She hides her inability to feel from Tadpole when they are having sex, assuring him falsely of her pleasure: “He was inside, and I felt nothing. I wanted to feel, but I couldn’t. Is it good? Yes. Is it good, baby? Yes, yes” (82). Ursa’s shame also drives her estrangement from her friend Cat upon discovering Cat’s lesbianism, and fuels Ursa’s hurt and her consequent refusal to acknowledge that hurt—the hurt she feels from Mutt’s violence toward her, as well as the hurt from Tadpole’s eventual betrayal, ostensibly due to Ursa’s inability to experience sexual pleasure with him. After he is caught cheating, Tadpole’s words echo Ursa’s own fears about what this loss of feeling means for her womanhood:

85 See Jennifer Cognard-Black’s incisive argument in “I Said Nothing” about whiteness’ function as a kind of “present-absence” that serves as a “threatening silencer” within Corregidora (48–53).
86 Given the increased number of sterilizations, both voluntary and forced, within African American communities in the time during which this novel is set and when it was published, it is also possible to imagine that a proportionally increased number of Black women—those who received the operation—were subject to this loss of or alteration in their feeling and, as a result, may have experienced shame around their identities.
87 This discovery proves too confusing and close to home for Ursa, who later admits that she had considered lesbianism as an option after her womb loss. See Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, in particular, for a longer discussion of the significance of Cat’s lesbian sexuality, and Ursa’s latent queer sexuality, within the novel.
“You don’t even know what to do with a real man. I bet you couldn’t even come with him when you had something up in there . . . A man wants a woman that can do something for him . . . I know some women that can fuck your ass off too after it happened to them . . . She got more woman in her asshole than you got in your whole goddamn cunt” (88–89).

While some critics have attributed the novel’s repeated negation of feeling to Ursa’s inability or refusal to give language or voice to the physical pain that she experiences, and certainly this may be part of it, Ursa’s stated denial of feeling, particularly during the sexual act, can also be read as an expression of numbness of her physical and emotional feeling in the wake of her sterilization—a deeply invasive procedure, which the novel depicts as altering her ability to feel sexual pleasure or desire and affecting her emotional life, “blunting” or desensitizing her emotions. Though the narrative does not explicitly acknowledge this loss of feeling/desire as a legitimate or tangible form of loss, perhaps because there is no precedent through which to acknowledge this, it nonetheless exposes this loss through its incessant invocations, thereby positing an integral link between female reproduction and emotional or affective life and layering our understanding of Ursa’s inability to access or express her feeling within the novel. This struggle surfaces in the recurring questioning of Ursa about her feeling—which I discuss in a later section of this chapter.

The struggle for recognition of this loss and of Ursa’s feeling—even when she is feeling nothing—that the novel engages in can be understood as the struggle to try to

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88 Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argues that Ursa is unable to verbalize her physical pain, whereas Jennifer Cognard-Black argues that Ursa’s silence serves as a resistant strategy, giving way to alternative modes of knowledge.
understand who and what one is and can be without feeling, or with much altered feeling, as the case may be. How does one forge a new relation to oneself and one’s body when it has been forcibly altered by the medical establishment (a proxy for whiteness)? How do Black women forge new and creative ways of being and feeling that are their own even when there are these constant demands upon them, when their feeling and being is always circumscribed for them?

These questions, which hang suspended within the narrative, point to the significance of the womb and its loss not only as connective tissue to the past, to Ursa’s family history, but also to the future—initially to the witnessing of the past by future generations, but after the loss of the womb, to an as-yet-undetermined future no longer constrained by the mandate to make generations. As such, we can read the present-absent womb as a kind of temporal nexus, rooted in the body yet existing outside of time and governing the narrative’s—and Ursa’s—relation to past and future. On one hand, the novel shows that to be without a womb for a woman in Ursa’s position is to have no access to the (prescribed) future and no medium through which to transmit the past; it is essentially to be out of time.89 Ursa’s loss of the womb at the start of the novel therefore

89 As Lee Edelman argues, the figure of “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order” (11). Within Edelman’s framework, the fantasy of the future, to which the figure of the Child (as distinct from children themselves) is integral, is the foundation of politics and the social; where that fantasy is foreclosed, as it is in Corregidora through the loss of the womb, the subject is untethered from the social, situated outside the realm of meaning making without an anchoring point (the Child as emblem of futurity provides a sense of meaning and purpose, even if that is always situated on a horizon that is never fully reachable). At the same time, it should be noted here that while Edelman’s critique of futurity has been recognized by many for its radical potential, its “antisocial” tendencies and orientation toward the purely psychoanalytic have been heavily critiqued. For instance, Andrea Smith, in “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism” (2010), points to the limits of this form of subjectless critique in terms of decolonization, writing, “Edelman’s analysis lapses into a vulgar constructionism by creating a fantasy that there can actually be a politics without a political program that does not always reinstantiate what it deconstructs, that does not always also in some way reaffirm the order of the same. Edelman’s ‘anti-oppositional’ politics in the context of multinational capitalism and empire ensures the continuation of that status quo by disabling collective struggle designed to dismantle these systems” (46-47). On a broader scale, Mari Ruti’s The Ethics of Opting Out (2017) surveys the critical
disrupts from the very beginning the novel’s own relation to meaning and its sense of temporality; the destabilizing effects of the hysterectomy and the loss it implies are felt upon Ursa’s sense of self as well as within the narrative itself, rupturing both the linear time wherein each generation passes down these stories to the next, as well as the temporal repetition in which the same narrative gets repeated again and again.

Yet the constitutive disruption caused by the loss of the womb within *Corregidora* ultimately enables the novel to occupy its own sense of time—a kind of temporal disorientation akin to what Homi Bhabha describes as “revisionary time,” wherein the past is reconfigured as an “in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (qtd. in Goldberg 457).90 This form of temporality is achieved on the narrative level through the novel’s often fragmented and recursive structure, which weaves together memory and fantasy, thus challenging the linearity, as well as the passivity, inherent in most conventional understandings of time. By showing the past and present as integrated and dynamic—this occurs, in particular, through the novel’s use of ritualized dialogues, recursive exchanges between one or more characters
composed of mixtures of memories, fantasies, and real and imagined conversations\(^91\)—the novel opens up space for new narrative structures and modes of expression to emerge.\(^92\) The simultaneity and interweaving of multiple temporalities and modes of existence (dream, memory, fantasy, physical reality) enable the novel to hold its contradictions in tension throughout such that the loss of the womb can reach backward and forward, opening up affective histories of trauma and enabling new relations to these histories—holding, at once, deep pain, ambivalence, and transformational potential. As I explore in the following section, one of the ways in which this interweaving is realized is through the use of feeling terminology, which occurs throughout the novel, linking multiple realms of being and becoming, and, in doing so, rendering its affective negotiation.

**The Enigma of Feeling: Feeling, Sexuality, Ambiguity**

Throughout *Corregidora*, the terminology of feeling is used to indicate a wide range of sensations, from physical and sexual sensation to the valences of emotion to forms of knowledge and memory, thus capturing the slippage between the bodily and emotional that the affective encompasses and showing Ursa’s embodied subjectivity to be

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\(^91\) In a 1977 interview with her mentor Michael Harper, Jones describes ritualized dialogues as such: “What I mean by “ritualized dialogue” is that either the language isn’t the same that we would use ordinarily, or the movement between the people talking isn’t the same. No, there are really three things: the language, the rhythm of the people talking, and the rhythm between the people talking. In those technical books, they might call it "inaction rhythm." The forms I know just bring in everything. But there's a certain kind of rhythm that people create when they talk, when they start talking, a pattern of talk and response. So in ritualized dialogue, sometimes you create a rhythm that people wouldn't ordinarily use, that they probably wouldn't use in real talk, although they are saying the words they might ordinarily use. But you change the rhythm of the talk and response and you change the rhythm between the talk and response. So in ritualized dialogue, you do something to the rhythm or you do something to the words. You change the kind of words they would use or the rhythm of those words. But both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm—change its quality” (699).

\(^92\) In her article “Angry Arts: Silence, Speech, and Song in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*,” Amy Gottfried describes the ritualized dialogues in Corregidora as enabling a kind of ‘working through’ of trauma through their capacity to verbalize Ursa’s anger (567).
woven from these different elements. As such, feeling works metonymically within the narrative to show the ways in which these areas of life and aspects of selfhood are inextricably bound up with one another—how Ursa’s relation to sexuality shapes her emotional feeling, and vice versa, and how these constitute forms of knowledge that inform the memory-scapes that construct her sense of self—thereby making clear the necessary and irreducible irresoluteness of the raced, gendered, and sexualized predicament that Ursa faces as she attempts to reckon with the loss of her reproductive potential and the far-reaching implications of that loss and to open herself to the possibility of new forms of connection.

Most commonly in the novel, feeling is associated with sexuality and the bodily pains and pleasures of physical intimacy. For instance, when Ursa and Tadpole are having sex, he repeatedly asks her to describe what he is doing to her, prompting her reflection, to the reader, “What I felt didn’t have words” (74). Tadpole’s questioning reappears in Ursa’s dreamlike memory-fantasy of a conversation with her first husband, Mutt, the man who impregnated and then caused the loss of her womb: “I’m still thick with you. I can’t get you out. Does it feel good? No. Really, Urs? Really no good?” (76). And in Ursa’s imagined dialogue with her female friend Cat: “A man always says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked. Does it feel good?” (89). It is also echoed in Ursa’s childhood memory of her mother scolding her after her neighbor touched her genitals: “Don’t you know what that boy was doing? I couldn’t feel it. If I could see it, I know you could feel it. Mama, I couldn’t feel it. What was he using? I didn’t feel nothing” (42). These represent only a few of the many instances where feeling is used in this context. It is also worth noting that because of the fragmented and
recursive structure of the novel, questions or responses that center on feeling, such as the question posed by Mutt within Ursa’s memory-fantasy, above—“does it feel good?”—are often repeated across multiple conversations, real and imagined, with different characters, which works to create a kind of seamlessness between these different interactions and between the realms of reality and fantasy.

While the examples above represent instances where feeling is used within an explicitly sexual context, elsewhere in the novel the terminology is used to signify a way of knowing or being, as when Ursa reflects on what she calls her “feeling ways,” which come through in her blues when it feels like her voice is “screaming” with “pleasure mixed in the pain” (50). Jones herself has spoken about her interest in the relationship between language, expression, and musical genre, in particular the traditionally African American genres of jazz and blues, describing Corregidora as a “blues novel.” Blues, she explains, “talks about the simultaneity of good and bad, as something felt, as feeling . . . Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once” (Interview with Michael S. Harper 700). It is precisely the intangibility of feeling, or affect, that enables multiple contradictory feelings to be contained within the same song, body, or gesture. But Jones’ use of “feeling ways” here also reaches beyond the immediacy of the affective to touch on something deeper—a kind of feeling that is at the core of her very being. And feeling is used in a slightly different context in yet another passage, when Ursa wonders what her great-grandmother and grandmother felt in their respective relationships to Corregidora—“Mama could only know, but they could feel” (102 emphasis mine). By drawing that clear distinction between knowing and feeling, Jones emphasizes the personal and immediate, rather than distant, nature of that affect. The use of this term also highlights
the real felt impact of slavery on those subject to its violences. Feeling in these instances can thus be imagined as connected to knowledge and intuition and as a relationship with history and memory.

Whether understood this way or as a reference to sexual or bodily sensation, feeling in *Corregidora* reflects Jones’ stated preference for ambiguity and her attention to the in-between—it is used as a way of expressing, through language, the contradictions of Ursa’s existence, which are the very substance of her embodied selfhood. At the same time, Jones’ ambiguous use of feeling highlights the ways in which Ursa has internalized the yoking of her feeling to her sexuality but also the permeation of sexuality and its associated feeling into all aspects of her life and identity. In other words, the language of feeling as it resonates throughout the novel works metonymically to bind Ursa’s experience of sexuality to her understanding of her own affective relation with herself and the world, showing how this relation is shaped by her experiences of sexuality—and the affective histories of sexual trauma that the loss of her womb has opened.

**Feeling’s Invocation and Refusal: Embodied Vulnerability and the Work of Narrative**

The contradictions of Ursa’s existence, of her struggle with feeling (the pleasure mixed with pain, as well as the absence of feeling) are also at the core of the narrative negotiation of power and vulnerability that characterizes the novel—a negotiation that is opened up by the surfacing of the affective histories of trauma that Ursa’s womb loss evokes. This negotiation takes place, in part, through the narrative’s interrogative structure, which is evidenced in the repeated questions posed to Ursa regarding her feeling state (“What am I doing to you?” “Is it good?” “Does it feel good?” “What was
that boy doing to you?"), questions which lead again and again—in a gesture that simultaneously emphasizes the centrality of feeling and negates, or disavows, its presence—to the reiteration of her silence. Thus despite the frequent probing of Ursa’s feeling/s, feeling in the novel remains enigmatic—Ursa refuses to grant her interlocutors access to her emotional life-world, instead denying its very existence through her reiterated claims that “I’m without feeling” and “I didn’t feel nothing” (70, 42). In this way, Jones establishes a pattern, an incessant back and forth movement that communicates a desire for feeling (or its imminent disclosure) at the same time as this feeling is rendered opaque, or absent. Ursa uses her silence, her refusal to speak and to name her feeling, to protect herself against the threat of exploitation that vulnerability carries, thereby seeking to consolidate her sense of self through the guarding of her interiority. But this self-guarding comes with its own price, as an exploration of Jones’ second novel, *Eva’s Man*, makes painfully apparent.

Jones drafted both *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man* while she was completing her undergraduate and graduate studies at the predominantly white Connecticut College and Brown University, respectively, working on the two novels side by side. Perhaps as a result of this concurrence, *Eva’s Man* shares many characteristics with *Corregidora*, both thematic and stylistic. Like its predecessor, it tells the story of a young Black woman, Eva Medina, with a long history of trauma, both personal and familial, which informs her intertwined fears of making herself vulnerable to anyone and of being exploited or abused. Eva’s history of sexual exploitation ultimately drives her to kill and castrate her lover, thereby committing the very act of sexual violence whose threat lies latent at the

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*Emily Lordi describes this quality of the novel, and of Ursa herself, as its being both accessible and distant, attributing this effect to Jones’ use of blues structure (147).*
heart of Corregidora. After brutally murdering and castrating her newfound lover, Eva is sentenced to prison, where she is interrogated by the prison psychiatrist. This scene of interrogation, a more literal emblem of the myriad forms of questioning that take place throughout Corregidora and Eva’s Man, is worth exploring for the way that it brilliantly illuminates Jones’ vision of Black female bodily and emotional vulnerability as integrally bound together and shaped by racialized and gendered histories of sexual violence, exploitation, and resistance. Additionally, it brings to the fore the complex relations between power, vulnerability, and desire and voice and narrative that are at the heart of both of these novels.

What follows is an excerpt from Eva’s Man in which the prison psychiatrist—about whom we know little except that his name, David Smoot, marks him as a figure of threatening masculinity through its linkage to Eva’s murdered lover, Davis Carter, and a neighbor boy who once assaulted her, Freddie Smoot—questions Eva about the motivations behind the killing, probing her feeling in an attempt to understand or uncover something deeper within her:

He leaned toward me. He said he didn’t just want to know about the killing, he said he wanted to know about what happened after the killing. Did it come in my mind when I saw him lying there dead or had I planned it all along. His voice was soft. It was like cotton candy. He said he wanted to know how it felt, what I did, how did it make me feel. I didn’t want him looking at me. I had my hands on my knees. My knees were open. I closed my knees.

‘I want to help you, Eva.’
I said nothing.
‘Talk to me.’

94 See second to last section of the chapter for a more in-depth discussion of this.
95 In Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg’s article “Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones’ Corregidora,” Goldberg connects the novel’s depictions of heterosexual sex with scenes of interrogation, arguing that, in torture, interrogation is used to coerce the prisoner’s verbalization of bodily pain, thus allowing the torturer to gain a kind of possession of or power over their victim. She argues that, in Corregidora, the “interrogative mode of address helps to translate female desire and the female body into male pleasure and power” (454).
I wouldn’t.
‘You’re going to have to open up sometime, woman, to somebody. I want to help you.’ (76–77)

In this choreographed exchange, the figure of the psychiatrist serves as a symbol of the institution, of imperialism’s investment in discourses of rationality—of, in a word, whiteness. On the surface, he does want to help Eva, as he professes to through his stated interest in her feeling. He seeks to know how it felt to kill her lover, how it made her feel, in order to ascertain why she did it and what this meant to her. The use of feeling in this passage indicates that he wishes to know the emotional effects of this act on Eva, as well as what she experienced in her body. However, while his encouragement of her to “open up” to him reads as an invitation to unburden herself of all that she holds inside—the traumas of her life, which manifest bodily in the novel in excess gas and constipation (126)—the uneven power dynamics between this man, whose existence as only a name and a voice signal his proximity to whiteness, and Eva, a Black woman serving time, invest his erotically-tinged questioning with the potential for exploitation.

As Candace Jenkins notes, Black people, and Black women in particular, face a “doubled vulnerability”—that is, they are vulnerable both to racist appropriations of their bodies and being and to the universal fears of intimacy that govern human beings (5). Within this frame, the psychiatrist’s demand for Eva to “open up” can be understood as a demand for access to her body and sexuality, recalling the long history of abuses.

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96 Psychiatry has long been dominated by Western notions of madness and mental health. The leading figures in the field as it has developed over the last several hundred years have primarily been white and male, leading to a reliance on racist and masculine ideals of rationality. The works of Franz Fanon are helpful for understanding the whiteness of psychiatry. Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1961) is also useful for understanding the ways in which this field has developed around and perpetuated specific notions of deviance and otherness.
perpetrated by white men (and Black men, too) on Black women’s bodies. As the passage shows, these affective histories of trauma are inscribed on Eva’s body, surfaced in the psychiatrist’s interaction with her. For Eva to give him what he wants—to tell him of her feeling—would therefore be to render herself further vulnerable, body and mind, to this exploitation, the threat of which lingers in his cotton candy voice and penetrative gaze.

Eva’s reticence to share her feeling (again, evocative of Ursa’s same hesitancy) is connected to what Jenkins describes as the “salvific wish,” a response to the desire for respectability and propriety—the desire to be recognized as belonging within “civilized” culture—that can emerge in the face of the harmful stigmas that Black women and men have long been subjected to and the real violence that accompany this stigmatization—violence that Eva knows all too well. Candace Jenkins argues that the salvific wish—a kind of sacrifice whereby Black women can pay for the safety of the Black community as a whole with the concealment of their bodies and desire—attempts to preserve sexual expressivity while foreclosing the possibility of erotic exposure through the creation of an alternative space for sexual vulnerability that depends upon the rigid denial of a vulnerable sexual desire. In other words, it attempts to create a (false) separation between Black sexuality and Black erotic life, with its accompanying desire and vulnerability,

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97 This includes the litany of physical and sexual violence enacted by white men against Black women during and after slavery, up through the present day, as well as the systemic violences perpetrated on Black women’s bodies through the welfare state, population control groups, and experimental medicine.  
98 African Americans, both women and men, have long been subject to stigma around their sexuality, which has been labelled as deviant, excessive, and generally “other.” Black women specifically have typically been understood by whites as existing outside the boundaries of “True Womanhood,” even as their sexuality has been used to demarcate those very boundaries. This pervasive fear of the unknowable Black body, and the consequent drive to control it, are connected to a deep-seated anxiety about the permeability of national boundaries and the corruption of—or, rather, the absence of—a “pure” national identity. See Chapter One of this dissertation for more on this.
such that Black women can claim a kind of sexuality, conservative as it may be, without making themselves vulnerable and thereby exposing themselves, and the Black community as a whole, to the possibility of exploitation.99

Eva’s refusal to “open up,” her concealment of her body and desire, thus functions as a form of self-guarding that is also a refusal, more broadly, to give the psychiatrist access to a pathology of Black women and Blackness.100 As such, it highlights the perils, both on an individual and collective level, of sharing oneself for someone whose position—as a woman, as a Black woman, as an incarcerated Black woman, as an incarcerated Black woman who has experienced numerous traumas throughout her life—already renders them vulnerable and exposed. Even in a situation, such as this one, where “opening up” might help to ease some of the pent-up tension Eva experiences in her body, it also signifies a strategy of coercion, which Eva must navigate. Her response to this is to close her knees and say nothing, effectively refusing him, along with the reader—for the psychiatrist also serves as a proxy for a white audience—access to her body and interiority. In doing so, she refuses to re-circulate these affective histories of trauma, to repeat the cycle whereby they are re-inscribed over and over upon her vulnerable body. Through this representation of Eva’s physicalized resistance to the psychiatrist’s attempts to probe her emotional and psychic life, Jones’ makes clear the intimate relation between opening oneself emotionally and opening one’s body—that is, between emotional and physical vulnerability—a relation that is echoed in the narrative

99 Jenkins reads Eva’s madness as driven by the (impossible) goal of simultaneously denying and displaying sexual vulnerability (14, 155).
100 Jenkins contends that this desire for respectability leads many African Americans, especially Black women, to repress or silence their own experiences of sexual desire, as they threaten to be misread or misheard by the dominant culture.
strategy of the novel (and likewise in *Corregidora*), which maintains a tenuous balance between flooding the reader with vivid, sometimes grotesque details of violence and withholding Eva’s emotional life.

What the novel shows us is that, beyond the co-optation of Eva’s feeling or emotional life, what is also at stake is the loss of her already tenuous sense of bodily integrity and, connected to that, her self-identity. To submit to the psychiatrist’s eroticized desire to know would be to risk exposure not only of her own vulnerability but also of her desire—the desire, mixed with vulnerability and its associated fears, that led her to kill, castrate, and fuck her lover. This desire has the potential to “shatter the will and disintegrate the constructed self,” as it exposes the repression of the concomitant nature of pleasure and violence in that self-construction (Jenkins 20). The complementary gestures of closing her body and refusing to speak, thereby denying access to her interiority and actively rejecting the historical narrative within which Black women’s bodies are available for consumption, allow Eva to maintain a sense, fraught as it may be, of unviolated selfhood (by not speaking she guards the desire that might, if it could be spoken, break her apart). Her body and her voice—her silence—are the only weapons that she has to enable her to claim some measure of power and of agency.  

Yet her position (as a Black, incarcerated woman) complicates the power of this refusal—after all, the psychiatrist is not an anomaly but rather an amalgamation of all the figures in her life, mostly though not exclusively male, who also attempt to probe Eva’s

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101 In her analysis of *Corregidora*, Jennifer Cognard-Black suggests that its repeated refrain of “I said nothing” operates as a self-protective mechanism while also emphasizing alternative and more embodied modes of knowledge alive within the novel. Likewise, Jenkins connects Eva’s refusal to speak to her guarding of herself in the face of her increased vulnerability as a Black woman who has experienced a long history of sexual trauma, both personal and collective.
feeling, desire, and sense of self. This becomes apparent in the passage that directly follows the encounter above. This fragmented sequence consists largely of the repetition of the questions posed by the psychiatrist—“how did it feel?/how do you feel?”—transposed into the voice of Eva’s prison roommate Elvira (whose lesbian sexuality ignites Eva’s fear and desire) and posed also to Eva’s mother by an anonymous male caller. As such, despite Eva’s earlier resistance, the psychiatrist’s questioning can be seen to have already penetrated the symbolics of her unconscious such that she has internalized the lack of claim to an unviolated selfhood.

Her subsequent proclamation, “I don’t want to tell my story” is an affective response to this perpetual interrogation of her feeling and desire (77). While it can be read as another futile attempt in this negotiation of intimacy and vulnerability to maintain or to claim a selfhood that has always already been compromised—just as the interrogatory structure of Corregidora renders Ursa’s interiority always already tenuous and in constant question—it also highlights the complexities of what it means to tell one’s story or to use one’s voice. Whereas voice and telling are often associated with the ability to claim one’s selfhood or subjectivity, Eva’s refusal is less about the telling, or not telling, of her story and more about her own want not to tell—her affective response to the history of exploitation of her sexuality and feeling—suggesting that voice and telling are, for Jones, grounded in issues of feeling and desire. Thus, the actual telling/not telling is less important than the subject’s (Eva’s) ability to claim her want, or desire—in this case, the desire not to tell, to preserve her feeling from whatever form of exploitation its exposure might signify. In this way, Jones positions the narrative form as a continuous, affective negotiation between the subject/teller and the imagined listener
wherein voice/telling operates through a dialectic of presence and absence, speech and silence, to both expose and to guard one’s feeling and vulnerability. As such, the work of narrative-building is shown to echo the work of constructing a self through its repeated enactment of this negotiation of power and vulnerability, the continuous interplay of fragmentation and consolidation, of opening up (speech) and remaining closed off (silence).

This negotiation between opening up and remaining closed off, which forms the structure of Ursa’s own story, is also the guiding tension within her familial narratives, passed down to Ursa by her grandmothers and mother. These narratives are marked by the refusal to feel, which comes from the guarding against exploitation of feeling and the fear of feeling that has accompanied this self-protection, and which continues to cause damage to Ursa’s ability to realize her own sense of self and build a life for herself. While her maternal forebearers sought to protect themselves against vulnerability by closing themselves off to the possibility of feeling, that absence in their narratives, as we see in the following section, is what ultimately leads Ursa to realize her own desire to feel, to open herself to the possibility of feeling through connection to others.

**Affective History and the Mutability of Memory**

As we have thus far seen, feeling, in its many forms, exists as a question mark, both present and absent, throughout *Corregidora*. While Ursa’s own feeling—sexual, emotional, and otherwise—is often rendered opaque through her disavowing responses to its interrogation, the feeling of her mother and her grandmothers also remains obscure, even as the details of her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s abuse at the hands of
Corregidora are rendered clearly. This is particularly apparent within several exchanges. Early in the novel, as Ursa is telling Tadpole about the slave master Corregidora, he asks her, “How were you really taught to feel about him?” (13). Ursa becomes defensive, turning the question on his relation to his ancestry without ever answering it. But it hangs there like a beacon signaling to the ambivalence within that ancestral relationship and the deep emotional and affective complexity of these “monstrous intimacies.” A variation on this question is asked, too, by Ursa’s father to her mother, before Ursa is born and before her father leaves for good. “How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love,” he asks her grandmother and great-grandmother (131). It is this question—again unanswered, again gesturing to the ambivalence embedded within those relationships—that Ursa’s mother cites as their reason for disliking him.

Ursa, too, questions her grandmothers’ feelings toward Corregidora: “Mama could only know, but they could feel… What did they feel?” (102). This question, as Swanson Goldberg points out, remains unanswered. Instead, it leads into a comment on Corregidora’s own perverse desire: “You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them” (102). Thus,

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102 Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out this absence of affect or feeling in the familial narrative of abuse that has been passed down to Ursa from her grandmothers (147). Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg likewise points to an absence in Ursa’s inability to express her actual bodily pain, which Swanson Goldberg links to her inability to express her sexual desire. While she remains skeptical of Ursa’s ability to overcome the cycle of repression that she has been born into, she finds some hope in Ursa’s expression, at the end of the novel, of her fear of hurting and being hurt (468).

