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Remembering Jim Crow : the literary memoir as historical source material/

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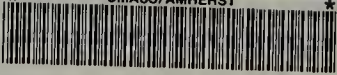
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REMEMBERING JIM CROW: THE LITERARY MEMOIR AS HISTORICAL
SOURCE MATERIAL

A Dissertation Presented

by

JENNIFER JENSEN WALLACH

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2004

Department of Afro-American Studies

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REMEMBERING JIM CROW: THE LITERARY MEMOIR AS HISTORICAL
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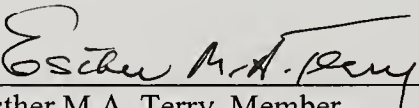
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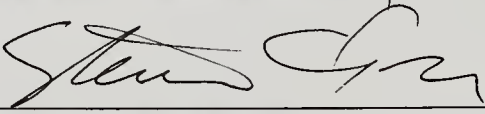
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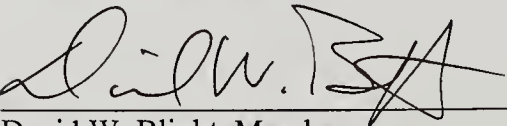
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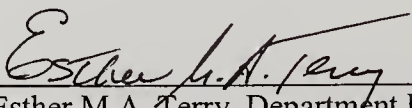
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DEDICATION

For CSB, JCW, and WFP

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I would like to express my thanks to the faculty members of the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts. I have benefited from my exposure to so many disciplinary perspectives and diverse points of view. I would like to thank John Bracey for his suggestions (and lengthy “must read” lists) given during the early stages of this project. I am also grateful to Bill Strickland for his support and blunt, well-reasoned advice (much of which was proffered over Cosmopolitans at the Monkey Bar). I am thankful to each of the individuals who served as members of my dissertation committee: Esther M.A. Terry, Steven C. Tracy, David W. Blight, and Robert Paul Wolff. At the prospectus stage, Esther helped me learn to refine and vigorously defend my ideas. Much of what she has taught me transcends the academic realm. Steve gave me a crash course in literary criticism, and his careful reading of my work challenged me and saved me from more than one embarrassing mistake. David’s fine scholarly work has served as an inspiration. He has set a standard that I hope to emulate in my professional life. Finally, I wish to warmly thank my dissertation director Bob Wolff (known affectionately to me as WFP). He has had a tremendous impact on me as both a scholar and as a human being. I am grateful for his support, his guidance, and his friendship.

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ABSTRACT

REMEMBERING JIM CROW: THE LITERARY MEMOIR AS HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL

MAY 2004

JENNIFER JENSEN WALLACH, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

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This dissertation is a two-fold project. The first half is a methodological examination of how memoirs can be used as instruments of historical understanding. The second half applies this methodology to the study of several memoirs written about life in the American south in the first half of the twentieth century.

Memoir is a peculiar genre which straddles the disciplines of literature and history. Currently the field of autobiography studies is dominated by literary critics. However, there is nothing inherent about the genre dictating that this should be the case. This dissertation analyzes memoirs from a historical perspective. I argue that insights drawn from life writing have the potential to greatly enhance our historical understanding.

I broach several topics including the problem of defining autobiography, the disciplinary proprietorship of the memoir, the relationship between history and theory, and the linkages between the historical study of memoirs and interdisciplinary conversations about historical memory. I describe the nature of historical reality, arguing that the individual thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and misperceptions of each historical agent are constitutive of the historical reality of a particular moment. Memoirs capture

the entire universe as it appeared from one acknowledged perspective. Furthermore, skilled, creative writers are especially adept at capturing the complexity of a past moment. Authors of literary memoirs draw on the aesthetic power of literary language and on literary devices such as metaphor and irony to powerfully portray particular historical moments.

I apply these ideas to an examination of memoirs about life in the segregated American south. I analyze memoirs written by African Americans, by whites, by men, by women, and by individuals with various political points of views. I find these accounts bear certain similarities to one another but are often strikingly at odds. Different ideas about the psychological impact of segregation, dissimilar characterizations of the black community, and contrary descriptions of the same moment and the same geographical space reveal that there is no singular Jim Crow experience. Historical reality is multifaceted, and the complexities of individual experiences are best captured in artfully constructed literary memoirs.

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INTRODUCTION

According to William L. Andrews “Autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America.”¹ During the era of slavery, escaped slaves wrote or dictated thousands of first person accounts of the horrors of slavery. Slave narratives not only provided fuel for the cause of abolition, but they also served to assert the humanity of the formerly enslaved. In the century and a half since emancipation, African Americans have continued to construct autobiographies that serve as political tools to fight against racism in its various manifestations. These life writings also present portraits of African American life that defy stereotyped ideas about blackness. Indeed many of the most widely read and critiqued books in the African American literary tradition, ranging from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), come from the genre of autobiography.

The sheer number and quality of these autobiographies makes them a worthy subject of study for the student of African American studies. Life writing also holds a preeminent place in black studies and in other areas of interdisciplinary inquiry because the genre is, in many respects, an interdisciplinary one. Autobiography straddles the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. It simultaneously purports to be both literature and history. As an interdisciplinary genre, the autobiography demands a criticism that cuts across traditional disciplines. The field of autobiography studies is fertile ground for exploring the nature of interdisciplinary inquiry.

¹ William L. Andrews, *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 1.

My interest in African American autobiographies also stems from my own life experiences. An explanation of the genesis of this dissertation requires me to indulge in an autobiographical aside. I am certainly not the only scholar working in the field of autobiography studies to succumb to the easy temptation to base my analysis of life writing in episodes drawn from my own life. However, I don't believe that this is a false starting place. After all, scholarly work cannot ever be completely extricated from the scholar herself. The kinds of things we write, the subjects that attract us, and the theoretical positions that we take are all related in some way to the people we are, the experiences that we have had, and the things we have been exposed to. In deliberately inserting a piece of my own autobiography into this preface, I am only being more than usually candid about my relationship to this text.

When I was twelve years old, I read Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), his memoir about growing up in segregated Mississippi and Arkansas. I stumbled upon the book one night when I had run out of library books to read. In desperation I began rummaging around a neglected bookshelf which had been inexplicably placed in the laundry room of our family home. When I stumbled upon the tattered paperback, I was intrigued by the image of a defiantly raised black fist on the cover. My strict, religious parents were prone to censor my reading. Not wanting to take any chances that this would not be deemed appropriate reading material for a Christian young lady, I snuck the book into my bedroom and stayed up all night reading.

In retrospect I see that this encounter with Richard Wright was a pivotal moment in my life. I can see now that, in an indirect way, *Black Boy* propelled me into the field of African American studies. Wright provided me with my first introduction to southern

history. He tutored me about racial intimidation and violence and about the potential impact of the kind of material and intellectual poverty that Wright experienced. Perhaps even more importantly, Wright showed me how important (and difficult) it was to struggle against injustice. By the strength of his personality and the power of his prose, he enlisted me into the cause of attempting to understand (and thereby combat) American racism.

In the years since, I have read much of the historiography of Jim Crow, and my understanding of the time period has become increasingly more complex since my first encounter with Wright. However, in spite of all the other things I have read, *Black Boy* remains at the core of my emotional understanding of what it was like to grow up in the segregated south, how Jim Crow looked, how it felt. When I think about southern poverty, I conjure up an image of young Richard attempting to sell his pet poodle for a dollar to buy some food. In many ways that image sums up the essence of Jim Crow for me, and I return to *Black Boy* again and again as I try to imagine what that historical moment was like.

As I have grown in scholarly sophistication and learned that scholars that engage in the study of a past moment must do so “objectively,” I have struggled to reconcile the dictates of historical inquiry that demand objectivity with my own subjective, imaginative understanding of Jim Crow. After all, my introduction to the history of the era came in the form of an unabashedly subjective, first person account of life during that era. In a certain sense, this dissertation is an attempt to frame, to analyze, to explain the kind of influence *Black Boy* had on my historical understanding. However, my examination of memoirs as historical source material has implications that reach beyond *Black Boy*,

beyond my own encounter with autobiographical writing, and beyond the Jim Crow era. It is my contention that autobiographies have the potential to enrich our historical understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in any other single source material.

This dissertation is a two-fold project. The first section is a methodological examination of how memoirs can be used as instruments of historical understanding. The second part applies this methodology to a body of memoirs written about life in the Jim Crow south. Because state sanctioned racism was the defining characteristic of Jim Crow, I have concentrated my analysis on the memoirists' depictions of race relations and the mechanisms of racial control that characterized the era.

The methodological portion of this study engages a wide range of topics. Chapter 1 overviews the field of autobiography studies, and Chapter 2 tackles the deceptively difficult question of defining the genre of autobiography. Chapter 3 deals with the question of the disciplinary proprietorship of the memoir and explores the complicated relationship of history and theory. Chapter 4 situates the study of autobiography within the ongoing interdisciplinary discussion about historical memory. Chapter 5 broaches the topics of scholarly objectivity and the nature of historical reality. Chapter 6, the last chapter in the section, argues that in the hands of a skilled writer literary devices (such as metaphor and irony) have the potential to enhance our historical understanding.

The second part of the dissertation is divided into two lengthy chapters. The first examines Jim Crow reality from the perspectives of Richard Wright, as recorded in *Black Boy*, and of his contemporary Zora Neale Hurston, as recounted in her memoir *Dust Tracks on the Road*. I discover that these two accounts of roughly the same historical moment are startlingly different, particularly in their descriptions of white racism and of

the black community. The second chapter in this section looks at Jim Crow from the perspectives of three white memoirists. Through an examination of Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, Willie Morris' *North Toward Home*, and William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, I discover (unsurprisingly) that these memoirists perceived the same historical moment and same events much differently from their black contemporaries. I also discover that the system of segregation was a source of discomfort and anxiety for whites, even those on different ends of the political spectrum. I conclude that there was not one Jim Crow experience that we can master and say that we understand the history of the era. There were many Jim Crow experiences. If we are to endeavor to understand the time period we must actively and empathetically examine the era from the varied points of view captured so eloquently in these literary memoirs.