103 Christina Sharpe describes what she calls “monstrous intimacies” as “familiar and intimate violence” bred by relations under slavery, as “the proximity between ‘antagonism and identification’ … a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted that are breathed in like air and often acknowledged to be monstrous” (Monstrous Intimacies 3).

104 Swanson Goldberg points to the fallacy in many analyses of the novel, which read the line about hate and desire as a response to Ursa’s question, indicating that the hate and desire was theirs instead of his (453).
while Corregidora’s feeling—his mix of hate and desire—is palpable and able to be articulated, the feelings of her grandmothers remain unarticulated within the space of the narrative, perhaps because they cannot be known, but also as a means to protect these feelings, which have historically been exploited, and whose complexity Ursa, and readers too, may not be able to understand even if they were to find articulation. These feelings, it seems, are not part of what her grandmothers wish to bear witness to, not part of the histories of trauma that they want Ursa to pass on—for they do not figure into the stories that have been passed down to Ursa, even as they linger like ghosts at the edges of these stories. This fundamental absence of feeling in the familial narrative of trauma makes it difficult for Ursa to connect to this narrative.

Ursa’s mother, however, is a different story; she possesses “a knowing, a feeling of her own” (103). This “knowing,” or “feeling” is indicative of her mother’s memory, identity, and desire. Because she did not grow up in the household or under the thrall of Corregidora, her mother has experiences that are her very own and which do not belong to the family lore that has been passed down, including, importantly, her relationship with Ursa’s father. Ursa’s craving for this memory or feeling of her mother’s becomes apparent in one of the longest sequences of ritualized dialogue, which takes place near the middle of the novel when Ursa has left Tadpole and gone to live and sing at a club called The Spider. After being rebuffed for hitting on her, the owner of this club attempts to understand something about Ursa, describing her voice as the kind that “can hurt you and make you still want to listen” (96). “You a hard woman to get into,” he says (98). This claim on Ursa’s self-protectiveness leads into a ritualized dialogue between Ursa and Mutt, with Mutt pleading with Ursa to “forget the past.” But Ursa cannot. Instead,
her mind goes to her memories—“Always their memories, but never my own” (100).
And her mind goes to her mother, whose “whole body shook with that first birth and
memories, and she wouldn’t make others and she wouldn’t give those to me, though she
passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn’t give me her own
terrible ones . . . Desire, and loneliness . . . I kept waiting for her to tell me, but she
wouldn’t tell me . . . Sometimes I’d try to feel it out of her with my eyes, but I couldn’t
get it . . . it was her very own memory, not theirs, her very own real and terrible and
lonely and dark memory. . . And still she told me what I should do, that I should make
generations (101). While Ursa cannot forget the past, as Mutt begs her to, it is also clear
from this extended passage that she feels unable to access the parts of her familial legacy
that are, indeed, closest to her, the parts that exist outside the familiar invocation to make
generations and which are, Ursa imagines, suffused with feeling—her own mother’s
memories.

Though her mother passed down the stories of Corregidora told again and again
by her grandmothers, she has guarded her personal life close to her, remaining “closed
like a fist” even in the face of Ursa’s attempts to understand her story without needing her
to tell it (101). The symbol of the fist, which recurs throughout the novel, has resonance
here with Eva’s closing of her knees against the psychiatrist’s mandate to ‘open up’—it
shows the ways in which this emotional closing off is rooted in the body, how the body
holds histories of trauma. Like the womb, the fist has especial resonance for African
Americans. In particular, the raised fist has historically been recognized as a symbol of
solidarity and racial resistance, popularized by the Black Power groups of the 1960s,
many of which were led by men and centered on the experience of the Black male. Jones’
The use of this symbol plays on its established meaning, while linking it to the Black female body and experience and expressions of African American vulnerability and self-protection. But the symbol of the fist is also used to complicate these expressions of vulnerability, representing, elsewhere, a threat of sexually charged violence (fist fucking as a form of revenge) that evokes Urs’s and the novel’s simultaneous revulsion and attraction to the proximity and possibility of queerness.

This specter of violence also represents the threat of bodily invasion, the fear of exposure of the body’s inherent vulnerability that may be connected to Urs’s hysterectomy and the trauma of undergoing such an invasive procedure without one’s knowledge or consent but which is also connected to fears around sex and the ability of

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105 The first of these occurs when Urs overhears Cat threatening a young teen with whom she is having an affair with fist-fucking as a punishment for harassing Urs: “If you bother her again I’ll give you a fist to fuck” (47). Urs is deeply disturbed by this threat, which leads directly into a rare moment of narrative vulnerability and candidness wherein Urs addresses the reader from a reflective standpoint, “It wasn’t until years later that I realized it might have been because of my own fears, the things I’d thought about in the hospital, my own worries about what being with a man would be like again, and whether I really had the nerve to try” (48). In this way, the threat of the fist is both connected to the latent possibility of queerness that haunts the novel and linked to Urs’s anxieties about the loss of her womb and its implications for her sexual life. Thus, even as it deeply upsets her, this threat becomes lodged within Urs’s own psyche so much so that she inadvertently repeats it later in the novel when she catches her husband Tadpole in bed with the young songstress who has replaced her at the club. Surprising even herself in the utterance, Urs echoes Cat’s words: “If you want something to fuck, I’ll give you my fist to fuck” (87). She then leaves Tadpole and shortly after begins an internal monologue directed to Cat in which she admits her own fears of her sexuality post-hysterectomy: “Because I knew why he kept me waiting, Cat, that’s why I knew what you felt, why I wouldn’t tell you what I knew… All those dreams I had lying there in the hospital about being screwed and not feeling anything. Numb between my legs. Part of it was what I needed to make myself feel, what I had to know… Afraid only of what I’ll become, because those times he didn’t touch the clit, I couldn’t feel anything” (89). It is through this imagined dialogue (Ursa is the only one speaking, though she seems to be responding to questions from Cat) that Ursa is able to identify with Cat, to share her shame at feeling useless in the bed of a man, and to express her fears of not being able to feel sexually. While some critics have described the fears around lesbianism in Corregidora as one of the novel’s blind spots, others, such as Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, have argued that the queer subtext of the novel presents its greatest promise.

106 Queerness within the novel represents a mode of being outside of the heteronormative symbolic order that works against the multimodal texture of the narrative. As such, the possibility of queerness, which is also a feature of Eva’s Man, resonates with Lee Edelman’s argument (see earlier footnote) about queerness presenting an alternative to the vision of futurity bound to the figure of the Child. As Edelman writes, “the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (4). The possibility of queerness that resides within Corregidora, and its reality in the character of Cat, thus actively works against the notion of futurity that has been foreclosed within the novel, resisting its mandates and signaling the potential for meaning outside of the social-symbolic order.
sex/sexual desire to expose the subject’s most inner life. The symbol of the fist is used to describe Ursa’s experience of sex after she leaves the hospital, when she is still recovering from the damaging effects of the hysterectomy. Without pleasure, without sensation, the sexual act is figured tinged with violence and conflict, as a “tension in my belly, like a fist drawn up . . . what I felt didn’t have words” (75). The fist as such invokes ambivalence around letting someone in—even as she is literally letting someone inside her body, her refusal to give words to this, or her inability to find the language here to express the loss of her feeling, enacts a kind of protection against that invasion. And so the fist—a symbol for her mother’s emotional guardedness and for sexual violence and violation, which also signals a latent queerness as a source of fear and desire within the novel—like the womb, has a multi-resonant signification that indicates the affective movement of both opening and closing oneself bodily and emotionally. These spaces of the body, spaces that figure the body’s boundaries, are sites that hold affective histories of trauma but are also sites (bodily and political sites) where those histories get refigured.

For Ursa’s mother, her hesitancy to ‘open up’ to her daughter can be read as a consequence of several factors, including her lack of a model through which to express her feelings and personal memories.¹⁰⁷ But, perhaps even more than that, this hesitancy comes from her fear of pain and of having her personal memories exploited through the sharing of them, even with her daughter—just as her grandmothers’ silence about their own feelings may also reflect this fear, the fear (of her grandmothers and of the narrative) that Ursa and others may misinterpret the complexity of these feelings. As Audre Lorde notes, this “fear of feeling” is common for Black women and men, in part because of the

¹⁰⁷ This is explored in more detail in the final section of the chapter. See also Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s argument about the lack of affect in Ursa’s grandmothers’ narratives.
long history of Black men and women’s feeling being exploited and used against them. Ursa’s mother feels shame at her painful experience with Ursa’s father, who confronted her with her own felt inability to love a man and hurt her, physically and emotionally, after she rejected him. Her fear of letting Ursa into that pain, of exposing her vulnerability, leaves her closed like a fist—protected on some level from the pain of her past but unable to move past this pain and trauma, to reach through this unbridgeable gap that her refusal creates between herself and her daughter. This fear of feeling, it seems, is part of the maternal mandate to pass down the stories of abuse under slavery through generations—to pass down these stories as they have long existed, without emotion or interpretation from the teller. The distance of her grandmothers’ stories from her mother’s life means that, while she can know them, she cannot truly feel them: “Mama could only know, but they could feel” (102). While this makes them easier, less painful, to pass down, it also makes them less meaningful for Ursa, who seeks something to identify with within these stories.

“What’s a life always spoken and only spoken?” she asks Mutt in one of their ritualized dialogues (103). This kind of life leaves no room for the living, no room to experience or feel, to learn and grow. Ursa’s questions suggest that, while the telling of these stories can do a kind of damage, made apparent in the trauma it has inflicted upon Ursa’s psyche and sense of self, its dangers are most pronounced when this telling becomes rigidified such that it loses the voice of the teller, becoming instead an empty

108 In “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde writes, “As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves” (53–54). In this and other essays in Sister Outsider, Lorde speaks of the importance of feeling for Black women and men, and for all women and men, while recognizing the fears of feeling engrained in our Western culture and particularly within the Black community.
vehicle for the transmission of a petrified past. For, despite Ursa’s knowing of this past through the stories of her grandmothers, she is unable fully to connect affectively with it. The reason inheres in her claim to Mutt, “Still there was what they never spoke, Mutt, what even they wouldn’t tell me” (103). This missing piece, what they wouldn’t tell, is, of course, their feeling. Feeling is the way that we connect with the world; without this piece, then, these stories lead to the self-guarding that has become the norm for the Corregidora women, rather than to the healing potential found in connection. For these reasons, Ursa needs this memory, this feeling of her mother’s, in order to be able to move on, to understand where she came from beyond the narrative of Corregidora. She needs a new family narrative to connect to, as she is no longer able to see herself within that narrative due to her inability to make generations. She longs for the intimacy of her mother’s memory, which might grant her access to an affective history that is absent in her grandmothers’ stories, told so many times they have become “just words.” Her mother’s memory, by contrast, represents “the lived life, not the spoken one” (108)—life that is still emotionally raw instead of drained of its affective force through repetition.

Ursa’s desire leads her to seek out her mother, years later when she is in her late thirties, in order to ask her mother, finally, to share her private memories with her. This section, set in the small town of her childhood where her mother still lives, stands out from the earlier pieces of the novel through its slow and subdued tone and detailed description of the setting, which continues for several pages before Ursa actually enters the house where she grew up with her mother and grandmothers and where her mother
still resides.\textsuperscript{109} The quiet pace and the gentleness between her and her mother, observed in such moments as her easy admission, after she tells her mother that she misses her, of her awkwardness in saying this—which stands as a testament to the vulnerability she is able to claim in this company—emphasizes the emotional grounding that this section provides (111). Its calm and measured movement, notably different from the more frenzied and passionate style of the ritualized dialogues, allows Ursa the space to recognize her mother, to see her, for the first time, as a whole person distinct from the legacy of her grandmothers.

She sees her this way by recognizing her mother on an emotional and affective level: “It was almost like I was realizing for the first time how lonely it must be for her with them gone” (109). Through Ursa’s mother’s telling of her story—the story of her meeting Ursa’s father, Martin, her pregnancy, and the brief duration and traumatic aftermath of her marriage—Ursa gains a new understanding of her mother as a person and as a woman who has experienced loss and pain. This recognition enables Ursa’s affective identification with her. She can see the ghost of her own untenable future in her mother’s blind desire for a girl child, and her mother’s claims to “not feeling like a woman” with Martin resonate against Ursa’s own feelings of this in the wake of her womb loss. Likewise, her description of Ursa’s conception—“I hadn’t even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out. But he must have. . . I. . . still that memory, feeling of him in me. I wouldn’t let myself feel anything”—echoes Ursa’s own

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{The detailed descriptions of her hometown and her mother’s house likewise stand in contrast to the lack of description of the city in which Ursa currently lives, which further serve to emphasize Ursa’s sense of self taking clearer shape through this visit home.}
\end{footnotesize}
experience of sex and sexuality after the hysterectomy, wherein she appears unable to feel anything (118).

Ursa’s mother’s story, her “private memory,” directly exposes the hurt that both Ursa’s mother and father experienced within their relationship. Whereas her grandmothers’ stories of Corregidora have been largely devoid of emotion, yielding the perpetually unanswerable question about how they really “felt,” Ursa’s mother’s story, more than anything, is a story of hurt and shame and humiliation and, finally, loneliness. These emotional tenors largely emerge in the aftermath of Ursa’s birth, after Martin has already left. Her mother goes to see him, and he is angry: “I said, ‘Don’t hurt me.’ I knew he was going to. I said, ‘Help me, Martin, but don’t hurt me’” (119). Her mother’s fear of being hurt is realized when Martin physically attacks her, but her hurt is also mirrored in Martin’s own pain: “I kind of looked at him, you know, and it was like I could see all that hurt there. He hadn’t really softened, but I could still see all that hurt there” (121). Ursa’s mother blames herself for his pain, for “[carrying] him to the point where he ended up hating [her]” (121). This is why she never got together with another man, for fear she would inevitably repeat the cycle of hurt that comes from differing needs and desires—from bearing legacies of trauma that leave shame and separation in their wake.

This is the first glimpse Ursa has of a father that she cannot remember, whose name she does not bear, yet whose blood runs through her even more than that of Corregidora. Even as she ostensibly set out to recover the private memory of her mother, her curiosity was piqued by her remembrance that she had never seen her mother with a man: “I never saw my mama with a man, never ever saw her with a man . . . no, I think

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110 This links the hysterectomy to her mother’s experience of sexual violation—not unwilling or coerced sex but sex that is experienced as a bodily violation nonetheless.
she never had one” (100; 101). In this way, her search for her mother’s memory is as much a search for her missing father as it is for this private feeling of her mother’s. The knowledge of her mother’s memory, including the complicated truth of her father and her mother’s deep pain, help to decenter the Corregidora narrative, revealing it to be—rather than the central, and predetermined, narrative of her identity—only one among a possible multiplicity.

This revelation and the affective history that it surfaces creates the space for Ursa to acknowledge and build upon her own memory, her own life. For even though her mother’s story is primarily one of hurt and loneliness, it is nonetheless a living and felt history, which therefore contains the possibility of change. Ursa’s exposure to the potential mutability of her mother’s life furnishes the ground for her to move from a preoccupation with the past into an inhabitation of the present—“I wanted to ask what about her now, how lonely was she. She’d told me about then, but what about now” (131)—and it also enables her to recognize her own agency in the creation of her self-identity and her future, which makes way, within the novel, for her own personal memories to surface, for her to begin to tell her own story. This is signaled in part by her recovery, however fleeting, of a memory of her father’s voice—a new and personal memory that will become part of the fabric of her life. At the end of the section, as she departs, Ursa muses on the possibilities for her mother’s future—“now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory—at least to me anyway—maybe she and some man . . .” Yet instead of leaning into this displacement of her own self, one whose feeling she has never been able to give herself permission to explore, she turns back to that self here, asking, “But then . . . what had I done about my own life?” (132).
The emphasis on “own” separates her from her mother and from her grandmothers and their legacy and also might be read as highlighting Ursa’s ownership over her self-identity and body, something that has heretofore been impossible due to her psychic imbrication in the memories of her grandmothers. This question lingers unanswered as a segue into the third section, in which Ursa’s own private memories—of her childhood friend May Alice, who became pregnant at a young age and taunted Ursa’s virginal naiveté, of the Melrose woman, who committed suicide for fear the men she loved were doomed to die, and of Ursa and Mutt’s courtship and their troubles—finally surface, as if she needed her mother’s story first in order to be able to tell her own. And what is this story?

**Opening Towards Connection: Love, Hurt, and Healing**

Ursa’s struggle to reconcile the place of the past in her life is to some degree always a futile one. Yet what she learns, what Jones shows, is that she nonetheless still possesses the power to make her own present and future—not devoid of the past but not wholly dependent upon it. As such, Ursa’s healing is less about a return to the past—indeed, it’s already infused within her life through the circulation of these affective histories of trauma that live in and on her body—or about transcendence of past or future, and more about strengthening bonds with the living, about creating and sustaining new modes of connecting that do not force or coerce her open but allow her the space to begin to be vulnerable. In doing so, she rescripts her relationship to the histories of trauma that have shaped her life.
Before she goes to visit her mother, Ursa engages in a ritualized dialogue with Mutt in which he asks her why she goes on “making dreams.” Her response—"Til I feel satisfied that I could have loved, that I could have loved you, til I feel satisfied, alone, and satisfied that I could have loved. I’ve got more hurt now than then. How do you think I feel?” (103). She poses the question, asked and always left unanswered of her grandmothers, of herself, wanting, needing, a response. In order to create her own life outside of the confines of her past, and without replicating its toxic patterns, Ursa needs that missing piece; she needs to know that she is capable of feeling and of loving. The novel, her journey, can thus be read as a quest to understand how much love, how much intimacy is truly possible for Black men and women in the wake of slavery, when so much trust has been taken and decimated, and so many people broken by the weight of their histories. When desire has become so integrally linked to pain and shame—how do you find love or trust within that?

The end of the novel has been much speculated upon in the criticism. This finale sees the reunion of Ursa and Mutt years after Ursa’s visit to her mother. Back at the hotel where they once lived together, Ursa drops willingly to her knees. In that moment, as she takes Mutt in her mouth, she finally understands what it was that her great-grandmother must have done to Corregidora to cause him to both hate and desire her. Inhabiting the posture of her great-grandmother, feeling her great-grandmother’s body in her own, and all the feelings and emotions held in her body, Ursa opens up this affective history of pain inflicted through generations: “But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them,

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111 Stephanie Li’s analysis of Corregidora focuses on the significance of love and human connection within the novel; though Li recognizes Ursa’s fear of emotional intimacy, ultimately, she argues, Corregidora suggests that “intimate relationships are vital means by which destructive historical legacies can be both remembered and transformed” (132).
any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?” (184). By opening this history, feeling it flood her own body, she is able to experience her great-grandmother’s vulnerability, a racialized and gendered vulnerability, in this position of sexual subservience. But she also experiences the power of this position (the most sensitive part of a man held in her grasp). Inhabiting this position by choice, a choice that may not have been available to her great-grandmother in that same position, she infuses it with power. She feels in her body power and vulnerability existing together, so that even as it is a history of pain it might also be one of pleasure, and redemption—might also be one of feelings and emotions too conflicting to name or parse apart.

The recognition of the potential to hurt those we love—out of shame, out of love, out of anger, out of fear, or a myriad of other feelings—gives way, finally, to an expression of mutual vulnerability between Ursa and Mutt, in which each voice their fears of being hurt. Some critics have read this ending as signaling the impossibility of Ursa’s breaking the cycle of trauma that has been passed down to her, while others have identified a potential for transformation and healing in Ursa’s reclamation of her great-grandmother’s act of resistance. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argues that while the ending leaves

112 Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argues that “this desire to end the repetitive cycle of wounding contains the impossibility of its own imperative,” leaving the novel “suspended in the troubled narrative time of historical legacy” (468–9). She does, however, locate some hope in the final dialogue between Ursa and Mutt, suggesting that it “begins the process of eliminating pain by expressing it . . . which is perhaps the first step toward a representation of reciprocal wounding . . . which might get history moving again out of its pained past-present and into a future of desiring subjects and subjects who desire” (469). Other critics, such as Emily Lordi, Ashraf Rushdy, and Sirène Harb, have been less pessimistic about this ending, and about the novel more generally, instead focusing on the ways in which the novel’s fragmented and recursive structure, as well as its depiction of Ursa’s embodied actions and behaviors in relation to those of her grandmothers, enacts a form of repetition with a difference, which allows for a disruption of the toxic
much to be desired in terms of Ursa’s self-realization, at the same time, her ability to finally put words to her fear of being hurt signifies a glimmer of hope. Like Goldberg, I, too, see possibility in Ursa’s newfound capacity to articulate her fears around intimacy and vulnerability. The act of naming these fears is in itself a step towards and into sharing a heretofore untenable intimacy with Mutt, and, in that, being vulnerable.

Yet by opening herself to the possibility of love, Ursa also by necessity opens herself to loss—the pain that accompanies the pleasure. She makes herself vulnerable to the near certainty that she will be hurt—by Mutt, and by others—and also that she herself will hurt others. Thus, in light of the tension that structures the novel between opening up and closing oneself off—the need to connect and the need to self-protect—what the text seems to suggest in this final scene is that, while opening up to vulnerability is an essential part of the movement toward healing connection, it is an ongoing negotiation that is risky and fraught. For those whose bodies and emotional lives have historically been subject to violence and exploitation, this process is even riskier, more terrifying, and the negotiation perhaps even more constant. The struggles that Ursa undergoes with trust, intimacy, and vulnerability are, as Corregidora shows us, central to the experience of Black womanhood in the late-twentieth-century South, as well as to the work of healing from historical and personal trauma.

**Addendum: Abject Potentiality and the Liberatory Silence of the Hole**

With Corregidora, Jones constructs an exercise in holding in tension; as she says, it is a true “blues narrative” that allows for multiple, contradictory feelings to exist at

and harmful patterns passed down to Ursa through generations and simultaneously imbues these actions/behaviors with new meaning and potential (Rushdy 44, 57; Lordi 146–7; Harb 133).
once. In this way, she models the work of vulnerability that is both the substance and the
subtext of the novel—the simultaneous fear of loss and of love, the pain and the pleasure
mixing together. She presents a vision of Black women’s vulnerability—and specifically
Southern Black women for whom these histories of trauma continue to live in the
landscapes that surround them, geographical and psychic—as an ongoing process of
negotiation between histories of trauma that continue to haunt the present, making
themselves felt on and in the bodies of Black women, in the fear and shame that these
histories circulate; and between the need and desire to connect, with a self not defined by
these histories and with others, to access the possibilities of connection that also inhere in
these histories. This vision of racialized vulnerability holds hope for healing, for moving
forward, for finding, if not joy, at least a form of connection in shared pain.

To think further about this potentiality, this abject potentiality, I want to
turn/return to two of the bodily figurations that recur within the narrative: the fist and the
hole. As I discussed briefly in an earlier section, the bodily sites that recur within
Corregidora—in particular, the fist, the hole, and the womb—are places where affective
histories of trauma are evoked, where they take hold. As Sara Ahmed argues, affect
shapes bodily surfaces and boundaries. Affective histories stick to bodies, to specific sites
on bodies, infusing them with meaning. These bodily sites, especially the womb and fist,
as I’ve already discussed, carry meanings accumulated through their implication within
histories of trauma and resistance. But their function as such means that they are also
sites where affective histories of trauma inscribed upon the body can be rescripted.

The fist, as we have already seen, signifies within Corregidora both an invasion
of the vulnerable body and a mechanism (through violence and through silence) for
guarding against that invasion. Additionally, this corporeal symbolics is also used to refigure the signification of the womb through its appearance in one of the songs that Ursa sings, which we are told about in a later section of the novel, when she finally opens up to the reader about her relationship with Mutt: “When I first met Mutt I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn’t seem like they was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist” (147). Ursa’s song reverses the terms of the threat of fist-fucking evoked earlier in the novel; instead, the threat of bodily penetration and invasion by a foreign object—the fist, or the phallus—is transformed into the threat of being swallowed within the ‘endless’ space of the womb. In this way, though her song still figures the body as permeable and capable of being violently occupied, it nonetheless opens the space for the possibility of the body’s own protective response against invasion. By locating the fist metaphorically and rhetorically within the womb where the child would be, Jones resists a reinscripting through Ursa’s womb of the barren Black female body as empty, useless, or peripheral to the struggle. Instead of simply an emblem of loss, the womb is reimagined as an active and creative space whose very strength—whose power—is found within its vulnerability.

The hole is yet another mode, signified through a symbol of the body, by which this womb loss gets reconfigured, one whose indefinability is at its very essence—the hole signifies what is left over, a bodily remainder. Unlike the womb, whose value lies in its procreative capacity, the hole in Corregidora—which is derogatorily referenced by Tadpole and invoked again by Mutt and Corregidora himself in the ritualized
dialogues—appears to have little value except as a passive receptacle for the male phallus. Without an intact womb, the hole becomes, for the men in her life, the signifier of Ursas capacity for sexual submission and therefore the crude marker of her femininity. Yet, as Jennifer Cognard-Black notes, if indeed a woman’s merit is based on her vagina, or “hole,” rather than on her capacity to reproduce, she is valued for something “interior and unseen,” which cannot therefore be exploited or co-opted by others (46). For this reason, Cognard-Black argues that the hole, which does not fit within a heteronormative paradigm of sexuality, can be equated with a kind of liberatory silence that stands in opposition to the story represented by the womb (the need to ‘pass on’ the telling of this history of trauma through the making of generations). Rather than being silenced, this allows Ursa to reclaim herself as silence, which is the “ultimate weapon against a culture that has fetishized her genitals as a knowable, marketable commodity” (47). Cognard-Black thus reads the hole not as a symbol of Ursas inherent subjugation as woman, but rather as a symbol of resistance to this subjugation through the claiming of unknowability—the refusal to make oneself legible within dominant structures. In other words, she understands the hole as a symbol of negation and of Ursas, and the text’s, refusal to operate within the constraints of established modes of communication and being. As such, the hole represents an abject space, something outside of representation that exposes the inherent instability within it.

For African Americans, whose very identities have been figured through the abject as always already outside, the abject can be understood to hold a kind of liberatory

113 After her hysterectomy, Tadpole tells Ursa, “You still got a hole, ain’t you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck” (82). His words resurface later in one of the ritualized dialogues between Ursa and Mutt: “You still got a hole, ain’t you? Long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck. Let me up in your hole, baby . . . Let me get up in your hole, I said. I wont to get up in your goddamn hole” (100).
potential. According to Darieck Scott, Black women and men can reclaim a form of power through the inhabitation of that outsider identity and the consequent reanimation of the space of the abject as a fulcrum of desire (28). While Scott’s formulation might suggest a reclamation of the abject through an embrace of pain, of a shared racialized history of trauma, it might also be understood as a rejection of pain—as an embrace, instead, of modes of feeling outside the pain/pleasure dichotomy, which is in part, perhaps, what the figuration of the hole might represent.