PART I: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS ABOUT THE MEMOIR AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

CHAPTER 1

THE AGE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE ADVENT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES

Nothing summarizes the current en vogue status of autobiographical studies as succinctly as the appearance in 2001 of a recent edition to Routledge's New Critical Idiom series *Autobiography*, by Linda Anderson. This series is designed to provide students with an entree into the kind of jargon-laden critical discussions that are generally inaccessible to the novice. With this recent publication, the critical literature about autobiography is implicitly linked with theoretical discussions as wide-ranging as postcolonialism, intertextuality, historicism, and romanticism (topics that also claim titles in the series). As we enter the twenty-first century, autobiography is no longer, as it once was, the domain of a handful of specialists but rather one of the cornerstones of literary study. The 2001 publication of the exhaustive two volume *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, further illustrates that autobiographical study has intellectually come of age and has garnered enough interest and critical literature to warrant encyclopedic summaries. Indeed to keep abreast of contemporary literary theory, one must become acquainted with autobiography studies.

In this chapter, I will give a brief overview of the history and current status of autobiographical studies and then highlight some ongoing critical debates. It will quickly become clear that most of the impetus behind autobiographical studies comes from literary scholars, but there is nothing inherent in the genre that necessitates this proscribed disciplinary focus. After surveying the field as it stands to date, chapter two

will examine the most fundamental but deceptively complicated question underlying this burgeoning field: How do we define “autobiography” in the first place? Indeed, how do we determine what texts should be studied under the rubric of “autobiography studies”?

An examination of the question of genre will allow me to outline the definition of “autobiography” (and more specifically of one of the genre’s subcategories, the “memoir”) that I will utilize in this dissertation. This generic clarification will then pave the way for chapters 3-6, which will seek to answer some of the questions I will pose in the first chapter, namely: How should we define the field of autobiography studies anyway? Does this area of inquiry naturally “belong” to one traditional, academic discipline? Specifically, what kind of applications does the field of autobiography studies have for the study of history? What particular kinds of insights into the past do memoirs give us?

The autobiography is no longer, as James Olney once feared, “a kind of stepchild of history and literature, with neither of those disciplines granting it full recognition.”² Autobiography has been adopted enthusiastically by students of literature as well as by scholars working a number of interdisciplinary fields such as Women’s Studies, Afro-American Studies, and American Studies. In 1977, Robert F. Sayre christened the autobiography as the “proper study” for students of American Studies, claiming, “autobiographies in all their bewildering number and variety offer the student of American Studies a broader and more direct contact with American experience than any other kind of writing.”³ Now sessions devoted to the genre are commonplace at Modern Language Association conventions, and conferences devoted to specific aspects of the

² James Olney, *Studies in Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xiv-xv.

³ Robert F. Sayre, “The Proper Study—Autobiographies in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1977): 241.

subject have been held at universities throughout the world. Growing international interest in the autobiography recently culminated in June 1999 at the International Conference on Auto/Biography held in Beijing, where scholars from around the world gathered to contemplate the “auto/biographical turn.” In response to the outpouring of scholarly activity in the field, two journals entirely dedicated to the study of life writing, *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, were established in the mid-1980’s.

The trend not only to incorporate representatives of the genre into the academic curriculum but also to self-consciously reflect on the form and function of autobiography is a fairly recent one, which did not begin in earnest until the early 1970’s. The dramatic outpouring of interest in the subject has been so sudden and so dramatic that it is still a common convention in autobiographical criticism to comment, as I am doing here, on the inauspicious beginnings of the field and its meteoric rise before launching into a critical discussion. For example, Albert Stone proudly proclaims that autobiography has grown from, a “minor and neglected branch of American prose” into a cultural phenomenon.⁴ James M. Cox, while echoing the motif of surprise at the sudden expansion of the field, is afraid that its very popularity might actually dissuade future students from even entering the discussion. Perhaps fearing too much of a good thing, he somewhat perplexedly remarks:

How times have changed! What was untilled land has been so intensively cultivated that even an ambitious student of the subject, looking down rows of books and articles devoted to autobiography, might be discouraged from entering the field.⁵

⁴ Albert Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), xiii.

⁵ James Cox, *Recovering Literature’s Lost Ground: Essays in American Autobiography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 3.

One of the reasons that autobiographical criticism has assumed such a prominent place in literary studies is the fact that autobiographies are now written, or perhaps more accurately, autobiographies are now *published* at a much more rapid rate and by a much greater cross section of society than at any other time in the history of the genre. According to William Zinsser, we live in “the age of the memoir...everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it.”⁶ As Albert Stone notes, “one finds personal histories everywhere one finds books: on library shelves and in the syllabi of college courses; at the checkout counters of drugstores and supermarkets; on best-seller lists, as book club selections, in reviews...of the *New York Times*; in the knapsacks of high school students and hitchhikers.”⁷ Indeed, a search on the Internet bookseller amazon.com’s web site for the keyword “autobiography” yields 32,000 hits, and ProQuest’s Digital Dissertation database lists 470 dissertations written with the word “autobiography” in the title between 1970 and 2000. If the Digital Dissertation search is expanded to search for “autobiography” as a “keyword,” it reveals that at least 1,940 dissertations written between 1970 and 2000 engage the subject of autobiography.⁸ In 1982 Albert Stone estimated that upwards of 10,000 autobiographies of Americans alone had been published.⁹

Why has this become the age of the memoir? James Olney speculates that the growing critical interest in studying autobiography that began to intensify in the late 1960’s is due to “something...deeply embedded in the times and in the contemporary

⁶ William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 3.

⁷ Albert Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), xiii.

⁸ For information about the Digital Dissertation Database, see <http://www.umi.com/>.

⁹ Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions*, 3.

psyche.”¹⁰ It does seem true that there is something in the contemporary psyche that draws people not only to autobiography but to other media that offer a kind of mediated intimacy as well. We are drawn to reality television shows like MTV’s “Real World,” that allow viewers to figuratively enter someone else’s living room and partake in a slick, edited version of a stranger’s life. Tabloids full of sensationalized gossip and Internet chat rooms brimming with anonymous, real time confessions have also fed a collective appetite for the voyeuristic, the intensely personal. Perhaps reading literary autobiography is a high brow manifestation of the same impulse vicariously to live another person’s experience.

It is difficult to speculate on the origins of the modern craving for details about others’ lives. Perhaps this curiosity isn’t really a modern phenomenon but instead the technological and social realities of our present era (television, cheap paperback books, ideas about freedom of the press) simply make it easier to sate ourselves. However, I will speculate that the drive to study (rather than to write or to casually read) the memoir is a response not just to a vague impulse in our collective psyche but also to market forces. The sheer volume of autobiographies being published demands that on some level, any serious reader, and certainly any literary scholar, must contend with the genre. In the end, the discipline of literary criticism is dependent on the publishing industry for its viability. Although studying rare manuscripts, unpublished diaries, and obscure works long since out of print are valuable enterprises and of great interest to specialists of various kinds, we are naïve if we think that the academy and the marketplace are not directly linked. For the most part, books must be printed before critics can evaluate,

¹⁰ James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 11.

analyze, and dissect them. Literary criticism frequently holds little interest to the casual reader and holds none at all when the subject of such criticism is obscure.

Autobiographies sell; thus autobiographies are printed. Autobiographies are printed; thus autobiographies are analyzed by critics.

Along with the marketplace the autobiographical turn can be linked to changes in the academy and politics as well. The decline of the New Criticism coincides with the emergence of autobiography studies. New Criticism's emphasis on the formal features of a work of literature rather than on the authors' role in creating that work made it ill suited for autobiographical criticism, as did the New Critical tendency to privilege poetry over prose, especially nonfiction prose.¹¹ James Cox provocatively suggests that the political situation of the 1960's and 1970's is partially responsible for heightened interest in the autobiography, on the part both of critics and of casual readers. He argues:

When politics and history become dominant realities for the imagination, then the traditional prose forms of essay and autobiography both gain and attract power, and the more overtly "literary" forms of prose fiction—the novel and the short story—are likely to be threatened or impoverished.¹²

Although Cox almost certainly understates the manifold ways in which prose fiction can be utilized for political purposes, his linkage of the autobiographical with the political certainly resonates, particularly in the tradition of African American autobiographies, which are frequently overtly political in purpose and in content. It is also true that an extraordinary number of 1960's activists have written autobiographies about their experiences in that decade, suggesting that the historical climate of the 1960's may indeed have had a role in ushering in the autobiographical turn.

¹¹ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 184.

¹² Cox, *Recovering*, 9.

However, it seems clear that we should be asking a question much more fundamental than that of why critics are studying autobiography. The short answer to that question seems to be because autobiography is there to be studied. Instead we should be asking why writers and general readers are turning to the autobiography in such droves. Jill Ker Conway suggests, and I suspect she is right, that the sudden interest in autobiography “lies not in theory but in cultural history.”¹³ Conway observes that modern readers cannot image the excitement felt by the New York readers who gathered at the docks in the 1840’s to wait for the next installment of Charles Dickens’ *Old Curiosity Shop*. Contemporary accounts report that the readers were so impatient that before the ship could dock, bystanders began shouting to the ship’s crew asking, “Does Little Nell yet live?”

Contemporary readers have access to a much wider variety of printed material, which can be found in libraries, bookstores, news stands, and even in e-books that can be downloaded from the Internet. We are saturated with stories in print, on television, at the movies. Fiction has become, in some respects, less exhilarating as the plot conventions become more familiar. We are so used to fiction that, according to Conway, we no longer fully suspend our disbelief when we read it. She argues that “virtually the only prose narratives which are accorded the suspension of disbelief today are the autobiographers’ attempts to narrate the history of real life.”¹⁴

¹³ Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 4.

¹⁴ Conway, *When Memory*, 5.