As we have already established, feeling within the novel is both omnipresent and conspicuously absent, a testament to the narrative’s (and Ursa’s) simultaneous desire for and fear of intimate exposure. While Ursa’s feeling undergoes frequent interrogation, its depths remain unplumbed. The hole might thus be imagined as a bodily signifier of potentiality, which supplants the lost possibility embodied by the womb. This potentiality is precisely that space, as yet unarticulated, where the depths of Ursa’s feeling have yet to be discovered—that space, if we are to draw, again, a parallel to Eva’s Man, that Eva speaks of when she explains her killing as an act of “[filling] in the spaces and the feelings” (168). If feeling is the missing factor in Ursa’s narrative of personal and inherited trauma and what will allow her to move forward in this negotiation of vulnerability, the hole can be read as both the potential for feeling and an embodiment of the unknowability of that feeling (the necessity of its constant deferral)—a contradiction that is held in tension throughout the narrative. Thus, while the narrative does indeed make way for the possibility of healing through the work that Ursa does, particularly in the latter half of the novel, it also points to the work of vulnerability as a persistent engagement with unknowing—an abyss that may at times bring forms of joy and pleasure
but never, certainly, resolve. The next chapter focuses more closely on the *work* of healing and its relation to writing and narrative, as well as the potential of abjection within the rewriting of affective histories of trauma.
CHAPTER 3

“WOMAN, A GARBAGE CREATION”: NEGOTIATING THE BOUNDARIES OF ABJECION IN DOROTHY ALLISON’S TRASH

Inscribing and Rewriting the Abject Southern Poor

Dorothy Allison begins “A Lesbian Appetite,” the second to last story in her 1988 semi-autobiographical collection Trash, with a dream of biscuits and pork beans. Far away from her childhood home in South Carolina, Allison fantasizes longingly of preparing a meal from her youth, then “putting it all in a great iron pot to bubble for hour after hour until all the world smells of salt and heat and the sweat that used to pool on my mama’s neck” (151). This deeply sensual image, replete with evocations of smell, taste, touch, and memory, is a comforting vision, connecting Allison to her Southern heritage—and to the wider world. Yet even as this dream provides the displaced Allison with some measure of solace, the sweat pooling on her mother’s neck tells a more complicated story. This bodily signifier of shared abjection functions to evoke the raw physicality of female domestic labor, physical and emotional, within the extreme conditions of Southern poverty that have marked Allison’s life. As such, it serves as a reminder, amidst this fantasy of fulfillment, not only of Allison’s conflicted identification with her mother, which is at the core of her displacement and her longing for home, but also of the ways in which poverty gets written onto the bodies of the Southern poor who have been cast out of society, marking their boundaries, rendering their abjection.

114 Julia Kristeva writes, in Powers of Horror, “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death . . . No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (3 emphasis mine).
In this chapter, I look at how Allison, in *Trash*, explores the trauma of abject Southern poverty and its effects on the bodily and emotional lives of its subjects, particularly its female subjects. Allison, I argue, shows how this trauma—an everyday, insidious form of trauma that has to do with inhabiting a racialized and classed identification, “white trash,” that has been imposed upon her family from without and subsequently internalized, and which situates them at the very margins of society—is linked to her family’s existence within a culture that depends upon their erasure yet offers them few opportunities to escape the conditions of their lives. Yet as Allison herself points out in her preface, the category of “white trash,” even as it operates to abjectify those it describes, also depends upon the derogation of Blackness and idealization of whiteness—the equation of Blackness with “trash” and whiteness with “worth” and “goodness” that gives this term, “white trash,” its meaning and power. 115 While not necessarily foregrounded within my argument in this chapter, this nonetheless forms the backdrop of the chapter, supporting and complicating the claims in the first chapter of this dissertation about the ways in which Blackness is used to stabilize a precarious whiteness and deepening the layers of shame and exploitation that map Ursa’s embodied experience in the previous chapter.

Through her writing in *Trash*, Allison explores the precarious boundaries that mark her and her family’s exclusion from the narrative of belonging in the New South—a narrative contingent upon ideals of progress shaped by the mid-to-late-twentieth century.

115 It is important to note that Allison explains in the preface of *Trash* that she purposefully does not use the term “white trash” in her title, using “trash” instead specifically in order to “raise the issue of who the term glorifies and who it disdains” (xvi). This term is used in several places in the collection, and I use it here, too, within this chapter, as this is the stigma that has plagued her family, and it is helpful, I think, to understanding the ways in which this stigma situates them on the very margins but also in a state of liminality and boundary confusion.
South’s embrace of industrial capitalism, with its promises of equality and upward mobility accessible to anyone, which relies on a distinction between the “good,” hardworking poor whose striving props up this narrative and the abject poor, who, like Allison’s family, have no place within it. The boundaries that define Allison’s family’s abjected relation to the social, as Trash shows us, also limn Allison’s own sense of embodied selfhood. In this way, her body tells the affective history of the pain and shame—the trauma—of this classed abjection. This history has been passed down, as it was to Ursa Corregidora, through the stories that circulate in Allison’s family—stories of violence, anger, and shame, stories filled with silences. Allison opens up and negotiates this history, I argue, through her retelling of these stories, through her narrative explorations of that which has been silenced or erased. In doing so, she reconfigures the damaging boundaries that have marked her categorization as an outsider, that have long alienated and isolated her, separating her—through shame and silence—from herself, her family, and others.

Through her discursive exploration of boundaries, social and bodily, Allison reveals their permeability, disrupting their rigidity and showing how they, and their disruption, can serve as sources of pleasure as well as shame—how pleasure and joy can exist within and alongside shame. This reconfiguration of boundaries—which resituates her family, as representative of the abject Southern poor, into the center of the narrative of the New South, exposing what is supposed to remain hidden—enables Allison to imagine modes of relation and connection outside of the ones that have operated to separate and silence her and to realize healing from trauma through the writing of that trauma.
Dorothy Allison is widely known for her autobiographical and semi-autobiographical fiction and essays, many of which detail her experiences as a self-described “working-class lesbian” growing up in a large family in the rural South. Allison has written extensively about the shame she experienced from the stigma attached to her family as “poor white trash,” the physical and sexual abuse she suffered as a child at the hands of her stepfather, and her own lesbian sexuality. *Trash* is Allison’s first published collection of short stories and her second book-length publication after her 1983 book of poetry entitled *The Women Who Hate Me*. The movement of *Trash*, whose contents are described as “stories” rather than memoir or autobiography, might be understood as loosely following a chronological trajectory that proceeds from Allison’s recollections of her family life and upbringing toward her burgeoning queerness and experiences in radical lesbian feminist collectives in the 1960s and ‘70s. However, this ‘chronology’ is disrupted by the poetic sensibility of the stories, a feature of much of Allison’s work, which seamlessly weave together fragments of dreams, fantasies, and desires with lucid reflections from Allison’s youth and adulthood.

This fragmented structure mimics the structure of trauma, which, as Cathy Caruth explains, is often experienced through the very fact of its forgetting, thus

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116 *Trash* was originally composed of fifteen stories, including a preface. When it was re-released in 2002, it included a new introduction as well as one additional, final story titled “Compassion,” which focuses on the illness and death of Allison’s mother.

117 As Leigh Gilmore argues, trauma narratives raise complicated questions about identification and representativeness, for they generally involve a struggle to represent identity as formed, in part, by an event or experience that is to some degree beyond representation (22). Indeed, trauma, despite its felt immediacy, can be understood as an event or experience that causes a disruption to the system (and disruption in the symbolic) and, as such, is often experienced, according to Cathy Caruth, through the very fact of its forgetting (*Trauma* 7). For this reason, it often appears in writing, as in memory, in a state of fragmentation, visible through the gaps and silences. Thus, by removing her story from the “legal jurisdiction of autobiography,” with its prohibitions on what can and cannot be told or claimed as truth, and
appearing in writing, as in memory, in a state of fragmentation, visible through the gaps and silences (Trauma 7). As such, the structure of Trash illuminates the intertwined traumas at the heart of the collection—the traumas of physical and sexual abuse, incest, poverty, state-sanctioned illegitimacy, and the loss and betrayal of one’s mother. As Allison’s writing makes abundantly clear, these complex traumas cannot be understood apart from one another—and each is connected to the debilitating effects of the social stigma attached to her family’s status as poor whites within their southern community. In her 1994 essay “A Question of Class,” she elaborates this, writing,

What may be the central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it. (Skin 15)

Her family’s poverty and the stigmas surrounding this poverty, Allison suggests here, have exerted immense influence on her life, such that we can understand this experience of poverty itself as constituting an insidious form of trauma as defined by Maria Root—trauma, that is, that does violence to the soul and spirit. While Allison’s

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118 While some of these traumas, such as the trauma of incestuous abuse and the trauma of being classified from birth as a “bastard,” are not made explicit or immediately evident within the frame of Trash (as opposed, for instance, to the graphic treatment of abuse in Bastard), my familiarity with Allison’s other work and with her life story, told in essays and interviews, informs my attentiveness to the ways in which these traumas are made visible throughout the stories, often addressed through enigmatic or thinly veiled references.

119 The quote that follows is also included in the introduction Allison penned to the re-released version of Trash, published in 2002.

120 The trauma of class, which has traditionally been less legible within the rubric of trauma studies, serves as a powerful force within the narrative. In considering class trauma, I draw on Maria Root’s theory of insidious trauma, which was developed to account for ongoing racial trauma and which feminist trauma psychologist Laura Brown describes as the “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily
experiences of rape and violence are more palpable within a trauma framework—more immediately threatening to the body and self—what she points to here are the devastating, and longstanding, effects of the emotional pain and shame that the trauma of poverty, which itself is at the root of these other, more tangible traumas, causes.

It is not, however, simply the fact of being poor that has affected Allison so deeply, but, in particular, the fact that her family’s embodiment of poverty renders them illegible within conventional society. They are the abject white Southern poor who fit neither within the narrative of the Black Southern poor—whose poverty is generally attributed to their racial identification, whether as a misplaced indicator that they deserve this poverty121 or as a way of explaining the legacy of poverty that they have inherited as the descendants of slaves—nor within the narrative, integral to the story of progress in the New South, of honorable and hardworking white poor folks whose economic striving is bolstered by the idea that if they can just work hard enough, they will pull themselves out of poverty and into the middle class. By contrast, Allison’s family harbors little to no hope of upward mobility. Their identity is constituted through the internalization, over

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121 I will point again here to footnote one and to Allison’s disavowal of the term “white trash” for this very reason—for the fact that the qualifier of “white” implies a default racial identity, Black, for “trash.”
generations,\(^\text{122}\) of this failure, whereby they are marked by mainstream society as the “bad” poor—

We were men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes . . . We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight for or struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and that those who did try to escape failed. (Trash vii-viii)

Their propensity to violence and inability to adhere to a form of productivity that is legible through the lens of Southern progress—they are either too much or not enough, they can’t keep a job or they work too many hours—marks them as “poor white trash” and situates them at the very margins of society.

As Southern “poor white trash,” Allison’s family represents a category of identity that, according to Matt Wray in Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness (2006), is defined by,

Fundamental tensions and deep structural antimonies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt. In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, white trash names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other. It brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order . . . White trash names a people whose very existence seems to threaten the social and symbolic order. (2)

Wray’s description highlights the abjection inherent in this term, which Julia Kristeva explains as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The disturbance that

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\(^\text{122}\) Allison’s story “The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee” tells the story of her great-grandmother Shirley, who married a poor man with little hope for upward mobility and who was mean and violent with her children, thus beginning the cycle of poverty that Allison’s family continues in.
“poor white trash” enacts (in identity and in the socio-economic system) has to do with its “mutually violating boundary terms”—the way that it explicitly brings the competing categories of race and class, often figured as distinct analytics, into focus, conflating the two (white as racial signifier, trash as signifier of abject class status) into one singular identity, between which meaning hangs suspended. While the first term invokes belonging within whiteness, the second effectively refuses that belonging, situating the subject marked as “white trash” on the very margins of categorization, existing in a state of “disturbing liminality.” The term thus marks a socio-economic boundary, the boundary that separates the “bad” white poor from the rest of respectable and semi-respectable society, at the same time as it performs a kind of boundary crossing—or confounding.

As such, and as Trash shows, Allison’s identity as someone marked by the stigma of “white trash” is predicated on this constitutive violation, a fundamental, irresolvable contradiction. The stories show this through the portrayal of Allison’s deep-seated ambivalence toward her family and identity and her constant struggle to be seen in a world that cannot understand or assimilate the various, seemingly contradictory, pieces of her identity. They explore how Allison’s existence at the margins, in this state of “disturbing liminality,” is registered through her relationship to the boundaries that mark off the spaces allowed and denied to her—such as the university—and to the boundaries of her own body.

In this way, the stories illustrate how abjection experienced on the level of the social, through one’s class status, is mirrored on the level of the individual body, both of which depend for their functioning on a semblance of coherence. As Mary Douglas argues, margins, whether the edges of society or the orifices of the body, are dangerous
places which, because they delimit the shape of experience, also have the potential to change that shape and to alter experience in fundamental ways (149). Existing at the margins of the social, in this ambiguous state of dangerous liminality, Allison’s family and those stigmatized as “poor white trash” threaten the functioning of the social by revealing its untidiness, its irrepressible (disturbing, dangerous) heterogeneity. Thus, their existence must be erased in order to protect its functioning.

The erasure of poor whites in the South and elsewhere in the nation is a longstanding and ongoing process of invisibilization that has occurred on several fronts and which reaches back to the initial circulation of the term white trash and the intentions behind this term, which were both to call attention to those it described and, in the process, to deny them value—effectively erasing their claim to belonging within the South and the nation. As Wray argues, the term white trash and its correlatives, including lubbers, crackers, and dirt-eaters, have long been used to stigmatize, shame, and demean poor whites in the South and elsewhere. While the latter terms entered circulation from the early eighteenth century through the early nineteenth, the term poor white trash

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123 The term lubber, as Wray notes, was originally borrowed from the English by colonist William Byrd in 1728 to describe the poor whites inhabiting the borders of the colonies. This term signaled class distinction and also carried significations for gender, racial, and sexual difference, as well as marking moral boundaries. According to Wray, lubbers connoted “idleness, squalor, filth, and perversity” (37). As time went on, new social groups began to emerge in the colonies. After the French and Indian War in 1763, many poor white colonists moved west into the western trans-Appalachia frontier. The image of the “lazy lubber” was inadequate to describing this new population, thus, as Mitford Matthews argues, the term cracker entered into circulation, first used in a 1966 administrative report (cited in Wray 34).

124 Crackers were figured as more dangerous and threatening than lubbers, associated with criminality, but, like the lubbers before them, were poor whites who existed on the very margins of society (literally at the edge of the colonies and then on the frontier) (Wray 37).

125 In the early nineteenth century, Georgia lawyer Augustus Baldwin Longstreet published a collection of stories portraying the character of “Ransy Sniffle,” a poor white clay-eater or dirt-eater, who was known for his low intelligence, tallow-colored skin, and physical deformities. This character, designed in part to amuse the growing middle class, became very popular, and helped to circulate and solidify degrading stereotypes about poor whites and how this condition was written onto their bodies (Wray 40). For more on these early iterations of “poor white trash,” see Chapter One of Not Quite White, “Lubbers, Crackers, and Poor White Trash.”
was first recorded in 1833 as a pejorative used by slaves in Maryland to refer to white servants. In contrast to the idealized version of whiteness propagated by the images of the Southern Lady and Southern Gentleman, *poor white trash* implied an “ungodly, desacralized, polluted whiteness”—simultaneously highlighting and denying the claim to whiteness to those it described. Despite the alleged origination of this term with Blacks, however, it was whites that brought it into widespread circulation. Wray explains, “Blacks may have invented and used the term *poor white trash* as an act of symbolic violence and micropolitical protest, but it was literate, middle-class and elite whites who invested its meaning with social power, granting it the powers of social stigma and prejudice and enforcing its discriminatory effects with regard to labor” (43).

In the years leading up to the Civil War and Reconstruction—a time when roughly 75 percent of the eight million whites in the South owned no slaves and, because this made it difficult for them to acquire property or sell their own labor, were likely poor—two conflicting narratives about poor Southern whites emerged. On one hand, abolitionists argued that the slave system was the cause for poor Southern whites, that they had been duped into perpetuating this system that also oppressed them, preventing them from selling their labor to the highest bidder (Wray 52, 48). The other narrative, however, came from proslavery apologists, and this argument was that white Southern poverty was caused by “tainted blood”—that their poverty was due to biological

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126 The first recording of the term white trash was made by the English actress Fanny Kemble, who described, in her visit with the aristocratic Mary Caton during a tour of the United States, Caton’s claim that ‘the slaves have the highest contempt for white servants who they call *poor white trash.*’ While the exact origins of the term *white trash* remain unclear, Maryland, where Caton lived, had higher levels of European immigration and a greater number of free Blacks during this time, which meant that more whites and Blacks worked side by side as domestic and other laborers; this may have led to a need for additional ways to distinguish blurred class and racial boundaries (Wray 41, 45).
inferiority rather than being caused by their environment (Wray 49). By the late nineteenth century, the condition of poor whites came to be recognized not just as a Southern problem but as a national problem, and, though these different groups continued to disagree over the causes of white poverty, in the South but also throughout the country, they all were nonetheless in agreement that poor whites constituted a social problem that had to be addressed to “spare the nation and the white race” and prevent “internal corruption and decay” (Wray 63). Addressing this problem meant seeking solutions to “contain” and further erase the white Southern poor.

This containment and erasure took place in large part through mandated institutionalization and forced sterilization. Poor whites became the research subjects, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the burgeoning group of eugenicists, whose concern with improving the white race made the problem of poor whites—who, ‘racially’ white but ‘behaviorally’ non-white, posed a problem of classification and categorization—particularly troubling (Wray 73). Eugenic research and field work focused on poor whites in the South, North, and West supported the (preconceived) idea that poor whites were less intelligent and cognitively able, and therefore more prone to laziness and criminality, whether because of biology or circumstance or what were considered “deviant” sexual behaviors (i.e., miscegenation, cross-class relationships, incest, etc.) (Wray 82). In the face of these findings, eugenicists advocated for legislation that would prevent the spread of these behaviors and trends.

These efforts, predictably, often focused on reproduction, as the undesirable traits of poor whites were thought to be passed down intergenerationally. Therefore, while segregation of poor whites was practiced in some areas, this was largely deemed
inadequate, leading instead to the rise of mandated institutionalization for those deemed “feebleminded” or “sexually deviant.” This was primarily targeted at poor whites and non-white people, especially women and especially in the South (Wray 89). Forced sterilization also became a common practice, gaining popularity throughout the 1920s, during which thousands of poor white and non-white women across the South were sterilized, many against their will and without consent (Wray 90–94). As Wray writes, “Through those policies and reforms, the boundaries that had symbolically marked poor white trash as a stigmatized outgroup now became institutionalized as social boundaries—legal barriers with the power to control, exclude, and deny” (94).

In addition to these concrete tactics designed to exclude poor Southern whites from the narrative of belonging in the South and in the nation, poor Southern whites—those marked as “white trash”—were denied representation in literature and popular culture except as stereotypes to be laughed at or demeaned. *Trash* serves as a kind of response to this long history of erasure, exploring its traumatic and painful consequences for Allison and the women in her family, who bear these consequences most heavily—they are the ones charged with guarding the family, with reproducing the family, the ones whose labor both in and outside of the home enables the continuation of this way of life, which means that they guard something that Allison holds dear and are also complicit in this violence. In doing so, it asks how one can reconcile forms of trauma embedded within the very substance of one’s body and the textures of one’s emotional life—how to escape something, or to learn to live with something, that one simultaneously loves and longs to disavow, desires both to hold onto and to forget?
This erasure of the abject poor—of their narrative, of their bodies, of their very being—is registered in *Trash* not only through the invisibilization imposed on them by the outside world, but also through the silences that pervade Allison’s family’s relationships with one another, the instances where they are unable to speak their truths, to share with others, whether within or outside of the family. These silences are gendered, enforced by the women; they are understood as a survival mechanism, protection against a hostile outside world. And yet, as Allison shows, these silences fail to protect them against the violence of the outside world and the violence from within, instead perpetuating a cycle of trauma that has continued for generations. The trauma of this persistent erasure is registered in the gaps and silences of the stories, those places of textual rupture where meaning is disrupted or displaced. It is visible in Allison’s shame—her shame surrounding her upbringing and also surrounding her desire to escape the binds of her family—and her struggle to feel at home anywhere, and in the concomitant search for selfhood and value, for boundaries within which her existence might be made legible.

Through its portrayal of this systematic erasure, the story collection shows how the form of abject poverty encapsulated through the category of “white trash” becomes embedded in the bodies, minds, and emotional lives of its subjects as an invalidation of their very being. Yet, at the same time, Allison shows how the writing of embodied trauma can function as a form of healing—how writing as healing takes place through the depiction of what has been silenced, through giving voice to those silences and erasures, excavating the fullness of what has been fragmented by trauma. While she cannot, through writing, change the socio-economic conditions within which her family continues to exist, by bringing into articulation what has been historically silenced and
invisibilized within the dominant narratives (both of society and of her family), she is able to diffuse some of the shame around her family’s existence and to claim space for them, and for other families like theirs, within the narrative of Southern life—showing them in their complexity, as multi-faceted individuals, rather than as the stereotype they are often relegated to. As such, she is able to connect with this identification that is such a strong part of her, to recognize the pleasure that it gives her while also holding space for the ways in which it has hurt her. Through her exploration of the boundaries of her identity and selfhood as someone who exists at the very margins of society, she imagines ways of connecting through her complex identifications. And through her embodied writing of trauma and her refiguration of modes of identification and connection, Allison enacts a form of healing work that goes beyond the individual, extending to the social body of the South.

“Starve the wanting part”: The Work of Silence and the Abject Female Body

While the erasure of Allison’s family and those marked as “poor white trash” from the narrative of belonging in the New South performs a kind of silencing of their humanity and very being, the shame that this stigma carries also manifests in the self-silencing that occurs within her family. In this section, I look at the ways in which the silencing and silences within Allison’s family operate both as survival mechanisms but also as perpetuations of trauma, and I consider the ways in which these silences get inscribed (as scarcity and lack) upon the female bodies of the abject poor.

In particular, I focus on Allison’s story “Mama,” a story from the first part of the collection, which explores Allison’s ambivalent relationship with her mother against the
backdrop of her stepfather’s abuse. While this physical and sexual abuse, suffered by Allison as a child, forms part of the backdrop for multiple stories in the collection, it is rarely openly discussed—unlike in Allison’s later novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which very explicitly, though within the frame of fiction, depicts this abuse. The ways in which the narrative gestures to it throughout echoes both the ways in which it has been silenced within the family and its continual eruption. In this way, it helps to emphasize that while this abuse was indeed a serious trauma that affected the entire family, it is just as much the silence around it, the refusal to reckon with it, that fractured the familial bonds of trust.

Though Allison’s stepfather does not actually appear in the story “Mama,” it is framed around the occasion of his birthday, which prompts the adult Allison to reflect on her conflicted relationship with her mother, whom she both identifies with and feels an impossible distance from. Allison’s close identification with her mother is expressed through her descriptions of her mother’s body, of the ways in which she feels her mother’s body in her own, in its “details”—“the strength of bone and the skin curling over the thick flesh the women of our family have always worn” (34). This depiction of her mother’s abject materiality—the bone and skin and flesh marking her boundaries of selfhood but also connecting her to the women in her family—shows how Allison’s relation to her is forged in that space of material, shared abjection.

The felt intimacy with her mother, and by extension the other women of her family, through this bodily identification, nourishes Allison’s sense of self, providing her with an image of strength that serves as a source of empowerment. She describes the way, upon leaving home, that her mother “grew into [her] body like an extra layer of
warm protective fat, closing [her] around” (45). Her identification with her mother thus serves as a source of protection, her mother figured as a “mountain,” as someone who had “saved [Allison’s] life and her own,” whose very being is the foundation of existence (45, 35). These bodily descriptors index the power Allison attributes to her mother and to that connection, felt as a bodily and affective connection, one that is at the center of her selfhood because it is inscribed upon and within her body.

Yet that strength is also the source of her mother’s betrayal, bound up with the silence that the women in her family carry—a silence that, as previously noted, extended to their keeping secret Allison’s abuse by her stepfather. Thus, this bodily identification with her mother is an ambivalent one, registering a strength that serves as a kind of (self) protection but is also damaging. This ambivalence is expressed in the description of her mother’s hands: “Nothing marks me so much her daughter as my hands—the way they are aging, the veins coming up through skin already thin. I tell myself they are beautiful as they recreate my mama’s flesh in mine” (45). While her hands, too, signify strength, the tenuousness of that is reflected in the thinness of the skin. There is beauty in the embodied connection that they forge between Allison and her mother, whom she loves deeply, allowing Allison to ‘feel’ her mother in her own body; but these hands also tell a story of struggle, their wornness a sign of poverty and scarcity, their fragility exposing the precariousness of the silences her mother has long carried.

While hands are traditionally a grounding part of the body, the appendage that allows for touch and for connection with and to the world, the wornness of her mother’s hands signals instability, their wrinkles reminding Allison “of earthquakes” (35). And this scares her: “When my mama was twenty-five, she already had an old woman’s
hands, and I feared them” (35). This fear of instability that she locates in her mother’s body—even in this place in the body that also signifies strength—also translates to her own precarious sense of self: “If she was fragile, if she was human, then so was I, and anything might happen. If she were not the backbone of creation itself, then fear would overtake me” (35). Thus, even as Allison’s pride in her strength and sense of beauty comes from this bodily identification with her mother, it exposes the uncertainty within the foundation that supports her (a foundation built upon these silences and erasures). This instability written onto her mother’s body and into her sense of self likewise operates as a recognition and reflection of a deeper instability fundamental to the narrative of the New South that gets written onto the bodies of those situated at or outside its margins—an instability signaled by the very fact of its bodily inscription, its visibility upon the abject body which should remain hidden.

In the latter part of “Mama,” the descriptions of her mother as excess—as extra layers of protective fat, as a “mountain”—are reversed, and she is depicted instead through figurations of scarcity, as a “cave” and as the person who could not “rescue” her daughter (35). Through the description of her mother’s bodily deterioration from cancer (a deterioration that becomes more explicit in the story “Compassion”), Allison further explores the ways in which her poverty and implication within a system that exploits her body and leaves her nothing in return, has marked her body: “Piece by piece, my mother is being stolen from me. After the hysterectomy, the first mastectomy, another five years later, her teeth that were easier to give up than to keep, the little toes that calcified from too many years working waitress in bad shoes, hair and fingernails that drop off after
every bout of chemotherapy, my mama is less and less the mountain, more and more the cave—the empty place from which things have been removed” (43–44).

Allison narrates her mother’s illness and bodily deterioration as being caused in part by her years of over-working, but she also attributes that to an outside force (my mother is being stolen)—to the system that demands her mother’s work and energy while simultaneously erasing her. Her erasure, and the erasure of the other women in Allison’s family, who also work too hard and get little in return, occurs through her invisibilization in discourse around national belonging but is also registered as bodily—it is written onto the body: “every part of us that can be taken has been” (44). Allison’s emphasis on the hysterectomy and mastectomy, in particular, highlights the gendered nature of this exploitation and erasure, the ways in which the conditions of abject Southern poverty impact upon the reproductive lives of women and destroy or pervert their capacity for nurturance and for pleasure. “Woman,” she writes, “a garbage creation, an assembly of parts” (44).

Imagining her mother as “a gossamer woman—all black edges, with a chrome uterus and molded glass fingers, plastic wire rib cage and red unblinking eyes,” Allison shows how the humanity of abject poor white Southern women, those marked as “white trash,” is destroyed, rendering them other, machine. In order to survive, as her mother has done for so many years, they are forced to become this—hard and unhurtable, wanting for nothing. Her mother encourages her to, “Starve the wanting part of you” (45). This is a direct response to the family’s exclusion from the narrative of progress, from the hopefulness that might inhere in that, and it is also an emblem of the emotional labor and management that the women in Allison’s family are constantly undertaking so as not to
upset the men, showing how women’s emotional labor is the foundation for reproduction, for the continuance of their family when everything around them seeks to destroy it.

Yet this denial as protective strategy from the pain and disappointment that wanting anything is sure to bring is not enough—as the instability registered in Allison’s mother’s hands signals. It is not enough to protect her mother’s body from the ravages of illness, and it is not enough to protect Allison from the depth of her feeling for her mother, the hate and the love and the hurt from “all the little betrayals that cannot be forgotten or changed” (47). While silence can serve as a survival mechanism, it can also, Allison shows, have poisonous repercussions.

The damaging effects of this silence are explored more fully in the story “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” in which Allison’s Aunt Alma comes to visit her in the women’s collective where she lives. This story, out of all of them in the collection, addresses Allison’s abuse by her stepfather most directly—and yet it is, as the title suggests, largely about the inability, still, to confront the painful truths associated with this abuse and its subsequent silencing. Allison writes, “You know what it does to you when the people you love most in the world, the people you believe in—cannot survive without believing in—when those people do nothing, don’t even know something needs to be done . . . Cause then she’d have to talk about the other thing [the abuse], and I knew as well as she that however much she tried to forget it, she’d really always known. She’d done nothing then. She’d do nothing now. There was no justice. There was no justice in the world” (106). This betrayal, their refusal to acknowledge the abuse and get her treatment, ultimately results in Allison’s being rendered infertile because of an untreated STD contracted from the rape. In other words, this silencing, the erasure of her
trauma, leads to another silencing—the silencing of her reproductive capacity. Thus even as the silencing of Allison’s sexual trauma may have served as a kind of survival mechanism, protecting the family against the further judgment and stigmatization by outsiders that has been their historical experience, at the same time this silencing quite literally forecloses the reproduction of family through its negation of Allison’s womb.

Yet, while the story shows Allison’s anger and hurt at this betrayal, it also shows her understanding of the bind their situation finds them in—the ways in which their inhabitation of this precarious, liminal, stigmatized identification, forces silence upon them in the name of survival. For, “None of us had ever been able to forgive ourselves that we and they were not strong enough, that strength itself was not enough. Who can say where that strength ended, where the world took over and rolled us all around like balls on a pool table?” (106–107). Their silence, their self-denial, cannot withstand the violence of the world, cannot withstand the ways in which that violence is reflected in their own family. Silence, in this case, operates in complicity with the narrative of progress and belonging within which they are erased. And emotional starvation—the salve her mother and aunts use to protect themselves—gives way, as Allison discovers, to the restless hunger that plagues her.

“Steal Away”: Invisibility and the Boundaries of Selfhood

In “Mama” and “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” Allison looks at the ways in which silences created by shame and fear operate to create boundaries that isolate and can

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127 Indeed, it is almost as if this cultural pattern of silence as a survival mechanism, driven by fear and shame, serves here to support the eugenic impulse materialized in the forced sterilization of many poor white Southern women and others deemed ‘undesirable.’
cause further damage, even as they may also offer a semblance of protection. These silences and erasures, she shows, are inscribed on the bodies of the abject Southern poor, particularly the women, who serve as “guardians” of the family, ensuring its continuation—even as their silencing prevents that. In this section, I look at another form of silencing—the ways in which Allison’s abject class identity gets erased within the space of the academy, a space which is unable to recognize the complexity of her multiple and overlapping identifications, even as it offers her traces of recognition. This persistent erasure of her embodied selfhood informs her precarious sense of self, which she attempts to gain control over through her exploration of bodily boundaries.

The story “Steal Away” takes place during Allison’s time in college, where she is a scholarship student. This setting is particularly noteworthy because the academy is a site of hegemonic (and resistant) knowledge production. By showing the ways in which her class identity is systematically invisibilized within this space, Allison shows not only how the institution of education is complicit in the invisibilization of the poor but also how her very being is invalidated precisely at the place where meaning is made. It also shows how the complex identifications associated with the “white trash” identification follow Allison, internalized through her shame and ambivalent attachments, even after she has left her family and embarked on the so-called path to upward mobility, and how her sense of difference, inscribed upon her body and affective life, sets her apart in this elite space where she is systematically erased, invisibilized, and misrecognized (not just her body but her very identity).

The story begins with an invocation of hunger, a “restless hunger” that is “not for food” but is instead connected to material scarcity, to the worry that she will never have
enough of what she needs. While Allison’s comparatively affluent classmates make plans to go to the movies, she thinks about “having only four dollars till the end of the month and not enough coming in then” (73). This hunger is registered through her body, in particular through her hands—“My hands shake when I am hungry, and I have always been hungry” (73). The hands are the site through which we interact with the world but also, for Allison, as we see in “Mama,” they serve as a site of embodied connection to her mother—a connection that provides an affective link to her class identification but also serves as a reminder of the toxicity of the culture of poverty she grew up in and its inability to give her what she needs. Like her mother’s hands, hers, too, register the instability—emotional, affective—of the material scarcity of their existence.

This hunger is a sign of how this material economic scarcity is translated into something more personal and affective—the story shows us how material scarcity (a concern about money) becomes figured, through shame, as personal (innate/inherent) scarcity—and it is what drives Allison to steal. Allison’s real material circumstances mean that she does not have access to the experiences of her college peers, who she idealizes as representing what is “normal.”

Her inability to shield herself with the external markers of belonging, thereby possessing the necessary capital to pass among her peers, leads to feelings of exclusion. Stealing is a response to this felt exclusion and her feelings of powerlessness in the face of the system that stigmatizes her and her family and deems them “other.” Instead of going to the movies with her classmates, she goes

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128 Léon Wurmser and other shame theorists have described internalized shame as developed in relation to an (idealized) other, who reflects back a vision of what the self is not. In “A Question of Class,” Allison describes this other as the “we” against which her family was positioned as “they”; in other words, her family’s exclusion was predicated on the idea that there was something, a group or community, to be excluded from. In “Steal Away,” the girls at her lunch table who go to the movies function as this other, an idealized version of what is “normal” to which Allison does not, cannot, have access.
downtown to steal, becoming “what had always been expected of [her]—a thief” (73).

Allison’s material scarcity thus becomes figured as an innate deficit—not having enough means that she can never be enough. Her equation of herself and her identity with the act of stealing emphasizes the shame that she feels from her poverty, how deeply that is written into her sense of self. Her adoption of the identity of thief—“I became what had always been expected of me”—functions as a way to reclaim an identity at the moment when hers is most precarious, when she finds herself literally face to face with the devaluation of her selfhood (through her inability to claim these markers of selfhood). It enables her to connect to her origins, what is safe even if dangerous, at the moment when she feels most invisible.

By animating a position of defiant outsider, an anticipatory subjectivity that allows her to ‘steal [herself] away’ from the pain and shame of her class status, she attempts to compensate for the intense lack that she feels in comparison to her peers—a material lack that gets translated into a personal lack. That lack, the nagging want inside herself, is transformed through her stealing into a relation to the outside world, and the

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129 The act of measuring oneself against an other, real or imaginary, to which one is never fully adequate contributes to a fear of revealing oneself as one is. Further, the fear or anticipation of the harm involved in revealing one’s self is often in conflict with the fear of losing one’s sense of identity—the fear of “self loss” (Adamson and Clark 11). To reveal the self is to risk rejection, to risk validation of the idea that one is fundamentally unworthy, but to hide the self is to see it disappear, to feel it collapse under its own premonition of unworthiness. This conflict is a manifestation of internalized shame, and the subject that is beholden by its shame is thus engaged in a constant struggle to realize a sense of self and value.

130 At its surface, the title “Steal Away” references the acts of petty theft that Allison commits during her college years as a means of compensating for the feelings of scarcity that her poverty engenders. This title is also, however, a reference to an African American spiritual, “Steal Away to Jesus.” These spirituals were known to contain hidden messages for slaves about running away, enabling us to read the title as a possible reference to a kind of escape—perhaps one enacted through the hiding of the truth of one’s self, effectively “stealing” oneself away in a kind of self-erasure that functions as a mode of self-protection, much like we saw in Corregidora and Eva’s Man. Or perhaps, alternatively, this represents an invocation of movement toward an end, toward a kind of freedom—a freedom that cannot be found within the constrictions of the capitalist narrative that erases Allison’s very being but might be found in the abject rejection of that narrative (which we see throughout the story).
uncertainty of her identity is filled through the claiming of an identity that has been imposed upon her from the outside—becoming a thief, she becomes something other than the nothing that her poverty dictates. In other words, stealing or becoming a thief is both a way for Allison to protect against the erasure of her identity (to prefigure her own erasure) and to claim an identity for herself that is active rather than passive in the face of her shame. It enables her to claim some control where she feels powerless or helpless, and to choose her own identity—even as this identity is ultimately borne out of her class shame—at the point where that identity is made invisible. This invisibility becomes precisely what is valuable to her as a thief, for it is what allows her to steal, undetected, unnoticed.

If stealing is both a realization of her shame and a way to mitigate the erasure of her embodied selfhood that she feels within this new milieu, it also serves as a mechanism for enabling Allison to gain possession of the material objects that her class status forecloses to her, objects that signify the perceived “normalcy” that she longs for—a notion of normalcy that has to do with the ability to fit within the narrative frame of the New South. As Melanie Benson Taylor notes, the South’s embrace of industrial capitalism in the mid-to-late-twentieth century promised a salve from the injuries of the South’s violent, racist and exclusionary history through an ideal of material fulfillment—a kind of resolve predicated on the possibility of progress through material gain accessible to all Southerners regardless of racial identification or economic class. Yet these promised material gains remained largely inaccessible to those marginalized individuals, like Allison’s family, for whom the means to accumulate were still out of reach (Disturbing Calculations 113). Thus, Allison’s thieving of the seemingly random
objects that she steals—toilet paper, magazines, sardines, guitar picks, knives, ashtrays—might be understood as representing her attempt to attain that promised gratification (and through it a sense of desired belonging) through material fulfillment by taking what she wants.

And yet this relation is complicated, as her stealing appears not necessarily as a desire to possess or to accumulate but rather as a desire to take in and then expel—for she steals these objects only in order to rid herself of them, making herself visible in the imprint or absence of these stolen objects. This stealing can be understood, then, as a means of rejecting the outside world that has rejected her and, at the same time, of affirming her bodily boundaries and materiality, which are threatened through her erasure in the narrative of the New South and the space of the academy. As she steals these objects, they take on an intimate relation of proximity to her body: “Anything small enough to fit a palm walked out with me, anything round to fit an armpit, anything thin enough to carry between my belly and belt” (81). They mark out the boundaries of her body (her selfhood), reassuring her of her physical presence, her material existence, in the face of its erasure and what Benson Taylor refers to as the “Southern self’s spiraling immateriality”—the loss of the body and devaluation of bodily knowledge propelled by capitalism’s tendency toward abstraction and the perpetual haunting of its futile searching.

At the same time as the stealing serves as a way to affirm her bodily boundaries, markers of selfhood, it also provides a ground on which to test those boundaries (to find out where those boundaries exist). The “smallest, sharpest, most expensive items”—those that have the capacity to cause the most pain—Allison carries out behind her teeth,
behind the smile “that remained my ultimate shield” (74). Her smile is her way of hiding herself to the world, maintaining her invisibility—which is both the problem she seeks to overcome and her protection against a hostile world—while at the same time adopting an outward appearance of “normalcy” (friendliness, acquiescence). This smile, her shield, covers one of the most vulnerable places on the body—the place where nourishment is received and expression given voice. Thus, by holding these dangerous, and valuable, items “behind [her] teeth,” Allison enacts her own bodily proximity to violence and pain—which have long been integral parts of her familial culture and identification—testing the boundaries of her selfhood, which are erased through her invisibilization, and enacting a drama of self-abjection (figuring herself as a kind of boundary).

Kristeva refers to the abject as a relationship to a boundary that represents what has been "jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (qtd. in Oliver “Nourishing” 69). In other words, she claims, it is what threatens the distinctions that the boundary is supposed to enforce, for instance the distinctions between inside and outside or self and other. In this way, it presents a threat to identity (as a cohesive whole). While the abject finds material form in substances like bodily fluids and waste, which mark the boundaries of the body and at the same time reveal their permeability, it also functions as a metaphor for the detritus within a society; that is, the people that exist at the margins of society, thereby marking out its boundaries or edges (qtd. in Oliver “Nourishing” 72). As members of society’s poorest class, Allison and her family exist as the abject within US culture, what reassures the “we” of their own inclusion and exclusiveness but what also cannot be neatly encapsulated within those distinctions (of inside and outside). By thus taking in these objects that she steals (from the “outside” world) and holding them close
to her body, Allison marks her own material boundaries and challenges her relation to the outside (she constructs her relationship to the outside as an affirmative one by figuring these objects as part of herself). Situated on the edges, she claims material proximity to the center (that excludes her)—claiming a selfhood that is erased by the fact of her poverty.

But after claiming proximity to this center, Allison rejects it, repudiating the symbols of a culture that has no room for her even as it profits from the exploitation of her selfhood. When her scholarship check—the mark of her poverty—is late, she dresses in her nicest clothes to go to the Hilton lobby to steal glass ashtrays and wine glasses. Later that evening, she takes her bounty to the pier and launches the glass off it onto the sharp rocks below. Each piece “shatter[s] ecstatically,” and this sensual experience—“sight and sound”—Allison writes, is “better than a movie” (74). Here she is not only repudiating what remains off limits to her (this realm of material accumulation), but suggesting that the sensual pleasure—the ecstasy in the shattering—attenuated by that repudiation is ultimately more satisfying than the prohibited object, which is only a representation of reality and not the vibrations of life itself. Those vibrations are the “sight and sound,” the physicality or sensuality of fragmentation. Thus, while her shattering of these glasses acts as a tacit recognition of the empty satisfaction that their possession promises within the culture that invalidates Allison’s very being, by shattering the glass that she had (figuratively) taken into herself, she enacts a fragmentation of self, a realization of her own (internal) fragmentation that resonates with Darieck Scott’s theorization of the possibility of finding pleasure within abjection through the embodied refusal to sever one’s identification with a history of failure or defeat (28).
“Steal Away” thus shows how Allison both evinces and subverts the desire for accumulation that carries with it a promise of belonging—cultivating instead a differential relationship to the material objects that mark her existence, using them both to affirm the boundaries of her selfhood (threatened through her erasure in that space) and to challenge the stability of the boundaries that exclude her. But while her illegibility, experienced as a sense of invisibility within the space of academia, is what makes possible her stealing, and while she is able to gain some sense of (self) control through her enactment of these dramas of abjection, nevertheless she is still not able to make herself seen, to access the recognition that she craves. This is epitomized in her encounter with the art professor who “never once [looked] up into [her] face” as he helped her clear the paper she had come to steal, causing an affective response of anger coming up from her stomach “with an acid taste”—the nausea of nonbeing, her insides made outside (75).

But while the male art professor is completely ignorant of Allison’s presence, the story suggests that there is an attempt at recognition by some of the women that Allison encounters in this space. The college president’s wife, for instance, places her “pink fleshy hand” on Allison’s shoulder at a get together for the scholarship students, suggesting the possibility of acknowledgment grounded in some kind of bodily connection. But when Allison squeezes that hand, the president’s wife jumps, alarmed at this reciprocity of physical connection.

In particular, this problem of recognition is shown through Allison’s relationship with the female sociology professor who seemingly attempts to cultivate a desiring relationship to Allison. This relationship connects the narrative of class shame to an ambivalent narrative of unformed queer desire. Unlike the others who make little to no
effort to recognize Allison, this professor both sees and does not see her, making physical
contact with her several times in gestures that appear both sexual and maternal (a
surrogate for Allison’s ‘missing’ mother). She trails her fingers delicately across the skin
of Allison’s wrist as she hands her a glass of wine at a dinner that she initiates, and then,
later, gently touches Allison’s face. This attempt at connection, which begins as the
possibility of recognition of Allison’s queer difference is, however, perversely turned
when the professor asks, “Your family is very poor, aren’t they?” (76). Instead of
recognition of her queerness, it is her class background that is suddenly and violently
exposed, a difference she had sought to keep hidden through the lies that she has been
telling (about her summers hitch-hiking cross-country)—even as she also craves the
recognition that these lies make impossible. The sociology professor’s recognition of this
truth of Allison’s life is thus also a misrecognition in that she sees her poverty and not her
person.

The shame of this recognition (aren’t all recognitions misrecognition?) causes a
bodily response: Allison’s face “froze and burned at the same time,” and, “the heat in
[her] face went down [her] body in waves” (83). But this description of her shame, which
Eve Sedgwick describes as simultaneously interrupting identification and making identity
through the way that it alienates the subject and ignites the desire for connection,\textsuperscript{131} is
also suggestive of desire’s inscription on the body, intimating not only Allison’s own
latent queerness but the potential for a kind of (conflicted) pleasure that comes from

\textsuperscript{131} In \textit{Touching Feeling}, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes shame as such: “Shame floods into being as a
moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed,
like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication. Blazons of shame, the “fallen face” with eyes down
and head averted—and, to a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a
desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge. But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes
identity.” (36).
being seen—even as that part of her that is exposed is that which marks her abjection and which she is therefore most fearful of. When Allison agrees reluctantly to meet the professor again, she finds her absent, but she borrows one of the books she finds on the shelves of her office. It is a book about sadism (Sadism in the Movies), and the next one she takes is The Sexual Life of Savages. These books—not even their content as much as what their titles suggest—represent a kind of fusion of her burgeoning sexuality and the violence that has defined her past. Annotating these borrowed tomes with a thick blue marker, she inscribes herself into the pages of the texts—making her abject materiality visible in the “heavy blue marks.” Thus, while the sociology professor herself never becomes the object of Allison’s desire, through this encounter, her stealing is transformed into a potential source of queer self-realization.

And yet that queerness, or the liberation into pleasure that it might represent—the possibility of a queerness inflected by this class shame and one that infuses with pleasure the cycle of self-consolidation and fragmentation that the act of stealing makes tangible—remains mostly unrealized within the story, bound by the constraints of class identity that continue to mark Allison’s felt exclusion within the privileged space of academia where Allison no longer socializes with her professors but instead, “[studies] their words, gestures, jokes, and quarrels to see just how they were different from [her]” (77). Thus, within this story, her incoherent sense of self remains inextricably linked to her feeling of difference, or exclusion, which she locates upon her body and in her affective life.

While the world of academia never seems able to recognize the complexity of Allison’s subjectivity—as a latently queer, intelligent woman from a background of abject Southern poverty that continues to impact upon her life—within the story, she does
receive another form of recognition, which comes at the end when her hunger is finally, if momentarily, appeased. This recognition comes from her mother when her mother and stepfather attend her graduation. While at the ceremony, Allison overhears the statistics professor repeating the phrase “Quite something, your [daughter/son] . . . We’re expecting great things of [them]” to each of the parents he encounters, hers included (79). While on one hand this statement, repeated, positions Allison alongside her peers against whom she has felt her difference in relief, at the same time it serves as an empty form of recognition, a visible indicator of the institution’s inability to provide the recognition of selfhood that Allison has been seeking—which we see her seek through her thieving of objects and through her encounters with the sociology professor. But then Allison’s mother repeats this phrase, “Quite something, my daughter,” as she laughs, hugging the roses Allison has just stolen off the welcome sign to her breast. Her mother’s utterance of this phrase imbues it with a meaning absent in its prior iterations, showing that even if she cannot fully grasp the significance of what Allison has achieved or the totality of who she is becoming—her laughter in that moment seems to indicate a tacit recognition of the absurdity, the hilarity, of how far she is from her daughter’s world and accomplishments—she recognizes that, after all, Allison is not nothing, but something.

“Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and am not worthy”: Southern Food and Identificatory Ambivalence

As evidenced by its use in “Steal Away,” hunger is a metaphor that reappears throughout Allison’s work. When asked about her use of this trope in a 1993 interview with Carolyn Megan, Allison explained, “being poor in this country is about being constantly hungry, because the thing that you get, the emotional sustenance you get is
never enough, so that hunger becomes a way of life, that longing for something never had. I consciously work with that because it’s an emotional state I understand so well. Once you’re a bit hungry, you’re desperately trying never to be hungry. You fear that you’ll never get what you need” (Megan 11). We can understand hunger in her stories, then, as an emotional state connected to shame and scarcity. But it is also connected to food and nourishment, which can be a source of constant deprivation for those in poverty. Allison’s story “A Lesbian Appetite” takes both of these meanings, using representations of food, and hunger, to show the ambivalence of Allison’s relationship to the identification of “poor white trash”—how the inscription of this identification on her body functions as a source of shame, but also enables a positive connection to that identification (which is realized through the identificatory power of food and its sensual pleasures, and, in the following section, through its abjection).

At the beginning of “A Lesbian Appetite,” Allison writes, “Food is more than sustenance; it is history” (161). Indeed, food has long played a central role within Southern culture, closely connected to the image of the region and its character. While representations of food that play on the ‘myth of Southern plenty’ can function to suppress knowledge of the “monstrous social system that made and makes Southern food so delectable,”¹³² analyses of food and eating can also serve to draw attention to the connections between gender relations, economic status and class, geopolitical location, ethnicity, and race by “[rooting] actual bodies in these relations.”¹³³ But food, as history, also carries another significance for the abject Southern poor, those categorized as “white trash.” Historically, the poverty of Southern whites has been attributed to a range of

¹³² Patricia Yaeger “Edible Labor” p. 155.
causes, including environment—which encompasses the poor quality of their diet. Food was thus another element used to abjectify poor Southern whites, to blame and to shame them for perpetuating their own degraded circumstances. In this way, food opens up this affective history of “poor white trash,” which Allison, in “A Lesbian Appetite” explores and transforms.

As in “Mama,” the story begins with an expression of embodied connection to the women in Allison’s family. Here it is realized through food; the beginning of the story unfolds through extended and loving descriptions of preparing foods, such as biscuits, beans, and bacon, whose aromas evoke her mother and her home in the South. Food connects her not just to the women in her family, then, but to her class and cultural background. But while her attachment to Southern food—an attachment fueled in part by nostalgia—is depicted here as nourishing her soul and sense of self, she also acknowledges that the “diet of poor Southerners” is “among the worst in the world,” filled with fat and grease and sugar and salt, ingredients which are cheap and tasty (162). To support this, she describes the damaging effects of this diet on the bodies of her family members, visible in the teeth they have lost and the blood that has collected in their stomachs. These anecdotes provide concrete illustrations of the ways that the poverty of the Southern “white trash” subject marks the physical body, even as these markings may in turn—as they have been historically—be taken as evidence of an inferiority inherent in the abject Southern poor.

Allison further explores how her attachment to this food has irretrievably marked her own body, inscribing her class status within her through the material form of an ulcer. Allison describes her ulcer as, “an always angry place inside me, a tyranny that takes
good food and turns it like a blade scraping at the hard place where I try to hide my temper” (152). The ulcer functions as a tangible site where Allison’s “white trash” identity is inscribed both within and upon her body, and, as such, it serves as a receptacle for her affective experience of this identity—her feelings of shame and anger. The image of spoilage, in particular—taking good food and turning it—can be read as a figuration of Allison’s shame at her spoiled innocence. Some days, she admits, “I think it is the rightful reward for my childhood . . . If I had eaten right, there never would have been any trouble” (152).

The trouble that is invoked yet never directly addressed within this story is the pain of Allison’s abuse. She uses the concrete form of the ulcer to link the emotional pain of this abuse to her family’s poverty, suggesting that their poverty (figured through their diet), which situates them at the very margins of society, might bear responsibility for the physical and sexual abuse that she endured (and the consequent loss of her mother). This can be read as an indictment of the culture of violence and silence that the family’s poverty perpetuates, but also of the system that allows this poverty to continue, unabated. While her conception of the ulcer as a “rightful reward” suggests her attribution of this abuse to something innate within her, a shame she bears, she is also externalizing the cause of this abuse. Her portrayal of the ulcer thus serves as a means of grappling with the ways in which the systems that act upon her, and the spaces within which she moves, come to bear upon her body and interior life. It functions as a means of exploring the boundaries between inside and outside, the boundaries that shape her even as they reveal themselves to be permeable, and continuously transgressed.
Notably, the pain of Allison’s ulcer has forced her to give up the very foods—salt and sugar and fat and whiskey—that render the Southern diet so seductive. In doing so, she sacrifices part of what makes her who she is in order to live. Yet she claims that she always remains hungry for “the smell and taste of the food my mama fed me”—for the way that it connects her to her family and her history, and to herself. Her longing to connect through the medium of food exposes her cultural sensibilities, the “poor white trash” part of her that, seeking pleasure, unknowingly seeks its own destruction. She writes, “Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and am not worthy” (152). In a concrete manifestation of ‘you are what you eat,’ her self-worth—and more than this: her very identity—is directly correlated to her Southern diet. Her self-exposure of this craving reveals the shame that accompanies it; but this move operates dually as a form of affirmation, an opportunity for Allison to recast her relationship to this “white trash” identification that, even while it causes her physical pain, “sweetens her mouth and feeds her soul.” While her body can no longer sustain this food, at the same time she needs it—if only in her dreams—to sustain herself emotionally because of the way it links her to this identity that is inextricably embedded within her even as she longs to disavow it.