Autobiographies, unlike fiction, claim to be true.¹⁵ While claiming to be true, many still read like novels rather than like most forms of “nonfiction,” replete with footnotes and diagrams, the apparatus of fact. The combination of truth claims and reader friendly narrative prose is irresistible to many casual readers who read autobiography as the unmediated truth of someone else’s life. James Olney suggests that readers are fascinated by reading about other “selves” because of uncertainty over their own identities. According to Olney, our collective fascination with the genre reveals “an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted.”¹⁶

Most autobiographies give insights into how others live their lives and fashion their own identities. We want to know what it is like to experience “real life” from another person’s perspective. We are searching for inspiration, life lessons, role models. Conversely we also read autobiography searching for titillation and an occasion to claim moral superiority or to pass judgement on another person’s choices.

Conway argues that many people read the autobiography because it contains “the entire span of humanistic inquiry about what it means to be human” without the technical, academic language of “history, psychology, literary criticism, and philosophy.”¹⁷ To Conway, the autobiography is a democratic medium where only literacy rather than scholarly expertise is required to access the genre. Although not all examples of autobiography meet her litmus test of accessibility, many, if not most, do.

¹⁵ After reading a version of this manuscript, Steven C. Tracey made the observation that works of literature often reveal general truths about the human condition. In that sense, fiction can also be regarded as “true.” However, fictional writing does not claim to recount events that actually happened in the “real,” extra-textual world. In that sense fiction, unlike autobiography, does not claim to be “true.”

¹⁶ Olney, *Autobiography*, 23.

¹⁷ Conway, 17.

Readers from various backgrounds are equipped to and, perhaps even more importantly, *inclined* to read autobiographies. This is not the case for many other kinds of texts including those of most academic disciplines and much modern literature. Instinctively, readers from various backgrounds know that they get access to something uniquely valuable through the lens of the autobiography. Indeed, the purpose of this dissertation will be to highlight just one of the many lenses through which we can read the autobiography, the historical.

The Advent of Autobiographical Criticism: A Brief Literature Review

Although many casual readers read autobiography primarily to find out about other people's lives, for theorists, the relationship between life and autobiography is frequently less clear. Contemporary autobiographical theory began with the publication of Georges Gusdorf's 1956 essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." Gusdorf conceptualizes the genre as a primarily Western phenomenon written by men who possess a certain feeling of personal importance and a desire to recapture their pasts and to inscribe their own image onto the historical record. Gusdorf's emphasis is on the act of writing the autobiography itself; this process is, according to Gusdorf, an important part of the autobiographer's life. Reliving one's past through the vehicle of autobiography is in many senses superior to the initial life experiences, Gusdorf argues, because "autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it."¹⁸ Louis A. Renza echoes Gusdorf's conception of autobiography by claiming "autobiography is the writer's attempt to

¹⁸ Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in James Olney ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 38.

elucidate his present, not his past.”¹⁹ James Olney, one of the most outspoken champions of the field of autobiographical studies, shares Gusdorf’s viewpoint that autobiography reveals the present consciousness of the autobiographer rather than a historically grounded depiction of the past. Through the process of writing, Olney argues, the autobiographer “half discovers, half creates” herself.²⁰

In asserting that present states of consciousness alter (or in his formulation, improve) memories of past events, Gusdorf launched the modern critical impulse not just to focus on the end result of autobiographical writing but to reflect as well upon the process of writing itself. His seminal essay, “Conditions and Limits” raises many questions that still occupy autobiographical theorists, including: What bearing does autobiography have on a “real” past? How reliable are memories? How does one gauge autobiographical “truth”? What is the relationship between the autobiographer herself and the representation of herself in the text?

Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) asks if the autobiographer, whether in the name of aesthetic beauty or narrative clarity, imposes a “design” on her life story, which fundamentally alters the literal truth of her life. However, Pascal is ultimately more adept at raising provocative questions than in answering them. In the end he decides to embrace as authentic autobiographies (which presumably do not altogether sacrifice “truth” to design) works that resonate with his own internal barometer, which measures “the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing.”²¹ Thirty years later, Timothy Dow Adams

¹⁹ Louis A. Renza, “The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography,” *New Literary History* 9 (1977): 3.

²⁰ Olney, *Autobiography*, 21.

²¹ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 60.

reopens some of these same questions in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990), even echoing Pascal in entitling his first chapter “Design and Lie in Modern American Autobiography.” Adams does not take autobiographers to task for veering from the literal truths of their lives. Instead he suggests reading for “narrative truth” rather than historical truth and claims that “the truth of one’s self can be very different from the truth of one’s life.”²² The choice to lie in autobiography is, according to Dow, strategic and, drawing on the tools of psychoanalysis, he claims ultimately every bit as revealing as the attempt of autobiographers to tell the truth. Similarly, John Sturrock argues, “whatever an autobiographer writes, however wild or deceitful, cannot but count as testimony. It is impossible, that is, for an autobiographer not to be autobiographical.”²³ Thus, it is the self that is revealed in autobiography, even in spite of the autobiographer’s intentions to conceal. Historical accuracy, however, is much more evasive.