The Body as Waste: Pleasure in Abjection

If the possibility of a queerness that might bring together the different, yet interrelated, parts of Allison’s identity—her class identity and her sexuality—ultimately remains unrealized in “Steal Away” due to her professor’s inability to fully recognize her, it becomes actualized in “A Lesbian Appetite.” As the story shows, Southern food serves as a site through which Allison can explore, and even claim, her ambivalent relationship
to her “white trash” identity. This reclamation is complicated, however, by her recollection of the warning of one of her grade school teachers, who echoes a common stereotype of the Southern poor, which was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to stigmatize them as “feebleminded,” and which continues to follow them today. The teacher claims, “The children of the poor . . . have a lack of brain tissue simply because they don’t get the necessary vitamins at the proper age. It’s a deficiency that cannot be made up when they are older” (156).

The suggestion that this deficiency is one that cannot be corrected, enforced through the voice of hegemonic power—again, the educational institution is unable to recognize her—effectively forecloses any possibility for upward mobility for the racialized and classed subject. Having been taught that “smart is the only way out,” Allison sees her hopes for escape from the conditions that have dictated her life collapse as her class identity is figured as the all-encompassing fact of her existence (rather than as one part but not the determining factor). Her response to this threat is to become a compulsive consumer of Vitamin D in a desperate attempt to counteract the effects of her diet and “build muscles in the brain.” She writes: “We will drink milk, steal if we must. Mama, make salmon stew. It’s cheap and full of vitamin D. If we can’t afford cream, than evaporated milk will do. One is as thick as the other . . . Feed me milk, feed me cream, feed me what I need to fight them” (156).

In her article on food, femininity, and abjection, Kelly Oliver cites Kristeva’s argument about the link between language and the maternal body. Kristeva posits that the infant, as a part of the process of individuation, must substitute speech for the mother’s body (however, as per Lacan, speech remains forever inadequate because the subject’s
desire is always beyond language) (“Nourishing” 70). Allison’s address to her mother in this passage can thus be read as her plea to that desiring space before language, before the language that shames her and marks her inadequacy—her plea directed, as it were, outside the symbolic and into the realm of the bodily and affective. With this plea, she fuses her ambivalent maternal identification with her experience of class abjectification and her queer sexuality in a subversive invocation of eroticized bodily pleasure. While “Feed me milk” is a cry for the emotional sustenance that Allison has long been denied by her mother, milk’s transformation into the cream that is forced from her own body and fed to her in the sexually explicit scene that follows this suffuses this appeal with pleasure that is located in the body. Whereas previously Allison used the physical manifestation of the ulcer to suggest the possibility of affective connection realized through shame, here she uses language—and, more than that, the invocation of something beyond the strictures that language must operate within—to make this connection and to affect this move from an economy of want to one of pleasure.

The embodied nature of this connection is further developed in an explicit scene in which Allison’s female lover urinates unexpectedly into Allison’s mouth, demanding that she swallow it. In this scene, Allison herself is figured as the food: “Gonna bathe you, put you in a tub of hot lemonade. Drink it off you. Eat you for dinner” (158). If, as we saw before, Allison’s relationship to food cuts to the core of who she is, inscribing the “white trash” identification upon her body and her psyche, here her own body is figured as food in a relation that is thrillingly erotic and provides an interesting revisioning of Kristeva’s imagining of the abject body itself becoming waste (Oliver “Nourishing” 72).
This scene tellingly prefigures Darieck Scott’s suggestion of abjection as a means through which marginalized and oppressed subjects might reclaim the possibility of pleasure. Scott writes from the perspective of a queer Black man, whose very subjectivity is thus constituted through the “introjection of historical defeat,” rendering abjection central to his experience of embodiment (9). Though Allison’s subject position differs significantly through her race and gender identifications, the subjectivity of poor white Southerners, particularly those marked as “white trash,” can also be understood (though not in a directly analogous relationship) as constituted through their outsider status—though their failure to adhere to the normative conditions of being and belonging. Allison’s experience of embodiment (and the experiences of those who occupy that socioeconomic position) can thus be said to be marked by her abjected status, her sense of being in a body existing as a constant threatening of distinction, which is made palpable in her search for boundaries that can provide her with a concrete sense of selfhood (as we see in “Steal Away”).

Scott argues that abjection—a state of embodiment marked by abjection—does not foreclose the possibility of pleasure obtained within and through embodied practices, though he suggests that this pleasure must be understood “through a different set of referents than we may be accustomed to” (28). In particular, he locates sexuality (which is “twinned” with Blackness, wherein both are figured as constitutive excesses) as a realm that might offer the potential for pleasure—not only sexual pleasure, but pleasure of the body, pleasure that exists from being in one’s body and occupying one’s identifications, even where they bring pain.
This kind of pleasure might be imagined to inhere in this reciprocity in vulnerability that is manifest within this scene of shared sexual abjection, wherein this very personal bodily fluid is passed between two queer lovers. It is a moment of animal violence—reinforced by Allison’s description of “clawing [her lover’s] back with [her] nails,” of the “hissing” and “burning” and “smearing”—that physicalizes Allison’s shame, that takes the embodied nature of that shame and ‘turns it,’ effectively refiguring the body that has been figured as waste, as trash, and as “poison,” instead as an engine of pleasure. Shame pierces to the core of one’s sense of identity, deeming it always already unworthy. However, this scene of bodies literally and figuratively opening to one another reimagines shame as a powerful force of connection. Ultimately, the pleasure apprehended here is a pleasure in integration that is bodily and affective and which paves the way for the fantasy that closes the story.

Like the beginning of “A Lesbian Appetite,” the end of the story closes with a “dream.” While the opening dream shows Allison cooking the Southern food of her youth and ends with disappointment when she awakens and finds herself without that food (without that connection), the closing dream is of a dinner party potluck where all the women in her life bring their own dishes. “Everybody is feeding each other, exclaiming over recipes and gravies, introducing themselves and telling stories about great meals they’ve eaten,” Allison writes (178). This vision of the integration of these different parts of Allison’s life—materialized in her mother and aunts and uncles and her lesbian comrades and lovers—fulfills Allison’s ever-present hunger: “For the first time in my life I am not hungry” (178). Significantly, Allison’s own positioning within this fantasy is in a state of in-between, walking “back and forth” from the outside to the inside of the
house. As someone whose very being has been abjected since the fact of her existence and who has consequently sought to limn the boundaries of her identity and sense of self amidst this constant confusion between inside and outside, Allison’s depiction of herself as occupying this liminal space and as being fulfilled through this positioning represents the possibility not of transcending who she is and where she comes from but of recognizing those things as only part of her truth.

The Healing Work of Writing Trauma

While *Trash* is a narrative of trauma, it is also a narrative of healing, which provides Allison with the space to speak back to the silences that have plagued her upbringing and her life, the shame and secrecy that have been at the core of her trauma—to show the spaces where silence has lived but also to show the things that have been silenced, including the pain and shame of that silencing. Many trauma theorists have spoken about the power of putting trauma into narrative—giving it a voice and form.\(^{134}\) And while this is certainly part of the healing work of *Trash*, what I want to draw attention to in this final section is the way in which, through her writing, Allison figures the embodied nature of writing itself—the intense full-body physicality of writing about these bodily traumas. By showing the physicality of the process of writing trauma,

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\(^{134}\) Both Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman have discussed extensively the healing potential of testimonies of trauma; see, among other works, Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), and Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991). Jennifer Griffiths’ *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance* (2010) is also an excellent study of trauma and testimony and its relation to the body, as are many others. Additionally, in *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (1999), Louise DeSalvo talks about the power of writing specifically as a way of healing, arguing that linking the thinking and the feeling around a trauma through writing is integral to the healing process.
Allison makes visible the real physical labor—often painful, but also often hidden or erased—that it takes to produce this story collection. In doing so, she exposes the ugliness, the messiness, the abject materiality of writing, and indeed of healing itself.

Where Allison does this most insistently in *Trash* is in both the preface to the original 1988 publication of the collection, entitled “Deciding to Live,” and in the introduction to the 2002 edition, entitled “Stubborn Girls and Mean Stories”—in the places where she speaks about the impetus for writing these stories and her process. Each of these chapters, the latter with more reflective distance, emphasize Allison’s relationship to writing as about identification that is both bodily and deeply emotional, or affective. In the introduction, she describes her writing of the stories in the collection as a process of making peace and finding forgiveness through figuring out ways to talk about her experiences that did not make her ashamed. In this way, writing is framed from the outset as an active process of meaning making intimately bound up with affective identificatory practices (writing is a way to change her damaging feeling).

In the preface to the first edition, the embodied and affective nature of Allison’s writing process is made even more visible; her decision “to live” is borne out of bodily pain and shame and realized through the act of writing her story. This decision is made in a moment of humiliation when Allison’s body has literally been broken: she has pulled a muscle in her leg, has two “cracked” ribs, and fingernail scratches on her wrists, and she is limping. Deciding to live is first figured as both a physical and metaphorical act, “[shutting her] mouth on [her] grief and [her] rage” (2). It is a retreat into silence, at once a repression of feeling and the beginning of a different relation to that feeling, to the grief and rage of her hurting body. Writing thus becomes an avenue towards living with that
pain and a means of “purging” the things she has never been able to tell. And this writing is highly physical. Allison describes “[twisting her] fingers and [chewing her] lips” as she sorts through the layers of truth and lies, memories and stories told to obfuscate those memories. She recounts how her “neck and teeth began to ache” feeling the anger and bitterness inside herself through her stories. And yet reading over them, feeling this in her body, was, as she claims, an integral part of realizing that decision to live again and again. As she reread the stories, she also rewrote them, rescripting these affective histories by “[putting] hope in the children and passion in the landscape while [her] neck ached and tightened,” the recursiveness of the process echoed in the clinching of her muscles (5).

Part of “deciding to live” was doing things just to “be in motion.” Allison describes her stops and starts, putting aside her writing when the feeling of her own experience (her grief and her anger) was too overwhelming and then being forced to take it up again by the ghosts of the past living in her body. Waking up “sweaty and angry” one night, she felt the “stories [rising] up [her] throat…echoing in [her] neck…behind [her] ears” (6). Though closing her mouth on her grief and pain was integral in not giving up on herself (the need to not become mired in these emotions), she makes clear that her body needed to tell these stories, to process these feelings—that deciding to live could not mean closing herself off fully from her feelings. Instead, when the stories came rising up in her throat, the “desire to live was desperate in [her] belly, and the stories [she] had hidden all those years were the blood and bone of it” (7). The stories she had hidden were the stories that held their own truths, the stories she was afraid would expose her and her family. Yet despite the painfulness and the potential shame of these truths, Allison
discovers that it is more painful—physically painful—to push these stories down, to shut her mouth on them. By acknowledging them as the “blood and bone” of her desire to live, she recognizes them not as appendages to her life but as a central part of who she is. These stories, then, represent another form of the abject—like the Southern food of her youth, they live in her body, impacting, forming the materiality of her body, and, in doing so, collapsing the distinction between inside and outside. While they have the power to shame when remaining hidden, they also have the power to heal that shame, to give it release, when shared.

If, as Allison is claiming here, the narratives that structure her subjectivity live in her body, the process of deciding to live and coming to writing is also therefore a process of being with her body and of listening to the body’s irregular rhythms—the stories that the body is telling. When, after abandoning her writing for a time, she returns again to it to revise, she creates a story that “resonated to the pulse of [her] sister’s fear and [her] desperate shame” (7). Though this, again, is only another beginning, it is part of her beginning to conceive of the writing process as with rather than against the body; instead of shutting her mouth against feeling, she is embracing its messiness as integral to the process of creation. It is her “shout” of “shape and substance against silence and confusion” (7). By giving voice and shape to the complexities of her feelings and her experiences, even when not exact, even when painful, she moves away from the chaos that the refusal to express engenders within. Vincent King writes in his analysis of *Bastard*, “this constant negotiation between the word and the world avoids silence on the one hand and the purely negative on the other” (137). While King’s claim is persuasive, I would take this further to argue that, in *Trash*, Allison, through this negotiation, creates a
language with which to speak these different forms of violence, oppression, trauma, and healing together—a language of the abject body.

Conclusion: Reproducing Healing

Through her detailed narration of the embodied and affective process of her writing this collection, Allison shows the labor that goes into writing, the pain felt in her body through the excavation of this bodily and emotional trauma but also the physical stress of the act of writing itself—the tightening of the neck, the twisting of fingers. The work of writing, she suggests, is both physical and emotional. And it is also a form of reproductive labor. This parallel is realized in Allison’s description, in “Stubborn Girls and Mean Stories,” of writing her great-grandmother’s story: “I tried to re-imagine the world as my great-grandmother saw it, feeling in my low back the generational impact of giving birth to eleven children in fifteen years” (xv emphasis mine).

Here the imaginative process is conceived of as a bodily form of identification—the feeling of giving birth connects the two women, as Allison “gives birth” to her grandmother’s story. This embodied connection enables her to access a deeper affective truth—deeper than the stories she has been told about this great-grandmother, a woman whose anger at the world defined and isolated her. This truth has to do with what her great-grandmother’s lived experience felt like for her.135 And while it may not change the fact of her great-grandmother’s anger, it opens up this affective history in which her

135 The stories, she explains, “have to have their own truth,” which can be understood not as an absolute truth, but as a felt truth, a kind of truth that is accessible to others (xv). By claiming truth of experience not as a highly subjective moment (one over which she has dominion) but rather as something whose affect can be shared, Allison challenges the public/private distinction that is integral to capitalism, breaking down a boundary that has been a source of trauma and shame throughout her life.
family is implicated—a history of struggle but one which also gives way to possibilities of connection.

The reproductive labor performed in *Trash* is made all the more salient for the fact of Allison’s sterility, which is revealed, as noted earlier, in her story “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” which centers on the silence passed down within the women of her family, silence in the face of violence done to them—silence masked as strength. In that story, Allison, whose Aunt Alma has arrived to question her about the rift between her and her mother and why she won’t return home, reveals, finally, the secret she has told her mother, that has devastated her mother for whom the continuation of the line—the “making of generations,” as Ursa Corregidora’s family describes it—is essential: she cannot have children—

Some people never do have babies, you know. Some people get raped at age eleven by a stepfather their mama half hates but can’t afford to leave. Some people then have to lie and hide it because it would make so much trouble. So nobody will know, not the law and not the rest of the family. Nobody but the women supposed to be the ones who take care of everything, who know what to do and how to do it, the women who make children who believe in them and trust in them, and sometimes die for it. Some people never go to a doctor and don’t find out for ten years that the son of a bitch gave them some goddamned disease. (105–106)

This silence, and the consequent loss of Allison’s ability to bear children, is, as discussed earlier and as is evident here, connected to the family’s status as part of the abject Southern poor, and the stigmas that this carries. It functions as a means of “protecting” the family from the law and from the outside world, which would presumably judge them, which would use this to confirm the already-held stereotypes about this class of people, and would thereby bring “trouble”—never mind the trouble that has already been
brought. It is a silence that is borne equally of shame and the need to survive in the face of a hostile world.

And it is a legacy of silence that Allison, through her infertility, is not necessarily destined to pass on, as she might be otherwise. Similarly to Ursa in the previous chapter, Allison’s inability to have biological children signals the possibility of passing on a different kind of legacy, one not ruled by this cycle of violence and trauma and hopelessness that has plagued her family’s history, a cycle in which children are birthed but not cared for, not given the protection or emotional stability that they need. Instead, writing is figured here as the primary means through which she passes on her legacy and keeps the history and presence of her family alive within the national narrative around social life. Writing enables her to reproduce the violence that is the truth, but only one of many truths, of her family experience without the harmful effects—without reproducing this violence upon others, for others. It enables her to show and to process how violence and trauma get stored in the body and to release this violence, to transform it—to show its transformation in moments of embodied connection. It enables her to show this trauma as a way of countering the shame and silence that it brings, but also to show the loving attachments and the pleasure that live side by side with this violence and trauma—that are also part of her, woven into the very fabric and texture of her embodied self.

136 Though it must be noted that this does not foreclose the possibility of Allison—or Ursa, as Jones’ ending is careful to show—reproducing forms of violence in her own relationships with others. As trauma work shows us, this is in fact quite likely; as Jones suggests, it may be inevitable. But within the narrative/s the figuring of the infertility of these characters does, I maintain, open up space for other possibilities to unfold.
As such, these stories help us understand the complexities of lived experiences of abject Southern poverty for those who don’t fit within the narrative of belonging in the New South, for those this narrative contrives to keep hidden and out of sight. By bringing these subjects—the messiness of their bodies and lives—into view, Allison challenges this narrative of progress, instead figuring it as a narrative of trauma enacted upon the body of which the abject Southern poor are at the center. She figures the abject poor, and particular the poor women—who perform the emotional labor that sustains the men—as the lever upon which this false narrative of progress in the South is turning. Through her exploration and negotiation of the precarious boundaries that mark her family’s exclusion and her disruption of these boundaries, she rewrites the affective history of “white trash,” of the white Southern poor confined to the very margins of society, showing how the stigmatization that has long plagued this population, causing hurt and shame, is not the only story—this pain and shame, while salient, exist alongside and inextricably bound with experiences of love, ambivalence, pleasure, connection, and healing.
CHAPTER 4

MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF A MISCEGENATED HISTORY: NATASHA TRETHEWEY’S POETICS OF SOUTHERN LOSS

The Difference of a ‘Letter’

Natasha Trethewey’s 2006 collection of poetry, Native Guard, explores the visceral nature of racialized and gendered violence in the historical and contemporary US South. Within this collection, the poem “Letter” (p. 12) stands out for its explicit emphasis on the intricacies of language and writing. The poem takes place at the post office, a site of seemingly boundless circulation where words and stories are sent from one to another, crossing only in their invisible trajectories. Trethewey is recently settled in a new home and is writing a friend to let her know this and that she is now leaving, rushing out on an errand that remains unsaid. The entire note is destabilized, however, by the author’s accidental misspelling of errand as errant—a one-letter difference that changes everything. Though both are anchored by their “upright backbone[s],” one has with it “the fullness of possibility (emphasis mine),” the queerly erotic shape “almost like the O my friend’s mouth will make,” while the other “crosses like the flat line of your death.” Errand gives substance and meaning; there is movement and intention within it. Errant, by contrast, signifies a straying from the proper course, something not the way it should be. What renders it wrong here is this ‘t,’ the mark of the cross associated with Christianity—“the ashes on your forehead / some Wednesday I barely remember.”

In this way, a single letter in the alphabet is revealed as infinitely vaster than itself—as an emblem of loss, a symbol for death but also rebirth, a mark that signifies forgetfulness, uncertainty, and the ability to change what is not set in stone. Through the
figuration of this letter, this cross that is both created and destroyed through the very act of crossing, Trethewey gestures to the physicality of language itself and its affective capacity to open up entire realms of meaning, transforming an individual’s relation to the world. The image of crossing recurs throughout the collection, accumulating additional significations: it is used to indicate the traversal of concrete, geographical boundaries, such as state lines; the convergence of multiple timescapes and histories; a written character preserving the nameless identities of illiterate Confederate soldiers; and raised marks documenting the violations of slavery on Black bodies. This motif thus operates metaphorically as well as metonymically, holding each of these meanings in tension as they call up another form of crossing whose absence here conditions its presence: that is, the Middle Passage, the collective trauma that inaugurated chattel slavery in the Americas and which haunts the collection through the profound loss at its core.

Returning, then, to “Letter,” we can see that this poem, at first glance about language and the precarity of signification, is also a poem about loss, a poem that opens up affective histories of loss—from the personal, maternal loss of the poet to the world-shattering violence that racialized slavery in the Americas enacted, imprinted, on the bodies of Black women and men. Thus the meta-inquiry into language in “Letter” becomes legible as an inquiry into affective histories of Black loss and erasure, and into the depths of the loss through which Trethewey herself has been constituted, even as this poem shows us that loss—profound, world-shattering loss—is, like the ashes on the forehead, also always about change.

This dissertation, through the framework of affective histories of Southern trauma, centers on the erasure of Blackness and other forms of abjected identification
from the construction of the dominant (i.e., white) narrative of the South—a narrative that is dependent upon these erasures. The previous chapters have looked at the effects of this systematic erasure through examination of the affective histories of trauma that circulate within these texts—the racialized history of sexual and reproductive trauma that shapes Black female vulnerability in Gayl Jones’ Corregidora and the racialized history of class abjection that figures bodily and social boundaries of exclusion in Dorothy Allison’s Trash. In doing so, these chapters have also described how these authors, through their explorations of the ways in which affective histories of trauma are inscribed upon bodies, are rescripting those histories to excavate the potential for healing, pleasure, and connection within them. This final chapter builds upon these analyses through its consideration of affective histories of Black loss and erasure in the South—of the ways in which the Black lives and bodies that have provided the foundation for the South’s very identity have been systematically erased from its history, even as the white South has embraced a mythic narrative of loss that reframes its defeat in the Civil War and which functions to obscure the Black loss that underlies this narrative.

I read Trethewey’s poetics in Native Guard as a meditation on the nature of loss for Black and mixed-race Southerners and on the relationship of loss to space and place, time and history, and embodied experiences of identity. In doing so, I argue that Trethewey, through her poetics, shows how affective histories of trauma and loss—the racialized histories of violence against Blacks in the South but also the related histories of Black loss and Black erasure from the narratives of the South that enact a different kind of violence that is no less impactful—are inscribed upon the bodies of Black Southerners. Through her weaving of seemingly disparate yet integrally intertwined histories of loss—
loss of mother, loss of home/land, loss of the histories and stories of the Black people whose labor created the South and who continue to call it home—Trethewey, I argue, shows loss, both personal and collective, to be foundational to the history and affective life of the US South.

Yet by demonstrating how these racialized affective histories of loss and erasure are mapped onto the bodies of Black Southerners—bodies that are infinitely heterogenous and constantly changing—Trethewey excavates the creative potential of loss, showing how it is not only about death and defeat, pain or failure, or even absence, but also, and equally, about change and possibility, strength and resilience, tenderness and love. As such, Trethewey constructs an affective history of the South as a history of multiple stories existing side by side, multiple histories articulating with and within one another. She writes a history of the South as a history of crossings written on the body.

The Southern poet Yusef Komunyakaa describes crossings, through the figuration of crossroads, as “a junction between the individual and the world.” He writes, “The crossroads is a real place between imaginary places—points of departure and arrival. It is also a place where negotiations and deals are made with higher powers. In the West African and Haitian traditions of Legba, it is a sanctified place of reflection” (32). Likewise, Edward Pavlic describes the crossroads as the place where “the relationship between internal and social identities is disrupted, broken, reimagined, and possibly renewed” (xvii). Within these configurations, the crossroads is understood as an affective site of connection and transformation—a space of possibility and transformative potential where the individual encounters the self and comes in contact with the world (perhaps akin to Audre Lorde’s depiction of the erotic as a kind of “self-connection shared”). This
figuration of crossing resonates within Trethewey’s poetics as a bodily site where affective histories intersect as they continue to be constructed within and through one another. Through her use of the motif of crossing throughout this collection, her writing of the history of the South as an affective history of crossings, Trethewey writes her own embodied subjectivity as a mixed-race Black woman who has been denied legitimacy in the place of her birth, her home, into the foundations of the Southern story. The story she tells of the South, her South but also the South of myth and majesty, is a story not just about loss but about connection, about living history and about her own body as a carrier of this history.

Natasha Trethewey: ‘A Home That is Not My Home’

Natasha Trethewey was born in Mississippi to an African American mother and white father on April 26, 1966, the 100th anniversary of Confederate Memorial Day and just one year before the Supreme Court struck down the anti-miscegenation laws with *Loving v. Virginia*. These state laws, which criminalized interracial marriage and sometimes also sex and cohabitation, were originally introduced beginning in the late seventeenth century in the North American colonies and were ultimately adopted by most US states and territories, particularly in the South and Midwest. These laws were designed to protect the so-called “purity” of the races—another means of regulating sexuality and reproduction as a way to regulate the composition and furtherance of the

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137 In Trethewey’s interview with Rowell, the editor of the premier journal of African diasporic arts and culture, *Callaloo*, she refers to herself as a “kind of psychological exile,” claiming, “Being born in a place that is my home and yet not my home because I was considered to come from an illegal union was infuriating” (1032).
nation—and their infringement was often met with harsh punishment. As a child born of an “illegitimate” interracial union, Trethewey was herself deemed illegitimate.

The state-sanctioned illegitimacy surrounding her birth engendered in Trethewey a deep ambivalence toward the US South and Mississippi in particular, an ambivalence that is inextricably bound up with her racial identification. This is reflected in a 2004 interview with Charles Henry Rowell, in which Trethewey cites the twentieth century Southern historian C. Vann Woodward’s claim that “native daughters” were in the early part of the century inscribing history onto the Mississippi landscape while “non-daughters were excluded” (1032). This frame, narrow yet carrying great ideological weight, is one that renders Trethewey’s complex mixed-race identity illegible and undergirds her subsequent self-identification as “a non-daughter of the place that I was born, that is my home” (1032). Her erasure from this narrative of Southern and US history has led her to explore, through her poetry, other histories, events, and figures that have likewise been excluded from the archives, inscribing these forgotten, occluded histories onto the landscape in an act of reclamation. This investment provides the impetus and guiding force behind *Native Guard*.

*Native Guard* is Trethewey’s third collection of poetry after *Domestic Work* (2000) and *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2002), both collections that center around questions of racialized femininity within a Southern context. *Native Guard* also takes up this thematic, but its primary focus is loss and memory, both personal and collective. The collection is separated into three sections, referred to by Trethewey as “document, monument, and testament” (Rowell 1033). The first, to which “Letter” belongs, explores the loss of Trethewey’s mother, who was murdered by Trethewey’s former stepfather, and the deep
sorrow that Trethewey experiences in the wake of this loss. The second section of *Native Guard* moves away from the personal to focus on the nameless Southern Black men, women, and children whose lives have been largely erased from the archives. In particular, this section focuses on the Native Guard to which the collection owes its name, the all-Black army regiment that fought on the Union side during the Civil War and yet whose presence is scarce within official records. Trethewey thus links her personal maternal loss to the loss, or absence, of these stories, as well as the very real losses suffered by African Americans in the South. The third and final section then shifts back again toward Trethewey’s own life experience as it confronts the racially charged atmosphere of the Civil Rights-era US South in which she grew up, examining the various forms of silencing that she grappled with as a Black mixed-race Southern girl, and later, woman.