Most autobiographical theorists working in the field today share Adams’ skepticism that the autobiography is a good source of historical truth, and many even dispute the idea that autobiography is a source of personal truth. Many critics are skeptical of the autobiography’s power to reveal truth about the self because they are uncertain about how to define the autobiographical subject in the first place. Paul L. Jay describes the “problem of the subject” this way:

We have become accustomed, when thinking about the concept of a thinking or a writing “subject,” at once to demystify and problematize that concept, to understand it as having reference less to a Natural, privileged, and potentially unified psychological *condition*, than to a historically constituted set of *ideas* and

²² Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 11.

²³ John Sturrock, “The New Model Autobiographer,” *New Literary History* 9 (1977): 52.

assumptions whose referents are complexly dispersed in the very language which seeks to constitute them.²⁴

Anxiety over the constitution of the subject raises a number of questions about subjectivity and identity. Does a stable, unified subject exist outside of the autobiographical text, or is the subject created in the act of writing? What is the relationship between the conscious subject who presumes to know and the unconscious? To what extent does an autobiographer's identity as reflected in the text mirror societal expectations? What is the relationship between an individual subject and the social, ethnic, and gender groups to which a subject belongs?

While describing the changing concept of the subject, Jay also identifies another topic that has preoccupied autobiographical theorists: the problem of language. Taking the postmodern turn and following the lead of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, many theorists have also argued that after the text of the autobiography is created, it separates from the author and takes on a life of its own. The textual depiction of the self is completely and eternally separated from the self who writes. Furthermore, the theory goes, we cannot establish reference between the language of the text and corresponding objects, events, and people in the outside world; therefore the autobiographical text refers endlessly only to itself.

No one has more emphatically attempted to sever author from text than Roland Barthes, who in 1977 declared "the death of the author." For Barthes, intransitive language, which is not designed directly to interact with reality, undergoes a "disconnection...[and afterwards] the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his

²⁴ Paul L. Jay, "Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject," *MLN* 97, No. 5 (1982): 1045-46.

own death.”²⁵ Barthes declares liberation from the “tyranny” of authors and from the notion of “a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God).”²⁶ In some respects this dramatic declaration has fairly limited implications for the analysis of poetry or fiction; the New Criticism declared texts ontologically independent from their authors long before 1977. However, the implications for autobiography are much more severe. Autobiography is defined by an identity between subject and author, if the author is removed from the equation, generic definitions are plunged into crisis.

To Derrida, autobiography should be read as “thanatography,” derived from *thanatos*, the Greek word for death. Derrida observes that the proper name of any individual outlives her, and every time someone signs her proper name or attempts to achieve immortality through the autobiography, she is really announcing her own death, the moment when only the proper name will exist. He writes:

In calling or naming someone when he is alive, we know that his name can survive him and already survives him; the name begins during his life to get along without him speaking and bearing his death each time it is inscribed in a list, or a civil registry, or a signature.²⁷

Thus for Derrida, although the autobiography purports to mirror the life of a living author, it is in actuality announcing that author’s death.

For Paul De Man, autobiography is “prosopopoeia,” a Greek word meaning “face making.” In writing autobiography, an author attempts to create a realistic face or mask of herself in the text. However, the mask that is created is merely textual, dependent on metaphorical language and tropes. According to De Man, “To the extent that language is

²⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.

²⁶ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 146.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 49. For a brief discussion of Derrida and autobiography, see Linda Anderson *Autobiography*, 79-86.

figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute.”²⁸ Thus we are back to the old deconstructionist dilemmas: there is no escape from language; there are no fixed meanings. Like Derrida, De Man reads death in the autobiographical project, claiming that “death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.”²⁹

Unsurprisingly the tendency to deconstruct autobiography, which ostensibly chronicles and celebrates a life, into a discourse of death has met with a great deal of resistance. Albert Stone bypasses the postmodern challenge altogether in *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*. He matter-of-factly restores authors to texts and reads autobiographies as a source of truth about the self as well as a source of historical truth. According to Stone, “no other mode of American expression seems to have more widely or subtly reflected the diversities of American experience or the richness of American memories and imaginations.”³⁰ Stone reads autobiography to gain insights into a reality (in this case “the American experience”) that exists outside of the text, thus restoring the context missing from the assumption that there are only texts. Increasingly many literary critics are rebelling against the textualization of reality and are beginning to restore both authors and historical contexts to literary criticism. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese acerbically notes, “literary critics, surfeited with the increasingly recognized excesses of post-structuralist criticism... discovered history.”³¹ These important theoretical shifts have had a significant impact on autobiography studies.

²⁸ Paul De Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” *Modern Language Notes* 97, no. 5 (1979): 930.

²⁹ De Man, 930.

³⁰ Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions*, 11.

³¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism,” *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Heser, (New York, Routledge: 1989), 213.