By infusing her poetics of loss with Southern history, the history of the Civil War and Southern segregation, and grounding them within the landscapes of the South, Trethewey shows how these forms of Southern loss are forms of trauma—Southern trauma. The trauma that haunts the collection is both personal and collective; while the loss of Trethewey’s mother is deeply personal, as is the racial violence and discrimination that she and her family suffered, these experiences also speak of the broader culture of violence in the twentieth-century South—violence against Black women and against African Americans more generally. The experiences of violence and erasure—the erasure of her mother’s abuse and her story, in death, resonating against the erasure of

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138 According to an interview with Jennifer Chang, it was this life-altering tragedy that initially compelled Trethewey towards poetry as a way to parse out her feelings and make sense of what had happened (“Public Life of Poetry”).
Trethewey’s own embodied experience as a Black mixed-race Southern woman, and each resonating against the erasure of Black Southern history from the official narratives—are figured as part of this larger pattern of racial violence embedded within Southern culture, a pattern that, as Trethewey shows us, is integral to US Southern history as it has been recorded.

Within the grand narrative that has dominated conceptions of the South in the national imaginary since the early twentieth century, Southern loss has been associated with the defeat of the Confederacy (and with it the end of chattel slavery) signaled by the end of the Civil War. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes, citing the Southern poet Robert Penn Warren, that moment of defeat was, for the white South, “as foundational and consecrating as the crucifixion . . . In the moment of death, the Confederacy entered upon its immortality” (58). That loss and the mythification of the South that it heralded in many ways came to provide the justification for the South’s continued existence. Loss and defeat thus became central to the dominant Southern story, even as that story—shaped in large part by the Southern Agrarians139—refigured that loss as a sign of the Confederacy’s “nobility.” This narrative of the South, while it has undergone challenges in recent decades, nonetheless remains the dominant narrative even today for many.

What is missing from this narrative of white loss in the South is, of course, the myriad forms of loss experienced by Southern Blacks, Native Americans, and other marginalized populations in the South. For Southern Blacks, this includes, though is not limited to, the losses experienced by enslaved Africans forced to leave their homes and

139 The Southern Agrarians were a group of Southern writers and intellectuals, mostly male and most of them associated with Vanderbilt University, who sought to create a dominant narrative of the “noble” South in the 1920s and ‘30s through their writing.
families to come to America; the many lives lost during the Middle Passage and to the
violences of slavery and its afterlife; the loss of freedom and dignity suffered by enslaved
peoples and their children and ancestors forced to live in the shadow of slavery; the
frequent loss of family members and loved ones due to the reality and ever-present threat
of family separations during slavery; the disproportionate rates of incarceration of Black
men and women post-Reconstruction up through the present as a continuation of the
threat of family separations; the loss of land acquired during Reconstruction by former
slaves and free Blacks due to the greed and exploitation of more powerful whites; and the
loss and erasure of Black lives and Black stories from Southern history. The remnants
and resonances of all of these and other forms of Black loss continue in various iterations
into the present day, described by Saidiya Hartman as the “afterlife of slavery” (Lose
Your Mother 6). And yet, this pattern of loss continues to be figured outside of a Southern
narrative.

While certainly not all of these forms of Black loss are geographically or
culturally specific to the South—even chattel slavery and its effects were not confined to
the South—the South was considered the primary territory of slavery in the US, and it is
where the legacy of racial violence against American Blacks has been most prominent
and, arguably, where this legacy of violence and exploitation continues most forcefully in
the present. It is also where the erasure of Black life, foundational to the flourishing of
the South for centuries, from the official histories is most pronounced. As Trethewey
herself has pointed out, and as has been brought to national attention in recent years, the
South is home to many of the monuments to Confederate soldiers and battles that still
stand as evidence of the fight to continue to hold slaves—evidence which itself enacts a
kind of symbolic form of racialized violence. Few monuments, as Trethewey notes, exist to commemorate the Black Southerners who fought against the Confederacy for the freedom of so many. Their stories, and the stories of many Black Southerners have been virtually erased from the archives. Plantations where slaves once worked the land still exist across the South, many turned into historic sites where tourists come to listen to revisionist histories that still today proclaim the honor and nobility of the Southern cause. As the recent 1619 Project exposes, Black farmers in the South continue to face racist exploitation that robs them of their land. That is all to say, these losses, even as they can be considered as forms of Black loss, can and should also be understood through the rubric of Southern loss. Yet it is precisely these forms of Black loss that are, that must be, erased from the dominant narrative of the South in order to uphold the nostalgic version of the South that so many white Southerners and others in this country continue to remain invested in—this ideal of the noble (white) South not defined by loss, whose only loss or ‘defeat,’ the loss of the Civil War, has long since been refigured as a mark of its magnanimity.

Through her poetry, Trethewey frames the different forms of Black loss that she explores in the collection as forms of Southern trauma—trauma that is integrally connected to the nation’s racialized histories of violence as well as to the specific region and culture of the US South. This framing of trauma is evident in part through the dialectic of presence and absence that runs through the poems, which, according to Cathy Caruth, marks the language of trauma (Unclaimed Experience 6). This dialectic is evidenced in the poems’ struggle to give shape to a loss that cannot be measured and form to the formless abyss of longing. Through exploration of the tension between voice
and silence, visibility and erasure, and frequent figuration of departures and returns, these poetics attempt to grasp at something that remains just out of reach. Not only the poems themselves but the form and structure of the collection tell a story of Southern trauma through their movement back and forth in time and shifting perspectives, through the way that the history of the Native Guard disrupts the narrative of Trethewey’s mother and her own life, haunting those narratives, showing how the violence, losses, and erasures that the Native Guard and other African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were subject to are continuous with more contemporary instances of violence, loss, and erasure in the South. These experiences, spanning centuries and generations, index a culture of trauma and loss in the South—a ‘tear in the social fabric’ and a crisis of meaning and identity that continues to pervade the question of what it means to be Southern.

The poetry in Native Guard explores how these affective histories of loss and trauma are inscribed onto the bodies of Black Southerners. In doing so, the poems also index the ways in which these histories are mapped onto and embedded within the landscapes of the South, which are integrally bound up with those inhabit this region. As such, they present a vision of space (bodily and geographic space), in relation to the US South and these histories of Southern trauma, as mutually constitutive with temporality and the construction of identity—as what Doreen Massey describes as the

140 In Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (1997), Avery Gordon talks about how the past can exist within the present as a kind of haunting.
141 In Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Making of African American Identity (2001), Ron Eyerman defines collective trauma as a “tear in the social fabric” and a “loss of identity and meaning” (2).
142 Thadious Davis refers to the space in Trethewey’s poetry as “apertural space” (space that opens), arguing that Trethewey “manipulates” apertural space, “so that it is sometimes a slit, torn or sliced with the violence of a blade . . . At other times . . . a gap between the inside and the outside of structures or relationships . . . At other times . . . the hole through which the liminal is made possible” (61).
“product of interrelations,” constituted through interactions and materializing as “a meeting up of histories” and contemporaneous heterogeneities (4). According to Massey, space is always under construction, always in process. Likewise, the bodily spaces that Trethewey maps are anything but static; they hold and circulate affective histories of Southern trauma, registering the intersections of these histories and, in doing so, showing how Southern identity (the identity of the poet and those in her poems) is forged through an affective experience of loss and a relation to place and history that is dynamic, ambivalent, and complex.

Through her figuration of the bodies of Black Southerners as landscapes of loss, Trethewey maps what Katherine McKittrick calls a “Black geography.” Black geographies, McKittrick explains, exist both within and outside of traditional spaces and places, “[locating] and [speaking] back to the geographies of modernity, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism” (Demonic Grounds 6). They map the ways in which the suppression/oppression of Blackness has been implicated in the construction of space and place, but also the ways in which Black bodies, lives, and knowledges have created and mapped lived and imaginary spaces, spaces of resistance and of struggle whose stories are not limned and limited by the dictates of whiteness. Trethewey’s exploration of the South and Southern identity shows how these figurations have been marked or shaped both physically and symbolically by forms of racial violence against African Americans and the erasure of Black narratives—how these affective histories of racialized trauma have shaped understanding of the South and what it means to be Southern. But her poetics also open up space for those histories of erasure and the narratives embedded within them, highlighting stories of loss—of absence and erasure but also of presence,
rich vivid life—and showing how these stories have, also and indelibly, shaped the
geography of the South. In mapping this Black geography of the South, Trethewey
excavates the creative potential of loss,143 illuminating the ways that memory, through the
recall of a “black absented presence,”144 can make visible and possible new sites of being
and conceptions of place, which, even as infused with forgetfulness, exist as lived and
livable in the past and present.

In the readings that follow, I trace Trethewey’s mappings of these bodies marked
by loss, spaces inscribed with erasure and forgetfulness but also with memory and life
(Black absented presence), moving from a consideration of the poems’ engagement with
time, space, and identity to the ways in which violence, loss, and erasure are inscribed
onto the Southern bodies and landscapes that inhabit the collection to a consideration of
the ways in which history is inscribed upon the surface of bodies and how bodies can
serve as monuments to lost histories. In doing so, I read the poems through their dialectic
of presence and absence (a hallmark of the trauma that they bear witness to) and through
the ways that they figure absence, erasure, and loss but also through the ways in which
they figure not only the remains of that loss but the fullness of life and presence and
possibility.

143 As David Eng and David Kazanjian note in their introduction to the edited collection Loss: A Politics of
Mourning, Walter Benjamin identified two versions of loss—one which “moves and creates,” the other
which “slackens and lingers” (2). The essays in their book examine these different sides of loss, exploring
mourning as “a creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and histo-
ry” (2).
144 McKittrick explains this concept as such: “The spatial dilemma—between memory and forgetfulness—
produces what has been called a black absented presence. Absented presence is evident in several black and
black feminist narratives that outline how processes of displacement erase histories and geographies, which
are, in fact, present, legitimate, and experiential. The site of memory, then, suggests that erasure is lived
and livable through the past and the present. The site of memory displays and utters new sites of being, and
a different sense of place, as they are embedded with forgetfulness” (Demonic Grounds 32).
“Theories of Time and Space”: An Affective Journey into History

*Native Guard* is separated into three sections, each bearing their own epigraph. Outside of those sections at the beginning is a single poem, “Theories of Time and Space” (p. 1), written in the second person, which unfolds as a mapping of a journey both to a concrete place—Ship Island, an island off the coast of Trethewey’s hometown of Gulfport, Mississippi—and into the collection itself, imparting to the reader a set of spatial and philosophical coordinates for engaging with the poems inside. This poem, which evokes material and symbolic histories of racialized violence, figures the collection itself as engaged in the construction and production of affective history, as an interactive encounter between poet and reader—an encounter with histories of loss and erasure that will constitute a new writing of history.

“Theories of Time and Space” enacts a repetition of Trethewey’s own journey toward the creation of the poems in the collection: she has described her inspiration for writing *Native Guard* as coming to her during a trip, some years previously, to Ship Island, which housed a prison for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. The Native Guard, the all-Black Union battalion for which the collection is named, was charged with keeping watch over these prisoners. What struck Trethewey about this visit, she notes, was the plaque placed at the fort by the Daughters of the Confederacy commemorating the fallen Confederates, while nowhere was there comparable acknowledgement of the Black soldiers who also gave their lives to this country. Neither was this history mentioned on the tour, nor included in any of the historical-promotional documents (Rowell 1032). This “buried history” living history of bodies literally buried in the

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145 In her 2004 interview with Charles Henry Rowell, Trethewey states, as part of her explanation of the genesis of *Native Guard*, “I started thinking about that, about how right there, across the water, not too far,
folds of the past through their exclusion in language—was the initial incentive for
Trethewey’s subsequent research into the island’s connection to the war and the soldiers
who were stationed there, research which eventually informed the production of *Native
Guard*. As such, “Theories of Time and Space,” through its literal mapping of the journey
the poet takes to Ship Island, exists as a form of affective remapping of the poet’s journey
into a confrontation with loss and historical erasure that is both personal and collective.

The poem begins with the lines, “You can get there from here, though / there’s no
 Going home. Everywhere you go will be somewhere you’ve never been.” In this way, the
poem from the outset lays out a theory of time and space and identity as mutually
constitutive, suggesting that the construction of identity is a continuous process
concurrent with movement in space and time. The identities of the poet and reader,
mirrored in the poem, which is narrated in the second person and seemingly addressed to
the reader of the collection, are imagined as continuously evolving, constructed by and
through the affective histories that shape them—it is the journey, an affective journey of
meaning making, that produces change in the individual, and it is for this reason that, for
the poet and the reader, “there’s no going home.” As Massey puts it in her study of space,
“The truth is that you can never simply ‘go back,’ to home or to anywhere else. When
you get ‘there’ the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed”
(124). Even where we may attempt an effort at return—and certainly these poems show
us many of those—we are never able to return quite to the way that something was

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an hour or so out from my hometown, there was yet another buried history that I think would've been very
important to have known when I was growing up and spending the Fourth of July on that island, a little
black girl in Mississippi. So that's where I began. I started researching the Civil War, black soldiers, and
Ship Island” (1032).
before. There is a sense of loss to be felt in this impossibility of return, in the simultaneous invocation and foreclosure of home.

It is this sense of loss—the loss of a familiar version of oneself, the loss of what is known—that initially unsettles the reader’s bodily relation to self in this poem, but which, at the same time, opens that relation up through the promise of an affective journey into language, marked by a crossing of affective histories, that holds the potential to remake the individual. By figuring the reader as actively engaged in the poetic process of meaning making, Trethewey from the very outset constructs an affective relation between reader, text, and poet. Thus, through her reclamation of this “buried terrain,” her excavation of the forgotten, and her figuring, through the voyage to Ship Island, of the centrality of Black bodies and subjects to the places and spaces, the landscapes, of the South, Trethewey maps a Black geography of crossing, realized through the way in which it invites the reader into a poetics of Black Southern loss that is about more than erasure and displacement—that is also about movement and discovery, about Black resistance to erasure evidenced through the poet’s own words, about an active process of meaning making that recognizes and refigures these affective histories.

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146 McKittrick argues that Black geographies, “comprise philosophical, material, imaginary, and representational trajectories; each of these trajectories, while interlocking, is also indicative of multiscalar processes, which impact upon and organize the everyday. Black geographies are located within and outside the boundaries of traditional spaces and places; they expose the limitations of transparent space through black social particularities and knowledges; they locate and speak back to the geographies of modernity, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism; they illustrate the ways in which the raced, classed, gendered, and sexual body is often an indicator of spatial options and the ways in which geography can indicate racialized habitation patterns; they are places and spaces of social, economic, and political denial and resistance; they are fragmented, subjective, connective, invisible, visible, unacknowledged, and conspicuously positioned; they have been described as, among other things, rhizomorphic, a piece of the way, diasporic, blues terrains, spiritual, and Manichaean. The complexity of these geographies is found in the ways they reveal how ideas—black and nonblack—get turned into lived and imaginary spaces that are tied to geographic organization” (Demonic Grounds 7).
On the Middle Passage as a Form of Crossing

In addition to serving as the point of origin for the collection, Ship Island refers to a real, material place—the island, as noted earlier, that housed a prison for Confederate soldiers, watched over by the Native Guard during the Civil War, an island with a rich history of Black resistance that has been erased by the official records. But the image of the ship that its name conjures also serves a metaphorical function, calling up another journey, another crossing marked by loss whose absence, I argue, haunts the collection: that of the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage was historically a trade route used from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries for the transport of millions of Africans forced into slavery across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. The conditions that enslaved Africans were kept in on these voyages were horrific, dehumanizing, and many died along the way.

A collective historical trauma that retains symbolic value within Black culture and American culture more broadly even today, the Middle Passage takes form as a crossing—perhaps the inaugural form of crossing—and is both a painful and powerful symbol of disruption and liminality. Hortense Spillers has described the Africans on this voyage as “suspended in the ‘oceanic’” of “undifferentiated identity” (“Mama’s Baby” 72). She writes, “removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all” (“Mama’s Baby” 72).

Identifying the Middle Passage as a form of Black geography, McKittrick describes it as “a body of water and time on a body of water, which is interconnected to black imaginative work and different forms of black politics and black travels and exiles . . . It is a geography that matters because it carries with it (and on it) all sorts of historically painful social encounters and all sorts of contemporary social negotiations” (Demonic Grounds 19).
Spillers uses this figuration to suggest that the Middle Passage offered for enslaved Africans a “counter-narrative to notions of the domestic” (“Mama’s Baby” 72), which enabled the inscription of new familial and social structures whose racialized and gendered dimensions were forged in the wake of this world-shattering brutality.

According to Spillers, then, the Middle Passage is more than a now-distant historical event, even one whose horrific abuses render it a source of historical, collective trauma for those descended from slaves. For Spillers, it also represents a moment of ontological incoherence, of symbolic rupture—a moment whose absolute negativity gives rise to relational paradigms existing outside of the limitations of the white Western imagination.

Though the Middle Passage itself is not directly cited in *Native Guard*, which is rooted more deeply within the locale of the South, the repeated references to crossing throughout the collection call up this history of collective trauma; and the ontological violence of its occurrence marks it as a form of affective history that haunts the collection through the profound loss at its core—a collective loss of ancestral home and identity, of an integral part of oneself and one’s history, that prefigures, and, one could argue, undergirds (even unconsciously), Trethewey’s own feelings of alienation within the South (her own affective relation to the South). Yet while the Middle Passage exists as an emblem of Black loss (in Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, for instance, Hartman retraces the Middle Passage in hopes of alleviating the pain of loss that she associates with this lost “home”), at the same time, this passage, this *crossing*, marks the precarious beginning of a new history—the history of Blackness in the Americas.

This history, we might imagine, is that which waits to be written, in “Theories of Time and Space,” in the “random blank pages” of the memory book that the reader
carries with them on their journey—the only thing they are able to bring with them (16). Though borne of violence and deeply painful, this history of trauma, the collection suggests, is formative for the poet, as someone whose body, inscribed with a racialized narrative of illegitimacy by the state, exists in its own state of liminality in relation to belonging within the South. As the poems in the collection show us, the body of the poet serves as a kind of testament to these affective histories of trauma and of loss that have shaped her—these histories of being in-between, both literally and symbolically, are inscribed onto her body and her affective life through the feelings of loss and alienation that haunt her. In the readings that follow, we see how the poet’s body and the bodies of others in the collection (her mother, Black Union soldiers, other African Americans erased from the history of the South) are figured as testaments to these histories of violence, trauma, and loss, but also how they serve as monuments commemorating those that are lost. And we see how histories are inscribed on the surface of bodies, how bodies write histories of loss and erasure—the history being written, as we read, in the blank pages of the memory book.

Landscapes of Violence, Loss and Erasure: Affective Histories Inscribed on the Body

Southern Landscapes and the ‘Buried Terrain of the Past’

In charting the trajectory that will take the reader to her eventual destination where she will board the boat for Ship Island, “Theories of Time and Space” maps a landscape of erasure, using figurations of the South’s physical geography to show how the complicated, violent past gets covered over. Trethewey’s description of this journey sees the reader head down Mississippi’s Highway 49, after which she is directed to “cross
over” a beach where sand has been artificially deposited to conceal the mangrove swamp that once existed there, the “buried terrain of the past.” This journey as a form of crossing thus opens up an affective history of burial, of covering things over—of erasure and loss of that which does not fit the sanitized image of the South that the “man-made” beach represents. The description of the beach replacing swamp shows how the landscape of the South, rather than remaining fixed, has shifted with the passage of time—hence there being “no going home,” no way to return to things exactly as they once were. And yet, notwithstanding the implication that this past is not recoverable ‘as it once was,’ the poem’s recognition of the thick swamp that once existed there (that might still exist somewhere underneath) suggests that, despite the landscape’s shifting facade, the past—these affective histories of Southern trauma, of violence and erasure—remains an integral part of that landscape. Its “buried terrain,” Trethewey suggests, is never definitively gone, but rather embedded into the very character of the land.

As in the epigraph that precedes this poem, in which the Southern poet Charles Wright describes memory as a cemetery, the dead “everywhere under foot,” the Southern landscape is thus figured as integrally bound up with history and memory, not only metaphorically but materially—the “buried terrain” of the swamp still exists underneath the man-made beach, just as the Black bodies of the dead, the forgotten and “set aside,” lie underneath the ground, or have since turned to dirt and become part of the land that Southerners now walk upon. Thus, the geographical landscapes that anchor Native Guard, whether the beach or Ship Island or Mississippi itself, are sites through

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148 The epigraph to the collection comes from the Southern poet Charles Wright’s poem “Meditation on Form and Measure”: “Memory is a cemetery/I’ve visited once or twice, white/ubiquitous and the set aside/everywhere under foot . . .”
which affective histories of Southern trauma circulate, sites whose encounter opens up these histories. These landscapes, this poem argues, contain within them the living marks of absence and erasure, the material evidence of what has been erased from the history of these spaces even as it lives on in those spaces themselves and in the affective histories that continue to circulate and stick to these spaces, and the affective histories that these spaces evoke. The past exists unseen yet is made visible in this poem, on this journey. Like the dense and tangled roots of the mangrove swamp, it is thick and complicated, and once we enter in, as we must do in order to engage with the poems in this collection, “there is no going home.”

**Bodily Inscriptions of Loss, Violence, and Erasure**

This inability to go back, to return to something or someone exactly as they were, or as you yourself were, is fundamental to the sense of loss that both haunts and guides the collection—the loss, suffered on a personal level by the poet and on a collective level by African Americans in the South, and by the South and nation more broadly, of an integral part of oneself and one’s history. This is explored further in the first section of the collection, which comes after “Theories of Time and Space” and includes the poem “Letter,” and which explores Trethewey’s profound grief and frustration at the death of her mother, who was brutally murdered by Trethewey’s abusive former stepfather while she was away in college. The ten poems that comprise this section examine the finality of loss—the loss of a Southern Black woman (Trethewey’s mother) to male violence, a form

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149 Katherine McKittrick argues that the built environment “privileges whiteness,” thus the “man-made beach” can be understood as a whitening of the landscape, an attempt to beautify/falsify the complicated and violent past that the thick and tangled swamp represents (*Demonic Grounds* 6).

150 While the beach is a real beach lining the Mississippi coast, it also exists here as a material manifestation of the power of memory’s embodied desire not to live in pain, a desire that can make it difficult, as Heather Love discusses in her work on queer affect, to accept the past as “something living—dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present” (10).
of loss that is in its own way native to the US South and connected to a collective history of violence against Black women, but also the loss of one’s mother (a part of oneself) and the concomitant difficulty and necessity of moving on in the wake of that loss. Trethewey shows the bodily and affective dimensions of this loss—how the loss of her mother is registered as a feeling in her own body and in her memories of her mother’s body, which carried that loss already in it—posing questions about the (im)possibility of measuring loss and how one can heal from a loss that is embedded within, a loss that involves a piece of oneself. In this way, Trethewey figures her mother’s body, and her own, as testaments to this history of loss—to histories of racialized violence in the South and to the erasure of these histories.

The poem “What is Evidence” (p. 11), in particular, shows how histories of violence (and erasure) are inscribed onto the body. This poem, through its title, asks the question of what bears evidence to the poet’s mother’s life and, implied within this, to her experience of abuse. The response to this question unfolds as a series of negations: “not the fleeting bruises she’d cover/ with makeup, a dark patch as if imprint / of a scope she’d pressed her eye too close to . . . nor the quiver / in the voice she’d steady, leaning / into a pot of bones on the stove . . . Not / the teeth she wore in place of her own.” Instead, what provides that evidence is, “Only the landscape of her body—splintered / clavicle, pierced temporal—her thin bones / settling a bit each day, the way all things do.” These descriptions of her mother, in life, link the body of a Black woman to the landscape of the South. In so doing, it shows how violence against Black women is an inextricable part of the South’s history, woven into the land and landscape just as it is inscribed onto the body in the form of bruises, missing teeth, a gesture of hesitancy. Yet even as her
mother’s body is figured as a testament to this violence, a surface on which this violence is inscribed, it is also a testament to the erasure of the violence through her mother’s covering over her bruises, the fake teeth she wears, and the way she steadies her voice. Just as the man-made beach covers the swamp in “Theories of Time and Space,” covering over a complicated history of violence, so, too, the covering up of the violence the poet’s mother has endured enacts a kind of erasure of that violence—an erasure of the history of violence that is evoked by her mother’s experience.

The repeated negation of these markers of violence in response to the question of what bears evidence suggests that the erasure of these inscriptions of violence makes them unable to provide evidence. Perhaps, too, these representations of her mother performing actions of the everyday are too ephemeral, too fleeting, to provide evidence of that life. Bruising, a quiver in the voice . . . these do not last. Instead, it is the body that is all that remains after death, the body empty of its gestures. Only her bones, broken and splintered, will be left when she is buried—only her bones as evidence of the violence that she suffered. These bones become a literal part of the landscape, “settling a bit” in their grave—her mother’s body a part of the land, settling as the land settles, as time passes, and things shift. The poem thus raises questions: What does it mean to provide evidence? What evidence is needed to attest to a life lived, a person who was living and now is lost, gone? What kind of evidence registers the truth, the fullness, of that life? The answer seems to be nothing, not the fleeting memories of that body, her mannerisms—only the physical evidence, her bones that bear the scars of her abuse. As her body becomes part of the land, it literally becomes part of the landscape of the South, but at the same time nothing is left behind to mark her life—just as nothing was left to
mark the lives of the Black Union soldiers at Ship Island. In this way, her erasure from history is already prefigured, not only by the way that this erasure is written onto her body in the way that she covers over the marks of the violence she has experienced as a way to hide her shame but also by these histories of erasure that preceded her.

While “What is Evidence” maps the inscription of violence and erasure on the body, another poem in the section, “After Your Death” (p. 13), explores the inscription of loss. This poem which comes directly after “Letter” in the first section, shows how the loss experienced after the poet’s mother’s death is registered in the spaces that stand testament to her loss, including the intimate, domestic spaces of everyday life, whose emptiness is mirrored in the poet’s body. The absence created by the fact of death and loss is figured in the first lines of the poem: “First, I emptied the closets of your clothes,” Trethewey writes, “threw out the bowl of fruit, bruised / from your touch, left empty the jars / you bought for preserves.” Loss is figured spatially as a kind of emptiness/empty space apparent in everything—the closets, the bowl, the jars—the bruise on the fruit existing as an echo of the bruises on her mother’s body, no longer there. The emptiness figured by these spaces speaks of the fact that they were once full—the closet filled with her mother’s clothes, the fruit that her fingers touched, leaving their imprint upon it, the jars that she imagined filling with the preserves that she would make151—and reflects an emptiness felt by the poet.

151 As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian write, “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (2). What remains here are these objects and domestic spaces, cataloguing loss through their emptiness.
The poet’s affective experience of loss as a form of emptiness felt within the body is figured through a depiction of the natural world, in the fig that she plucks off a tree outside. The fig, symbol of knowledge and a loss of innocence, is “half eaten, the other side / already rotting, or—like another I plucked / and split open—being taken from the inside: / a swarm of insects hollowing it.” This rot can be seen as an indicator of a kind of loss of innocence, the loss of innocence that occurs when one loses a loved one and is forced to confront the depths of that loss. Not only the poet’s grief but her seeming guilt becomes visible in the following line: “I’m too late, / again, another space emptied by loss.” Her lateness to notice the fruit being devoured becomes, through the use of the word “again,” her inability to save her mother. We see, then, that, for the poet, the loss of her mother is carried within her own body, experienced as a relationship with time and with space, and as a kind of repetition, a repeated and continual emptying of the spaces that surround her to match the space within, each echoing with the hollowness of loss.

Yet even while the poem shows the emptiness of loss that exists after death, pervading the spaces that remain and exposing the way that nothing seems right, it ends with a note of hopefulness: “Tomorrow, the bowl I have yet to fill.” This gestures to the empty bowl of fruit that the poet had thrown out and provides a testament to the fact that, even though her mother is gone, life, for her, continues. According to Caruth, there is a kind of “double telling” at work in narratives of trauma, an “oscillation” between the story of the “unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Unclaimed Experience 7).152 That is, surviving is its own form of trauma, intimately linked to the trauma of the loss—for the survivor of trauma, they may be one

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152 This is resonant with David L. Eng’s and David Kazanjian’s claim, in their introduction to Loss: A Politics of Mourning, that loss cannot be separated from what remains; it is, in other words, relational.
and the same. Surviving, especially after the loss of someone who was a part of one’s sense of self, is painful, lonely. But time moves on; one must go on. There are things that must be done and spaces emptied by loss that will be filled again. Thus, even as the death of her mother is registered as a bodily inscription of loss and absence, of emptiness, this figuring of the empty bowl as waiting to be filled hints at a sense of futurity, possibility, that inheres within this loss.

The sense of both foreclosure and possibility that is conveyed in this depiction of loss also comes through in this first section in the poem “What the Body Can Say” (p. 9), which contrasts the readability of some bodies and gestures with that of others, exploring the interplay between certainty and uncertainty as it pertains to the body. “How easy it is to read this body’s language” the poet writes of a statue of a man on his knees covering his eyes, which she reads as an expression of grief. Even as she acknowledges that, in terms of reading gesture, “What matters is context”—her own context reads this as grief, while his placement in the courtyard of a divinity school makes it more likely he is asking something of God—she finds the gestures immortalized in this statue legible. So, too, other “gestures we’ve come to know,” such as the raised thumb, which, depending on context, can be understood as a “symbol of agreement” or a “request / for a ride.” But what about when there is no easily identifiable context, as there is not for many human expressions? When you cannot tell what the body is saying by the location it is in or the specific gesture—when the gesture of the body is unknown or even unknowable?

These are the questions that surround a gesture of her mother’s, which continues to elude her: “But what was my mother saying / that day not long before her death—her face tilted up / at me, her mouth falling open, wordless, just as / we open our mouths in
church to take in the wafer, / meaning communion?” There is something that Trethewey senses in that gesture, an unspoken plea. Communion indicates not only a taking of the wafer but a sharing of intimate thoughts or feelings, thus Trethewey imagines that is what her mother was on the verge of doing, what she might have done. And yet—there is not enough context to know, for this gesture is not one that we have come to know; it belongs to her mother, to that moment. Indeed, there will never be enough context to read that gesture, for the moment cannot be replicated—her mother is dead. And so she is left with only the knowledge that “my mother wanted something I still can’t name.” Whether the poet cannot name that want because she does not know it or because she does not have the words to express what it was is unclear, perhaps it is both, but regardless, she is left with only this memory, this imprint of her mother’s body, her mother’s face turned toward her, mouth open as if she is about to speak.

This poem, then, figures the foreclosure of a certain kind of knowledge that comes with death. The absence of the physical body makes its speech indecipherable. And yet, even in the obscurity of this gesture, which will remain forever unknown, her mother’s body speaks; even when it cannot be understood fully, it speaks—it speaks of mystery, of desire, of wanting (to say) something. Perhaps what really matters, then, is how it’s read, how meaning is made in that space between one body and the next. Even as she claims not to know how to read it, she reads her mother’s body, and in that reading she creates her mother anew (motives, possibilities, stories)—a bodily signifier both of loss and of connection, frozen in this gesture of possibility.
Home, Ambivalence, Alienation

The histories of violence and erasure and felt sense of loss that these poems evoke is inscribed onto bodies in these poems through the figuring of presence and absence, of physicality and gesture. But this loss, an affective response to histories of racialized violence and erasure in the South, is also figured through depictions of home and departure and return, figurations that show how this loss of the mother and the affective histories of loss that it calls up are inscribed on the body through their destabilization of sense of home and through this sense of perpetual movement. The poem “The Southern Crescent” (pp. 5–6), the first in the section, opens with an image of the poet’s mother boarding a train in 1959 when she is sixteen, leaving Mississippi, “the very idea of home.” She is going to meet her father, who, it seems, never shows up. In the second part of the poem, Trethewey is riding that same train with her mother—its last run—remembering another time they rode it together to meet her own father and how the train derailed: “Again, the uncertainty / of it all—that trip, too, gone wrong.”

As such, this figuring of repeated departures indexes a kind of failure, of hope and possibility lost, of the inability to leave home. Yet this time, the third time riding that line, the poet’s mother “is sure we can leave home, bound only / for whatever awaits us.” This determination, desperation, is reflected by her face in the window; but even as her face is “dark and certain,” its existence as only a reflection marks its tenuousness. Home here seems to be connected to the past, and leaving home is about leaving the (painful) past behind, discovering possibility in the unknown of the future—though the inability to shed the past from ourselves may explain the series of failed departures.
This resonates with Saidiya Hartman’s journey to Africa, recounted in Lose Your Mother, in an effort to escape, or soothe, the painfulness of the loss she feels as a Black American in the United States, a loss she describes as bodily, as, “the kind of weariness old folks say you can feel in your bones” (198). “It’s just the feeling that something is missing back home,” her American friend explains to a chief in Ghana (199). A hole—but not the kind that can be filled and will then go away, not a hurt that will stop hurting. This affective sense of loss, for Hartman, is integrally connected to home and to history, to never fully feeling at home in the country of her birth and never feeling fully connected to her history. “To lose your mother,” Hartman writes, figuring the loss of Africa, home of origin, as a form of mother loss, “was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past” (85).

For Trethewey, the loss of the mother is a real, material and maternal loss rather than a metaphorical one, but it, too, is figured through its disruption of identity, through the way that it fragments the past. Perhaps that is why, while Hartman leaves one home, the United States, in search of another, Africa, where she hopes to feel a sense of belonging that she does not feel in the United States precisely because her sense of the US as home is so bound up with loss, Trethewey’s poetics figure a departure from home that never seems to go anywhere, instead returning again and again to the same train to reenact the same journey toward disappointment—the same disappointment that Hartman is ultimately faced with when she discovers the impossibility of filling in the blank spaces whose stories she sought to recover, when she discovers that Africa cannot be for her the Mother that she longed for, one which, it turns out, does not exist (135).
The conflicted relationship to home, as connected to Mississippi and the South more broadly, that the first section in the collection evinces marks it as a site of ambivalence. Home carries within it histories of violence and a sense of unbelonging, even as these histories of violence and of loss are inscribed upon the landscapes and the bodies of Black Southerners such that they are impossible to escape, to leave behind. As Thadious Davis argues, Trethewey’s conflicted relation to the South has “much to do with her racial designation and with her connection to the absences and erasures of black contribution to Southern cultural life and historical spaces” (58). That is, Trethewey’s own vexed sense of identity, as a mixed-race, Black-identified Southern woman, is bound up with these cultural and historical absences and erasures—with the erasure of the way that Black people and Blackness shaped the South. The third section in the collection, which focuses on Trethewey’s relation to the South and to her own body and racialized identity explores this ambivalence and the sense of bodily alienation that inheres in the sense of South as home.

This section begins with a poem, “Pastoral” (p. 35), that is a dream: Trethewey, in blackface, is standing with the Fugitive Poets, waiting to have their picture taken. “Say ‘race,’ ” the photographer orders, and she tells them her father is white. In this way, Trethewey is shown masking her own mixed-race identity with a parody of her Blackness—a layering of racial inscriptions that exposes the perversity of race relations and racial history in the South and shows how this is felt on the poet’s own body, making her strange to herself. “You don’t hate the South?” the poets ask her. This question remains unanswered.
The sense of alienation in one’s homeland that is depicted in this poem is further explored in the following poem, entitled “Miscegenation” (p. 36), which shows how the violence of the law and the US nation-state is inscribed onto Trethewey’s body through her categorization as “illegitimate” based on her parents’ interracial union. “Miscegenation” recounts the journey that the poet’s parents took in 1965 across state lines from Mississippi into Ohio in order to marry, two years before Loving v. Virginia would overturn laws prohibiting interracial marriage across all fifty states. Trethewey writes of how they “crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name / begins with a sound like sin, the sound of wrong—mis in Mississippi.” On one hand, we can read this through the framework of the crossroads, imagining this crossing of state lines as a form of liberation or escape from the embodied discursive violence enacted upon them by the letter of the law, which denies them their mutual desire and their relationship its humanity—though, to be sure, this plays out differently on the bodies and persons of Trethewey’s Black mother and white father. In this way, the geographic crossing is promised as a crossing that will be echoed affectively through the very fabrics of Trethewey’s parents’ bodies, shaping these bodies, changing their meanings, rendering their union legitimate.

Yet, at the same time, Trethewey’s deconstruction of state names here makes apparent the incapacity of state boundaries constructed through language to supersede the value system always already embedded within that language—the language of whiteness through which the naming of these legal geographies is enacted. Even as this crossing

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153 One of the central tenets of Ahmed’s 2004 book The Cultural Politics of Emotion is that bodies are shaped by the affective forces that act upon them (see footnote 15). Here I am repurposing Ahmed’s argument to think about the interchange between the external, and internal and bodily as it occurs through an affective, linguistic relation.
into Ohio provides her parents with a nominal legitimacy, Trethewey shows how the accusation of illegitimacy follows them through the names of the places that they travel to—through the language of wrongness, ‘sin’ and ‘mis,’ that becomes tangible in the sensory dimension of these words, these names that mark artificial boundaries, boundaries that render some as belonging and others as alien. Thus, Trethewey shows the ontological violence that language can exert, which then translates to her own sense of self, marked by the violent language of “illegitimacy” and “miscegenation”—again the sound of wrong. She shows how that sense of being wrong, of occupying this fundamental state of wrongness that is inscribed upon her body through these terms, translated to her entire life. The parallel that the poem draws between the poet and Joe Christmas—a Faulkner character known for the extreme psychological distress his illegible mixed-race identity caused him—a parallel that is enshrined through her own naming, a name that means “Christmas child,” further emphasizes the pain that her illegitimate designation has caused her, this sense of constitutive loss, of a loss of something never fully had, that she experiences for having been denied legitimacy in and by her own home, a place that should have recognized and loved her yet did not.

This sense of loss, ambivalence, and alienation is carried into other poems in this section, figured as a kind of uncanny feeling—the sense of a simultaneous strangeness and familiarity. It is palpable, for instance, in the poem “Blond” (p. 39), in which Trethewey imagines what her life might have been like if she had been born blond, white passing, just as the wig given to her for Christmas allows her to become; as she dances in a “whirl of possibility,” her parents look on at their “suddenly strange child.” As a child, innocent, she did not recognize the absurdity, the pain, of that moment until years later.
But here, in this poem, it shows how alien she felt to herself, even then, to imagine that she might put on a wig and become someone else altogether, that she might leave behind her own racial identity—or perhaps in donning this wig, she embodies the contradictions of her mixed-race heritage and the stranger that it renders her even within her own home.

In addition to indexing the way that her ambivalent relation to the South is inscribed upon her Black, mixed-race body, this poem also registers a form of individual and collective erasure—the imagined erasure of the fact of her Blackness by this blond wig. Other poems in this section likewise show how the poet’s ambivalence toward the South and her own racialized identification makes her an instrument of her own erasure and of the erasure of Black history. In “Southern History” (p. 38), Trethewey describes a moment in her senior year history class when the teacher explains that “Before the war, they were happy,” and Trethewey sits silently guarding the lie. Likewise, “Incident” (p. 41) describes an ‘incident’ in which members of the KKK burned a cross on her family’s lawn—“We tell the story every year,” she opens and closes the poem with, yet, repeated within the poem: “Nothing really happened . . . No one came.” Even as they bear witness to this (hi)story, it is described through its silencing, through negation—a story that she cannot fully own, even as it is her own, a testament to the terror of silence and to the way in which the racial landscape of the South worked to silence the truth of Black experience.

The Problem of Writing History: History’s Inscription on the Body

The first and third sections of Native Guard show, through their respective explorations of the loss of Trethewey’s mother and the alienation of the poet, how
histories of violence, loss, and erasure are inscribed upon the bodies of Black Southerners and how these histories, as histories of loss that cannot be recuperated, are definitive, but, at the same time, as affective histories that continue to circulate, changeable. This seeming contradiction or conflict between the fixity of the past and its malleability and continued openness indexes a problem of writing history that becomes more apparent in the second and middle section of the collection, which moves outward, away from the personal history of the poet, to focus on the history of the Native Guard and the collective history of trauma of the erasure of Black lives and Black history from the narrative of the South. My reading of this section looks at the ways in which history is figured in relation to the bodies of Black Southerners, how history is inscribed upon the surface of the body, and what this means for the telling of histories of racialized trauma, violence, and erasure.

This section begins with a poem, “Pilgrimage” (pp. 19–20), about visiting the historical site of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River, and feeling its history living around and within the poet, its weight pressing down upon her as if the weight of a human body, holding her still. Here this history of violence is felt by the body not as part of her but as an oppressive force paralyzing her. From there, the section moves into a series of four poems, “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi” (pp. 21–24), set in the early 1900s, which appear to describe images taken from those times154—Black men, women, and children, children in

154 Trethewey’s first two collections of poetry, Domestic Work and Belloq’s Ophelia, each are inspired by archival photographs of Black people, particularly Black women, in the South whose stories have gone untold; these collections seek to tell those stories, imagining the inner lives of the subjects of those photographs. Though unconfirmed, it is likely that this short series of poems engages in similarly inspired imaginative work.
particular, denied their humanity, forgotten by history, resurrected in the poems as living beings. Thus, even as history itself forgets, its artifacts stand testament to lives lost and forgotten, to the violence of exclusion that these images register. This series of poems gives way to another, “Native Guard” (pp. 25–30)—the one for which the collection is named and which will be the focus of this section—which provides an imagined first-person window into the consciousness and experience of the men who fought in the all-Black Union regiment during the Civil War and yet whose presence is scarce within official records.

While these poems are concerned with the (racialized) nature of historical silences in the archives, Trethewey’s use of first-person narration to imagine and bring into being the voices of these forgotten Black soldiers rescripts the emptiness and the finality of loss outlined by the poems in the first section of the collection in relation to the poet’s mother. If loss there is portrayed as world shattering, unbreachable foreclosure, here it becomes the basis for the creative reimagining of these lives and events. Thus, even as these poems show the violence of Southern history as it is written on the bodies of Black Southerners, they also index the dilemma of writing history—the need or desire to memorialize these pieces of forgotten history balanced against the fact that history is a

155 As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian write in their introduction to the anthology Loss: The Politics of Mourning, “The politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history” (2). They cite Walter Benjamin’s argument about the productive potential of loss to theorize loss as a creative process, with melancholia providing a way of thinking about loss as a continuous process signifying an open and ongoing relationship with the past. Thus, while the first section of Native Guard, which focuses on the loss of Trethewey’s mother, seems to be more about coming to terms with that absence and limning the spaces where that loss makes itself felt, the middle section instead works to fill in those spaces of loss. Whereas the first section grapples with a recognition that there are pieces of the story, Trethewey’s mother’s story, that will remain forever inaccessible to her due to her mother’s death, this section (while it does also appear to acknowledge the inaccessibility of some aspects of this larger collective history), this section unfolds as a writing of the story, the stories, that have been erased.
living history, always changing as more multiplicities within it are uncovered. As such, they raise the question of what it means to rewrite history, to fill in the gaps and spaces in the official records. What kinds of change or transformation can this rewriting accomplish? What can be filled in, and what cannot (some things cannot, as Hartman discovers in her own attempt to fill those gaps)? How much of history is fixed, and how much is mutable? What are the limits of rewriting the past?

In asking these questions, this section considers writing, and particularly the writing of history, as a spatial practice—not only for the way that it is figured in this section through its material inscription on bodies and objects and through the spatial motif of crossing, but because of its implication/imbrication in the space-time-identity continuum. Within Trethewey’s poetics, space, time, and identity are mutually constitutive and always in process. As the collection in its entirety attests, histories do not fall solely within the domain of temporality but are integrally connected to place, space, and identity; they influence how we understand specific places, and they shape the present and future and the way that we understand ourselves. Likewise, our relationship to place and space and to our own sense of identity shapes the ways in which we understand history. The practice of writing, and rewriting, history can thus be understood as a practice of mapping/remapping spaces—geographic, psychological, structural, linguistic—and of bearing witness to what has occurred in those places and spaces so that it is not forgotten (so that it can continue to live in the bodies and minds of those proximate, physically or mentally, to these spaces of history). Writing history is an affective practice that is bound up with the construction of identity—affective history creates identity, creates bodies and surfaces, through the circulation of specific affects.
“Native Guard,” the longest poem in Trethewey’s collection, takes the form of a series of ten short vignettes, written as journal entries and dated from 1862 through 1865, the year the Civil War officially came to an end. The 1st Louisiana Native Guard was originally a Confederate troop made up of free persons of color founded in 1861 only to be disbanded the following year. Some of its former members then joined the Union Army’s 1st Louisiana Native Guard that was started in 1862. The majority of this regiment, however, was composed of escaped slaves, and by November of that year their numbers had grown so large that the Union organized second and third regiments. However, in 1863, these regiments were renamed the Corps d’Afrique, a renaming that appears in Trethewey’s poem as an attempt to devalue their claim to the South and the nation. This and the discrimination that these troops faced ultimately led to many abandoning the regiment. While the Native Guard, as an emblem of Black resistance to white supremacy, is an important piece of Black history, Black Southern history in particular, the stories of these men have long gone untold, as Trethewey initially observed on that formative trip to Ship Island.

The first vignette of the series, from November 1862, introduces its themes of memory and forgetting in its opening lines: “Truth be told, I do not want to forget / anything of my former life: the landscape’s / song of bondage—dirge in the river’s throat / where it churns into the Gulf, wind in trees / choked with vines . . .” (p. 25). These opening lines set up “Native Guard” as a testament to the will to remember as it confronts the power of historical forgetting—a testament to the difficulty and concomitant

157 Many of those who left the Native Guard/Corps d’Afrique eventually joined the United States Colored Troops of the Union Army, regiments in the U.S. Army comprised of Black and other minority soldiers.
necessity of remembering, or preserving, the “truth” that remains undocumented, perhaps undocumentable. Yet these lines also show how the truth of this history, these memories, are inscribed onto the Southern landscape: Trethewey’s personification of the landscape—the river’s “throat,” the “choking” of the vines—shows the ways in which these ostensibly natural formations are invested with the South’s long history of violence, as well as with a Black history of resistance—figured in the landscape’s slave song—located in the rhythms of the body as they map the beat of the land, dissolving the separation between embodied subject and its surrounding environment. These spatialized figurations ground the poem’s inquiry into writing history in the materiality of place and space—the space of the land and the space of the body.

Further on in the entry, the writing of history is explicitly invoked, figured as a form of bodily inscription: “I’ve reached / thirty-three with history of one younger / inscribed upon my back” (p. 25). The materiality of the still-existent scars of the violence this Black soldier has suffered thus signify temporally as they hold within them the history of their inscription—the history of racial violence that they bear witness to is also the history of the speaker’s life. Yet the poem suggests that this bodily inscription of history is not enough to withstand the capriciousness of memory, which Trethewey describes here as “flawed, changeful,” writing, “I now use ink / to keep record, a closed book, not the lure / of memory . . . that dulls the lash / for the master, sharpens it for the slave” (p. 25). What this suggests is that the history of violence written on the body of the enslaved is inadequate as historical record precisely because is it such an intensely

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158 The line that follows this one is “I had thought to carry with me/want of freedom though I had been freed.” This suggests that what the narrator is most afraid of forgetting is what freedom means and feels like, something that cannot be understood except from the vantage point of one who is not free.
personal history, and thereby subjective, implicating only the bearer of these marks and not the one who inflicts them. Furthermore, because it is embodied, this history and its attendant feeling in the body changes as the body itself changes, which it inevitably does.

The narrator therefore proposes instead a writing of history that is immune to fluctuation, a “closed book.” While on the surface, this notion of a closed book for writing history appears antithetical to Trethewey’s project of historical excavation—which, as we’ve seen, seems to register history (as bound up with spatiality and temporality) as permeable, as a story (a multiplicity of stories) that shifts and grows as new parts of it are discovered—with closer scrutiny we can see that a closed book only exists as such until it is opened again, until there is more history that must be recorded. Thus, it does not signify an account of history that is forever foreclosed but rather one less open to interpretation. And, importantly, one that will live on, through the ink that writes it, long after the subject/s of this history have died. We can thereby see in this verse an expression of the dual materialities through which history registers—the flesh and the letter—and we can see them together as they articulate with one another, the body being written in this book that will close and be opened again.

This meeting/overlapping of histories (that written on the narrator’s body and that which he writes) can be understood as an affective form of crossing between histories personal and collective, between the felt sensation of history as embodied and the distance it travels to become enshrined upon the page. This crossing of histories is materialized in the second journal entry, dated December 1862, which reveals the writing of two stories in an abandoned journal that once belonged to a Confederate soldier and has now been recovered by the unnamed narrator, a member of the Native Guard. The
journal is “near full / with someone else’s words, overlapped now / cross-hatched beneath mine” (p. 26). In this way, the act of writing one’s personal history becomes a means of connection to a history outside oneself—“On every page, / his story intersecting with my own”—and the idea of the “closed book” is further disrupted, as written history is shown to be, not static, but amenable to change. Instead of a book housing writing that will remain undisturbed, the journal becomes a dynamic space—a crossroads of sorts in which multiple histories can coexist.

This space of multiplicity is extended beyond the confines of the journal’s pages to the physical bodies of the soldiers whose stories are written there. The fourth entry, dated January 1863, sees the narrator working with his fellow soldiers, joining in the “low singing someone raised/to pace us” and feeling “a bond in labor / I had not known.” These descriptions play on double meanings, evoking both the conditions of slavery through the slave song and the bonds, while actually describing conditions of freedom—the “bond in labor” no more the chains but rather the camaraderie of fellowship. The doubleness of these lines show how the history of slavery and racial violence continues to be felt in the present—not just through the language used to describe actions in the present, but through the way it is experienced. And from this play of language, another man emerges, removing his shirt to reveal scars, like the narrator’s, “Cross-hatched like the lines in this journal” (p. 26). If those overlapping stories in the journal provide a testament to intersecting lives and history, so, too, then, do these crosses that mark the bodies of these men. These marks render their bodies stories written from the violence
that produces them—written in the space of crossing (the crossing of their stories, of the marks on their back) where the language of the body finds a foothold.\footnote{The symbol of the cross again appears as a form of writing, of documentation, in the fifth entry, dated February 1863, in which the narrator describes the keeping of the white prisoners of war that occurred on Ship Island. The Black soldiers of the Native Guard offer these often illiterate white soldiers words to send to their loved ones, yet the defeated Confederate soldiers remain wary: “X binds them to the page—a mute symbol/like the cross on a grave. I suspect they fear/I’ll listen, put something else down in ink.” Here the mark of the cross that elsewhere signified multiple stories intersecting and the mark of history written on the body becomes a “mute symbol,” a mark used as a placeholder to show that a person was there. These Confederate prisoners are afraid of Black writing, afraid of the documentation of the history that unfolds which they are part of; but they are also afraid of the misrepresentation of history, of the power of writing to create story, to create truth. Through this reversal of the dynamics of power, Trethewey gestures to the ability of those in power to manipulate history.}

Thus, regarding the writing of history, what the journal entries that compose this poem seem to suggest is a recognition of the simultaneous multiplicity of history, and of the ways in which the same writing (marks on a body) can be part of individual histories as well as a collective history. Further, while there are multiple ways of writing history and multiple ways in which history makes itself known or felt—on the body, through the landscape, through the repetitions of daily life—many of these are subject to change or interpretation. Writing, too, is subject to interpretation, but it keeps a record that persists long after a body is gone. For this reason, the written documentation of history, of a multiplicity of histories, is vital.

The bodies of these men with history engraved on their backs write a history of the South and of the nation that Trethewey as poet-interlocutor translates to the page, and in doing so makes her own. She becomes the narrator of Native Guard, sharing his “Jesus year”\footnote{In “Miscegenation,” Trethewey writes, “When I turned 33 my father said, It’s your Jesus year—you’re the same/age he was when he died. It was spring, the hills green in Mississippi” (11–12). Likewise, the narrator of “Native Guard” remarks in the first journal entry that he is 33 years old. As such, we can read the narrator of “Native Guard” as an amalgamated version of Trethewey herself.} and his predilection for record keeping. She speaks through his voice, in the final entry, dated 1865, reaching across the centuries to encompass the South’s long legacy of
racial and gendered violence that has gone unrecognized. “There are things,” she claims, “which must be accounted for” (p. 29). While history is constantly being written and rewritten—on bodies, in books—its losses, its erasures, remain. These include the black massacre at Fort Pillow, a “slaughter under the white flag of surrender”; the renaming of the Native Guard as the Corps d’Afrique, “words that take the native / from our claim”\(^{161}\); the way that “mossbacks” and freedmen became exiles in their own land. These include “the diseased, the maimed, / every lost limb, and what remains: phantom / ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve” (pp. 29–30). These are the losses, just a few of the losses, suffered by the soldiers of the Native Guard and obscured from the history of that war and of the United States. How this remains in this country’s history, Trethewey suggests, is like a phantom limb haunting the official versions of history—the sense that there is something else, that you feel something else a part of you, yet which doesn’t exist in material form. It’s that ‘something missing’ that Saidiya Hartman’s friend describes to the man in Ghana, a longing that you ‘feel in your bones,’ this lack of accounting for these lost histories of exploitation and resistance.

These losses remain. As Hartman finds out on her own journey, there are some gaps and spaces that can never be filled in. But, as this poem shows us, there are also some that can be—stories animated, brought to life from whatever traces exist, just as Trethewey’s voice, loud and clear and claiming her connection to this forgotten history, awakens the “dead letters” in this last vignette—letters which are part of this accounting.