Paul John Eakin confronts many poststructuralist assumptions head-on and has been outspoken in his effort to restore both authors and reference to autobiography. He proclaims, “autobiography is nothing if not a referential art, and the self or subject is its principal referent.”³² In *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, Eakin examines Barthes’ autobiographical writings and argues that no less a proponent of the separation of authors from texts than Barthes himself was ambivalent about his theories. According to Eakin, “at the end of the 1970’s when critics like Michael Sprinker and Paul De Man were announcing the death of the self, the deconstruction of reference as illusion, and the end of autobiography, Barthes was turning toward reference, autobiography, and a more conventional (even bourgeois) view of the subject.”³³

According to Laura Marcus resistance to the poststructuralist attempt to separate autobiographers from their texts is strongest among “groups for whom self as agency is a crucial political and personal postulate.”³⁴ If death rather than agency is inscribed on the autobiographical act as Derrida and De Man assert, the results are politically damning for marginalized groups who have typically used autobiography as a political tool.

In the African-American context, the slave narratives, and the later Jim Crow autobiographies which comprise the subject of this dissertation, were used as political tools to expose the cruel realities of white oppression in the hopes of pricking the conscience of their readers. According to John Blassingame, “the autobiography was a counterweight to the white historian’s caricature of black life. In the autobiography the

³² Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

³³ Eakin, *Touching*, 22.

³⁴ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 210.

black man ceased to be a shuffling, contented darkey singing his way through slavery.”³⁵ If the autobiography is viewed only as a self-reflexive text rather than as a testimony of a real historical moment that exists outside of the text, then the autobiographer as political agent becomes impotent in her attempt to effect political and social change. The political autobiography is written in the hope that the text will inspire its readers to effect change in a real world that exists outside the text; therefore a relationship between the text and a world external to it must be established. Furthermore, autobiographies written by members of historically marginalized groups are often used to assert individual and collective identities to a society that denies them full personhood and citizenship. If the author of the autobiography is presumed dead, then the assertion of agency through the act of writing becomes impossible.

Feminist critics have echoed many of these same concerns when writing about women’s autobiographies. Many feminists, even those who might have no qualms about deconstructing a white, male subject, are reluctant to countenance the deconstruction of texts written by women. Nicole Ward Jouve argues, “You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it.”³⁶

Criticism of African-American autobiographies and criticism of autobiographies written by women have become significant and sizable sub-fields of autobiography studies as a whole. A quick survey of the titles of books in the sub-field of African American autobiography studies reveals that there is a pronounced emphasis on the historical experiences of African Americans as well as on the agency of the autobiographical subject. Consider, for example, the titles of three studies of

³⁵ John Blassingame, “Black Autobiographies as History and Literature,” *The Black Scholar* 5, (1974): 7.

³⁶ Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

autobiography published between 1995 and 2000 : *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths* (1995) by V.P. Franklin, *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom* (2000) by Roland Leander Williams, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (2000) by Margo V. Perkins. African American autobiographers are depicted actively as “living,” “telling,” “questing,” and “acting.” Studies of this kind have made such significant inroads that they are increasingly drowning out deconstructionist criticism that denies authors agency and removes historical context.

In spite of the wealth of autobiographical criticism and the contentious debates over issues such as truth telling in autobiography, the relationship of author to text, and the value of autobiography as historical evidence, autobiographical critics have yet to reach a consensus on one of the most fundamental questions underlying the field: What is an autobiography? Before I can assert that autobiographies are valuable historical resources, I must tackle this issue. We cannot hope to mine life writing for historical insights until we have devised a method for identifying autobiographies.

CHAPTER 2

THE QUESTION OF GENRE

Representative Autobiographies and Twentieth Century Re-Presentations

The term “autobiography” has its origins in the late eighteenth century and was created from three Greek elements, “autos-bios-graphē,” which translate to “self-life-writing.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first usage of the word in the *Monthly Review* in 1797. The first published book to proclaim itself an “autobiography,” *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister* by W.P. Scargill, appeared in 1834.³⁷ However, it is by no means considered the “first” autobiography. Attempts at life writing date back at least to the publication of Augustine’s *Confessions* in the fifth century A.D.

Prior to the twentieth century, literary scholars had identified and canonized only a handful of autobiographies as representative of the genre. Overwhelmingly, these representative autobiographies were written by men in the Western tradition. These early autobiographies are all, in a sense, success stories, which celebrate the uniqueness of the autobiographer himself and then chronicle his development as an individual. One of the earliest autobiographies of this type, which served as a prototype for many other autobiographers, is Augustine’s *Confessions*. Roy Pascal has deemed *Confessions* the “first great” autobiography.³⁸ For Augustine, success is measured in spiritual terms. His *Confessions* is an account of his conversion to Christianity. Throughout this early autobiography, he recounts his early life, education, and travels from the perspective of an enlightened convert who is pained by his previous worldliness and folly and grateful

³⁷ Olney, *Autobiography*, 5.