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\(^{161}\) Through this act of renaming the Native Guard to the Corps d’Afrique, the state invalidates their belonging, literally resignifying their bodies (corps in French) as belonging not to the United States but to Africa, displacing them from the land that is their home. In writing them back into this landscape, Trethewey recovers the radical fact of their very existence as a central element and contradiction of US history, a crisis of citizenship that played out on the exploited bodies of these men.
which remain “unanswered; / untold stories of those that time will render mute” (36–38). While the dead cannot be resurrected—as the first section in the collection shows all too painfully—the poet can and does unmoor these letters from their “unmarked . . . graves,” bringing them to life within her poetics (30). These letters, then, are figured as bodies—the bodies of those lost to history whose unmarked graves mark their erasure. Bringing these bodies to life within her poems, figuring them as vibrant, living, active, Trethewey awakens the “dead letters.” And like the letter in the poem “Letter,” which is also a cross, these letters—these bodily inscriptions—are mobile, traveling, making and unmaking meaning as they write a new history, an embodied history of Black life in the South, woven of stories excavated from the shadows and those still waiting to be told.

The Body as a Monument

Through the poems in the collection, Trethewey shows how the racialized body becomes a testament to violence, loss, and erasure and a surface on which living history is inscribed. But, as I look at in this final section, in considering the affective history of Black loss in the South, she also shows how the body can serve as a monument to these histories of loss—how even as the physical markers of the lives and deaths of the Native Guard, of Trethewey’s mother, of other Black Southerners lost to violence and history may be absent, forgotten in the shadow of monuments to Confederate leaders and graveyards reserved for white Southerners, the body itself, as a living site of affective histories, a site where these histories of violence and erasure continue to circulate, can become a monument to those lost and not-forgotten.
The rendering of body as monument is most apparent in the final poems in the collection—“Monument” (p. 43), “Elegy for the Native Guards” (p. 44), and “South” (p. 45–46). The first two of these poems each refer back to earlier sections—“Monument” to the first section about her mother and “Elegy” to the second about the Native Guard. Taken as a triad, they link the sections together thematically through this figuring of monument. The poem “Monument” sees Trethewey return to her mother’s grave, an “untended plot” where ants stream like “arteries” and the red earth is spread like a “rash.” This figuring of her mother’s untended gravesite as bodily is enhanced in her claim that her mother will be part of the soil the ants are bringing up. Again, as we saw in the epigraph to the collection, the very land of the South is shown to be composed of the bodies of those who have lost their lives and been lost to history.

Following that, “Elegy for the Native Guards” takes the reader, finally, after the journey through these poems, to Ship Island, where the names of Confederate soldiers are carved in stone and the names of the Native Guard are absent. “What is monument to their legacy?” the poet asks. All their graves, “crude headstones,” have been “water-lost,” with only the ocean bearing witness. Like her mother’s grave, these graves are untended, seemingly abandoned. As such, taken together, these two poems show the material erasure not just of the stories—of her mother, of the Native Guard, of Southern Blacks—but of any physical testament to their lives. Without physical markers, they “disappear / into the subterranean—a world / made by displacement”—a geography, as it were, of Black absented presence. Yet, returning to “Monument,” the poem shows how the spaces marked by erasure are also imprinted on the body—for the gravesite that the poet has neglected exists as “a blister on [her] heart.” Thus, despite her neglect, her own body
becomes a monument to her mother, to the loss and erasure of her mother that she both reenacts and moves against—and the linking of these histories, and her writing herself into the history of the Native Guard in the middle section of the collection, evidences the way that her body also becomes a monument to the Native Guard, holding this history of loss, too, within it.

The final poem, “South,” expands this notion of the body as monument as it seeks to reconstitute Trethewey’s claim to the South and her home state of Mississippi through the inhabitation of the terms that have been used against her. This poem reflects upon Trethewey’s return to Mississippi after time away, a return hinted by her epigraph \(^{162}\) to be both a physical and psychological one. The phrase “I returned” recurs at multiple points throughout the poem, consolidating the poet’s identity within a figuration of movement marked by repetition and circularity. Each ‘return’ as it is articulated builds the layers of Southern history that form Trethewey’s South and her own experience of identity, and the textures of the Southern landscape that Trethewey maps in this poem are figured through their bodily dimensions.

Accordingly, the “stand of pines” that opens the poem becomes a “bone-thin phalanx,” \(^{163}\) an amalgamated image that calls up the ghostly presence of the Native Guard, inscribing their bodies within the physicality of the natural scenery; the magnolias

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\(^{162}\) The epigraph to this poem is a line from the work of American biologist E.O. Wilson: “Homo Sapiens is the only species to suffer psychological exile.”

\(^{163}\) This image of the “bone-thin phalanx,” especially as it is echoed several lines later in the “thin palms,” is reminiscent of an earlier poem from the first section entitled “What is Evidence.” That poem is about the abuse suffered by Trethewey’s mother that imprinted itself on so many dimensions of her body, incapable of being captured in the language on her headstone, which remains abstract and removed. In that poem, Trethewey writes, “Only the landscape of her body—a splintered/clavicle, pierced temporal—her thin bones/settling a bit each day, the way all things do” (11–13). If we read these two poems together, then, we might begin to see the ways in which Trethewey maps the Black female body onto the landscape of the South (interestingly, this seems to occur through a kind of fragmentation of this body, which might suggest a refusal to embrace a narrative of wholeness).
become “surrender, white flags draped / among the branches”—petals whose soft shapes
disguise the slaughter that occurred under this flag, one of the ‘things that must be
accounted for’; “thin palms” are resurrected where weeds once grew, “symbols of
victory,” as in fingers held aloft, but also reminiscent of the thin bodies, thin bones of the
Native Guard, and also still of the hands of Christ, bleeding in sacrifice. The cotton field
whose “hallowed ground” Trethewey treads upon becomes not only a physical site of
memory where the Black bodies of slaves toiled in the sun, but a living monument to the
exploited labor of slavery that has travelled both literally and metaphorically from the
South’s dusty earth to the fabric of our own quotidian lives: “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.”

In staking these claims, Trethewey rewrites the South, inviting us—an invitation
we dare not refuse—to see beyond the “lenticular logic” that Tara McPherson argues
obscures the ways in which multiple, and oftentimes conflictual, histories exist together
within the same frame (7). In Trethewey’s poetics, that frame is bodily; it is affective.
Trethewey shows us that the Southern landscape gains legibility through the inscriptions
of the bodies that have peopled it, inscriptions brought to life through language—through
metaphor.

If Trethewey has been steadily redrawing the spatial and temporal parameters of
the South throughout the poem, it is in the last lines that she writes herself into the frame:

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

where that old flag still stands, I return

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164 In the last stanza of “Native Guard,” Trethewey writes, “There are things which must be accounted
for: slaughter under the white flag of surrender—black massacre at Fort Pillow” (127–129).
to Mississippi, state that made a crime
of me—mulatto, half-breed—native
in my native land, this place they’ll bury me.

Here Trethewey explicitly connects the spatial with the linguistic and invokes the power and violence of naming. In the first lines of the above-excerpted stanzas, naming constitutes a material form of erasure; in naming these sites of Southern geography for a Confederacy built on a legacy of violence against Black bodies, the sanctioning of that violence becomes part of these very monuments. But where the flag stands, Trethewey situates herself in a ‘return’ that is no longer a past tense, but ongoing. She situates herself in this position of centrality from which she can indict the state as an active agent of a violent misnaming or misrecognition in order to then inhabit the language that has been used against her—the language that is and is not her. By locating the historically pejorative terms ‘mulatto’ and ‘half-breed’ both linguistically and narratively within the space of crossing—this space set apart—Trethewey isolates them from herself, throwing them, and the particular ways in which they inscribe notions of race onto the body, into sharp relief. But she also in that same move claims them, subverting their dehumanizing inscription of race upon her body and instead illuminating their identificatory power. In positioning these terms in that transformational space of

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165 In an interview with Jennifer Chang, while talking about her 2012 collection Thrall, Trethewey describes her affective encounter with a poem that her father wrote when she was young in which he describes her as "cross-breed." She states, “I had no idea that I was going to make the turn in the poem to feeling like that person, being parsed by the language that my father used in a poem of his. [‘I study / my crossbreed child.’] I’ve known that poem most of my life. I think he probably wrote it when I was four years old, so I’d been hearing it at readings for many, many years and always with this feeling of discomfort. It’s a very sweet poem, but I never knew why I was not comfortable when he got to that line. Not until writing ‘Knowledge’ did I figure it out: there’s something about the use of that language, however he meant it, that still rendered me as an object of study. An object of fascination because of my otherness. Not to mention that technically humans cannot be cross-breeds” (“Public Life of Poetry”). This embodied memory might be worth considering within the context of the linguistic associations of crossing that I am tracing, though we would be wise to remain wary of it forming the basis of a psychoanalytic account of Trethewey’s relation to this word.
crossing, between ‘me’ and ‘native,’ she uses them as a bridge to advance her claim and connection to the land. In this way, ‘me’ becomes ‘native’ through its very traversal of these terms, which is also a play on the signification of her own name, Natasha—a name that means native, ‘Christmas child,’ the site of birth. As such, her racialized body becomes a monument not only to these histories of loss and erasure, and of violence, but a monument to her own embodied presence as native daughter of the South and to the multiplicity of histories that construct the Southern narrative.

Trethewey harnesses the affective dimensions of language existent in its metaphoric capacities and its naming function in order to weave a narrative of the South whose perpetual doubleness is made palpable through its physicality—a narrative that is thoroughly embodied, and, as such, brings multiple dimensions of Southern history into contact within its expansive frame. Through this affective poetics, she reveals the inextricability of history and geography, language and law, in the formation of her own body and, by extension, the body of the nation.

Conclusion: A Home that is Not My Home and a History of Becoming

Over the course of the collection, Trethewey weaves together narratives of personal and collective history, linking a long history of violence perpetrated upon the Black female body with the violence of a national history predicated on the exclusion of those bearing bodies marked as ‘other.’ This linkage underlies the affective association

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166 The last lines of “Miscegenation” read, “Natasha is a Russian name—/though I’m not; it means Christmas child, even in Mississippi” (13–14).

167 This might be thought of as akin to the notion of energeia in Aristotelian philosophy. Energeia is a term based upon the Greek word meaning “work” and is the base of the term “energy.” Aristotle describes pleasure and happiness as types of energetia, and also associates it with movement. Scholars such as Richard Moran have more recently looked at this concept as an animating force of language and metaphor (Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric 1996).
between the self-shattering effects of Trethewey’s maternal loss and the ontological violence of an absence in the archives that conditions a feeling of loss at the core of our national identity. By connecting these different forms of violence and affective attachment within a shared historical framework constructed around the constitutive Southern trauma of slavery and its roots in colonialism, Trethewey builds a poetics of Southern US history as nonlinear and affective, integrally connected, and forged in the interstices between the personal and collective. In doing so, she harnesses the creative potential in a long history of Black loss in the South—lives and families lost, lost mothers and fathers, lost land and home, the loss one is forced to confront within one’s sense of selfhood—in order to challenge traditional understandings of Southern history and belonging and of what it means to claim a Southern identity.

In the last section of this collection, Natasha Trethewey writes herself, a Black and mixed-race women born illegitimately in Mississippi in the middle of the twentieth century, into the heart of Southern US history and the history of the nation, thereby enacting a radical revisioning of this history that calls up Ashraf Rushdy’s claim for slavery as America’s “family secret” (2). Yet the story that Rushdy tells is not Trethewey’s story, for hers is not a story, or not only a story, of the violence of miscegenation as a violation of the bodies of Black women. Instead, hers is a story of a union built on emotional attachment—one only imagines, on love. But it is also a story of a union that ended, as they do, and a Black woman, a mother, Trethewey’s mother, murdered by a man that she had also loved, taken from her daughter unable to properly mourn, to know how to mourn a loss that exists so deeply inside. This is the erasure that

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persists within the pages of *Native Guard*, the loss that endures there within the same frame as the life that Trethewey writes back into history: a history of the South as it is woven of flesh and bone and body and words that pierce the very core. Trethewey’s letters write a history of a crossing whose destination has yet to be reached—a journey across an ocean, a traversal of state lines, an internal and embodied feeling state of racialized becoming.
CONCLUSION

MESSINESS AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF SOUTHERN BELONGING

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.
—James Baldwin, “A Stranger in the Village”

The story that these chapters tell is one of female identity and belonging in the mid-to-late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US South, a region that exists as “a state of mind both within and beyond its geographic boundaries.”169 It is a story about history, Southern history but also US history more broadly, and how we read and understand history—about how history shapes us but also how histories can be transformed, opened up, resignified. It is likewise a story about trauma, extreme and everyday forms of trauma in the US South, and the ways in which these traumas live on and in bodies marked by race and class and gender, and circulate within affective life, bringing histories into the present and shaping modes of being and feeling.

Through their depictions of Southern women whose struggles for selfhood and recognition are integrally tied to the US South’s raced, gendered, and classed history of violence, exploitation, and exclusion, and are bound up with felt experiences of being cast out of or in excess of the narratives of the South and Southern Womanhood, the authors in this dissertation expose the precarious foundations on which the boundaries of Southern belonging have been constructed. And in writing affective histories that transform these characters’ relationships to the South, to their traumas, and to themselves, these authors remap Southern belonging and what it means to be and to belong as a woman in the late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century South.

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Through their writing, they show how those who have been relegated to the margins of narrative/s of Southern identity and belonging, who have been rendered abject by the dictates of Southern Womanhood, and whose stories have been systematically erased—Black and mixed-race women, as well as those marked as Southern “white trash”—are in fact central to the Southern story. In doing so, they reimagine Southern belonging as messy, ambivalent, infused with shame and loss—but also as joyful, dynamic and connective, about movement and change. Southern belonging—what it means to be and feel ‘Southern’— in the New South, rather than being tethered to rigid ideals that necessitate exclusion of anyone deemed unfit or unworthy, might instead, these narratives suggest, be reconceived of as living with and within contradiction. For Southern history, a multiplicity of intersecting, or rather interwoven histories, is a history of contradictions—a history of unspeakable brutality and deep hypocrisy but also care and community, a history of rigid racial boundaries and boundary crossings, of ideals of female purity and innocence used to justify horrific acts of violence and the systematic violation of women cast outside the net of White Southern Womanhood, a history of resistance, of loud expressions of pride and pervasive silences and erasures, of myth and majesty and bodily materiality, of, as per Patricia Yaeger, ‘dirt and desire.’ It is a history whose ghosts linger, a history that is continually being brought into the present through its inscription on the bodies and affective lives of Southerners.

Learning to live with these contradictions, to recognize one’s selfhood as created by and through contradiction, as these texts show, does not mean subscribing to one or another ‘truth’ of the South, or of the self, but rather to recognizing the messiness of this multiplicity of truths. For, what these narratives show is that Southern history is living
history, kept alive and brought to life through its imprint on bodies and the circulation of feeling and affective experience—and bodies and emotions themselves are inherently messy, complicated sites of contradiction. Being and feeling Southern, then, in the mid-to-late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—finding a home within the imagined geography of belonging mapped by the South’s interwoven histories—involves, for many, including and perhaps especially those who have been previously figured at or outside the very margins of Southern belonging, being with contradiction and, rather than seeking to resolve these contradictions, recognizing the ways in which they have shaped female selfhood in the South.

Living in and with contradiction inheres in each of these texts throughout. It is palpable in Ursa’s recognition at the end of *Corregidora* that accepting the risk and inevitability of feeling and causing hurt is the path toward finding love, connection, and healing; it is there in the betrayal Allison feels by her family and her simultaneous love for them, in her need to escape her home and to keep it close to her; there in Trethewey’s rewriting of the past, bringing to life the voices of the Native Guard, even as she mourns the inability of language and poetry to bring back her mother—there in the deep loss and hopefulness that live together in her poems. It is there, too, in Gilchrist’s figuring of Rhoda’s journey as a journey to freedom, both because she never actually ‘gets free’ and because she has always been ‘free.’ But whereas the other texts embrace the messy in their quests for selfhood and belonging, messiness for Rhoda remains a source of anxiety, an emblem of her persistent instability and inability to locate herself. Perhaps this is due to Rhoda’s closer proximity, as a member of the white Southern elite, to the ideal of Southern White Womanhood, which leaves little room for contradiction—which works
instead to paper over the contradictions that necessarily mark the lives of Southern women. This ideal remains an influential force in the lives of many Southern women even today. And this is why it is particularly important to develop new modes for thinking about Southern female selfhood and belonging, as these authors do, as embodied, affective, and inherently contradictory.

**On Roots**

At the end of the podcast *White Lies* (2019), which investigates the unsolved 1965 murder of the white Unitarian minister and activist James Reeb and its subsequent cover up in Selma, Alabama, during the Civil Rights movement—and which, in doing so, provides an exposé of how fear and shame can lead to hatred, silence, and denial—the podcast hosts, two white men originally from Alabama, speak to Joanne Bland, a Black woman who grew up and continues to live in Selma and who is cofounder of the National Voting Rights Museum. She explains how many white people respond to her work by telling her to move on and accuse her or others who want to talk about the past of getting ‘bogged down’ in this history. “White people have proximity to this history, but they want to forget,” she says. They feel not only guilty but incompetent, she speculates, because they never did anything or said anything to try to prevent the continued violence and abuse against African Americans in their city. But, she explains, even as they want to forget, “the pain that their lives and actions caused has determined how I am today… The pain you inflict is still there.” In her words, “This leads to this and this leads to that. And this led to this, and this led to that. It’s a continuous cycle. It’s like a tree with branches. If you cut off one branch, don’t mean the damn tree going to die. It’s just going to grow
another branch. That’s what’s happening.” Her solution: “We need to find the root of all
this.”

Bland’s statement highlights the complicated ways in which different racial
groups are implicated within the traumas of racial violence and exploitation in the South.
These traumas, historical and ongoing, are not the province of African American
Southerners any more than they are of white Southerners—but rather they show the ways
in which these groups are inextricably intertwined, bound together through this trauma,
even as their relation to it and experiences of it vary significantly. This implication goes
beyond the Black/white binary that has long held sway in the South to include other, less
critically explored groups of Southerners such as Native Southerners, who have their own
history of loss and dispossession that is both distinct from and intertwined with the
experiences of white and Black Southerners. As Melanie Benson Taylor argues in
Reconstructing the Native South, “We have only just begun to reckon candidly with the
numerous ways in which the plantation South and its Native neighbors crossed paths,
bloodlines, and histories in profoundly altering and continually influential ways” (13).

While this dissertation does attempt to move beyond that binary, particularly
through its consideration of mixed-race Southern identity in the work of Natasha
Trethewey, deeper exploration of the ways in which the histories of trauma discussed in
this dissertation and contiguous Southern histories are inscribed in and on the bodies and
affective lives of Native Southerners would undoubtedly enrich our understanding of how
experiences of difference, and dispossession, shape affective life—how different groups
are marked as outsiders by and through experiences of trauma and violence, and the
differential impacts this has on individual and collective experiences of bodily and

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emotional life. For instance, it would be interesting to know more about whether and how much shame has played and plays a role in shaping Native Southern identity—for shame, it seems from this study, is indeed a major shaper of selfhood for both white and Black Southern women living in the wake of these racialized and gendered histories of Southern trauma.

The affect that is, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, most bound up with identity formation, with a sense of separation and alienation as much as with the irrepressible drive toward others and toward the desire for belonging,\(^{170}\) shame evidences the paradoxical values of the South—the simultaneous attachment to community alongside these histories, and ongoing realities, of exclusion, erasure, and dispossession. But shame, which likewise merits further study in its specific relation to the South, also holds transformative potential, as the place where the question of identity arises and therefore that which “makes identity” (Sedgwick 36–37). It may be that shame, the other side of vulnerability, irreducibly messy and inevitably relational, is key to reaching not only a better understanding of the ways in which the historical traumas of the South and of the nation continue to live in the bodies and emotional lives of so many of us, but also to finding ways to actively reckon with the realities of these traumas, bitter and painful as they may be, and their continued impacts.

When I hear Joanne Bland’s words at the end of the *White Lies* podcast—“We need to find the root of all this”—I immediately think of the dense and tangled roots of the mangrove swamp, hidden underneath the superficial beauty of the man-made beach, in Natasha Trethewey’s poem “Theories of Time and Space.” What does it mean to go to

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\(^{170}\) Sedgwick writes, “That’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (*Touching Feeling* 37).
the root? To trace the pain and trauma back to its supposed origins, to find the place where it all began? To start to unravel the different ways in which we are implicated within each other’s pain and trauma? Roots can be tangled and messy, much like the ways that Southerners of all identifications—and, truly, all of us—are tangled up in each other’s histories of trauma, bound together through shared abjection, shared pain, the pain caused to each other, the violence wrought upon one another. Finding the root involves confronting history in its messiness, its ugliness even. But roots are also connective and finding them can lead to moments of profound connection and moments of reckoning—can lead eventually, perhaps, to healing.
Elsewhere, this is the year Scarlet O’Hara falls in love with Tara. Here, the year some fifteen hundred people are cut open and wrecked.
—Molly McCully Brown, “Where You Are (VI)”

Whatever I believe about how we go on—sometimes, watching the small, vigilant chests of the crows in the fields, there is only your body instead of the wound. Love, look at the milkweed, the mountains, the dust.
—Molly McCully Brown, “To That Girl, as An Infant”

The poems excerpted above are from Molly McCully Brown’s 2017 collection The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded, which imagines the lives of those institutionalized within and employed by the Colony—a state-run institution that opened in 1910 and is scheduled to close in June of 2020—between fall 1935 and fall 1936. The Colony was the largest institution of its kind in the US and held both men and women, though it only admitted white patients through its early years—Blacks deemed “feebleminded” or “insane,” including those convicted of crimes, were sent to the poorly-funded Petersburg Colony, which served as a kind of labor camp. Initially authorized by a bill written by eugenicist Aubrey Strode, the Colony was integral to the South’s and the nation’s program of eugenics in the early to mid-twentieth century and was a site where many forced sterilizations took place, including that of Carrie Buck, the subject of the Supreme Court case Buck V. Bell, in which the Court upheld the right of state statute to permit forced sterilization of the “unfit,” those deemed physically or mentally disabled or otherwise undesirable.

Brown, a young, white woman who grew up close to the Colony in Virginia, was born with cerebral palsy, and had a twin sister who died within 36 hours of being born.
These poems thus speak not only to an oft-unspoken part of Virginia’s and the South’s, and nation’s, history but also to a life that the poet might have had, as she notes in the first poem in the collection, had she been born just half a century earlier. The subjects of Brown’s poems are mostly women, and an entire section, titled “In the Infirmary (Summer 1936),” is devoted to women who underwent sterilization in the Colony; “Where You Are (VI)” (p. 55), excerpted above, is the first poem in this section. Like the poetry of Trethewey, whose work Brown cites as a model, Brown’s poems combine history, “invented biography,” and research, bringing to life a population that has been largely excluded from the narratives of the South.

Many of those institutionalized within the Colony in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century inhabited bodies that were marked as ‘broken’ or ‘useless’ due to illness or physical disability; these physical characteristics were thought to extend to the patients’ intellectual lives, or perceived lack thereof. For this reason, and the bodily nature of the tortures that these patients sustained in the name of eugenics, bodies play a central role in these poems, as does the metaphysical—they are rich with bodily imagery, showing bodies marked by disability and bodies marked as “other” as sites of pain and suffering, and spaces of confinement, but also as sites of wonder and beauty that open up possibilities for different ways of being in the world.

*Running:* I am lying in the blindness and I cannot see my body or the walls; maybe I am tumbling forward like the doctor says the planet is tumbling forward.

*Flying:* maybe I am tumbling forward like the doctor says the planet is tumbling forward; maybe the dead weight of my left arm is a wing

*Faith:* maybe the dead weight of my left arm is a wing.

—Molly McCully Brown, “Away”
Brown’s collection is resonant with the other works in this dissertation in various ways, not least of which is, as noted earlier, its depiction of women cast out of the narratives of belonging that have long marked, and continue to mark even if in less stringent or obvious ways, the ideological boundaries of the South and, by extension, of the nation. The lines cited above from “Where You Are (VI)” specifically draw a comparison between Scarlet O’Hara, that fictional guardian of White Southern Womanhood, and the institutionalized subjects of the collection, who, as O’Hara was being written into being, were being “cut open”—the consolidation of her personhood paralleling, within the poem, the sacrifice of their claim to womanhood. Indeed, like all of the authors in this dissertation, Brown shows reproduction—and its correlatives, infertility and sterilization—to be a central facet of narratives, and experiences, of belonging and unbelonging in the South.

Through her poems, Brown, like Gilchrist, Jones, Allison, and Trethewey, shows how trauma visited on the body—sometimes in the form of direct violence but also sometimes just the trauma of occupying a body persistently marked as “other” or abject—is held not only within that body but within emotional and affective life. She, too, maps an affective history of the South—inscribed on the bodies of the subjects of these poems and upon her own—though even more than shame or loss or ambivalence, these poems speak of isolation and yearning, of loneliness co-existing with the feeling of being part of something greater. These, too, then, index the fundamental, and potentially productive, contradictions that seem to pervade Southern female bodily and emotional life—contradictions that are part of being human but that come into relief within a culture
that seeks to hide them away, to smooth them over in pursuit of nostalgia for what never was or a future that has yet to arrive (the present, past in present, still untenable).

\[\text{Lay out on the pine floor:}
\text{rattle your own bones back}
\text{to the center of the world.}
\]—Molly McCully Brown, “Grand Mal Seizure”

Brown’s poems point to the need not just to expand our analyses beyond the Black/white binary in the South to consider Native American Southerners, Latinx Southerners, Asian American Southerners, Southern Jews, and others, but also to consider those, like the institutionalized subjects of this collection, whose bodies have in other ways been relegated to the margins of the South, hidden away out of sight—even as these subjects are also differentially marked by race and gender and class and products of the intersecting histories of violence and trauma, and resistance, that weave the tapestry of Southern history.

“To That Girl, as An Infant” (pp. 50–51), one of the poems whose excerpt opens this epilogue, is part of the section titled “Interlude” in Brown’s collection, a short section of three poems that render the poet’s own experience, thus bringing her personal story more fully into contact with those of the subjects of her poems. This poem is about her twin sister, to whom the collection is dedicated. She imagines her lost sister, mirror of herself, as a “figure in the field / picked clean by crows / then reassembled, miniature” with “fingertips for shinbones, teeth for hands / and feet”—grotesque, deformed, a symbol of abjection. “Baby, what becomes a body is strange,” she writes. “What becomes beautiful is the wildest thing.” There is both beauty and strangeness, Brown suggests, in what grows, what does not, in the way that the bodies and stories of herself and her sister, so very different, are inextricably bound together. Like the story of the
South itself, imagined geography mapped by those who have inhabited it and those who continue to do so, it’s a story of mutuality and intersecting histories and traumas, but also a story of survival and a story in which what does not survive persists nevertheless—what is lost persists, a wound that never heals. But sometimes, as the poem goes, “There is only your body instead of the wound”—the space of loss and longing subsumed in that moment by the body narrating its own story. And can we listen?
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