³⁸ Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 22.

to God for his present state of spiritual evolution.³⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, published posthumously in 1781, is a secular descendant of Augustine's *Confessions*. Rousseau is a progenitor and champion of the Romantic ideal of individualism. For Rousseau, success in the autobiographical project as in life is in telling the truth about himself and celebrating his own uniqueness. Rousseau begins his *Confessions* by proclaiming:

I HAVE begun on a work which is without precedent, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself. I have studied mankind and know my heart; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality...⁴⁰

Rousseau's proclamation of his own originality has been variously echoed in autobiographies ever since. Indeed the idea of a unique self and a unique subjective experience has under-girded the autobiographical impulse from Augustine up until the present. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is a distinctly American counterpart to Rousseau's *Confessions*. Franklin too is conscious of his own uniqueness but tells his life story not just to celebrate and explore his personality but also for the purposes of instruction. In his account of his "emerg[ence] from the poverty and obscurity in which [he] was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world," he sets his life up as a model for others to follow and helps usher in the rags to riches mythology of the American dream. In his estimation, his own life is exceptional and on that basis "fit to be imitated."⁴¹ Franklin's autobiography confirms Georges

³⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (c. 398-400). An on line version of the text is available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm>.

⁴⁰ Jean-Jacque Rosseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (1782). An on line version of the text is available at http://www.orst.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/confessions/Rousseau_Book1.html.

⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (1791). An on line version of the text is available at <http://earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/index.html>.

Gusdorf's somewhat offhanded observation that "the man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of special interest."⁴²

Many of the conventions established in these early autobiographies endure as the genre enters the twenty-first century, but the formulas have grown increasingly complicated, and the autobiographical subject has become ever more diverse. For example, conversion narratives of various kinds have been a mainstay of the genre from Augustine onwards, but many recent autobiographies rebel against Augustine's model even as they embrace it. Carolyn Briggs' *This Dark World: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost* (2002) is, in many respects, an anti-conversion narrative or perhaps conceptualized differently, a double conversion. Briggs' autobiography is told from the perspective of a mature narrator who converted to Christianity as a young woman but who later rejected the teachings of the church and writes from the perspective of a backslid convert/ reborn humanist. At the end of the memoir, she is sitting on an airplane half-fearful that a wrathful God will send the plane full of innocent people plunging into the ocean in order to punish her for her spiritual waywardness. She is simultaneously half-relieved to be freed from the strictures of mind-numbing fundamentalist religion. In the end, she rejects the easy answers of religion and decides to embrace uncertainty and make her own decisions:

I realized that I should repent, that now was the time to repent, to beg God's mercies before I died and stood before his throne of judgement...I opened my pretzels. I watched the movie without putting on the headphones, but I did not repent of anything.⁴³

⁴² Georges Gusdorf, "The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney, 29.

⁴³ Carolyn S. Briggs, *This Dark World: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 303-304.

Briggs improvises on Augustine's mode by ultimately rejecting her faith as well as by conceiving of the religious seeker as a female subject.

In some respects *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a conversion narrative that follows the tradition of Augustine more closely. Like Augustine, Malcolm's conversion narrative is told from the perspective of a spiritually evolved narrator who looks upon his life prior to conversion with dismay. However, unlike Augustine, who crafted his own autobiography single-handedly and is solely responsible for his language selection as well as for his recollection of events, Malcolm's autobiography was a collaborative effort with Alex Haley. Malcolm closely monitored Haley's efforts and insisted that "Nothing can be in the book's manuscript that I didn't say, and nothing can be left out that I want in."⁴⁴ However, in allowing Haley to choose the language that would be used to articulate Malcolm's story, Malcolm undeniably gave up some control over his autobiographical image. Furthermore, it is impossible to know to what extent Haley's word choices, biases, and own life experiences somehow altered Malcolm's testimony and even Malcolm's own perception of himself. Suddenly the question of genre becomes muddled. Is Malcolm's collaborative life story as much an autobiography as Augustine's independent effort?

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* echoes Rousseau's celebration of individuality but she does so from an African-American, female perspective. As a free-spirited black woman who came of age in a racist, sexist society with proscribed expectations for persons of her background, she saw her unique personality as both a blessing and a curse. At one point, Hurston moans, "I had a feeling of difference from my fellow men, and I did not want it to be found out. Oh, how I cried

⁴⁴ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 387.

out to be just as everybody else!”⁴⁵ To Hurston, who lived in a society that did not ascribe full personhood to African-American women like herself, individuality felt like both an asset and a liability. Blending in rather than standing out seemed to be her best hope for survival in a racist society that resented evidence of her strong and independent spirit, which remained eternally unbowed to Jim Crow expectations.

Furthermore, unlike Rousseau who pledges to tell the truth and to “loudly proclaim, ‘Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I,’” Hurston has a more flexible vision of autobiographical veracity.⁴⁶ Hurston’s version of her life story does not follow a neat chronology. She omits significant events in her life, and not every incident she recounts is literally verifiable. Barbara Johnson has suggested that *Dust Tracks* is a kind of “trickster tale” where truths about herself are deeply imbedded in her style of storytelling.⁴⁷ Hurston’s style of truth telling in contrast to that of Rousseau demonstrates another way in which the genre of autobiography has become increasingly more complex, due in part to changing historical contexts.

Much contemporary autobiography since Benjamin Franklin has maintained his assertion that life writing can be instructional. However, the type of instruction often varies wildly from Franklin’s prescription for the achievement of material wealth and political power. Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dreams* is an account of her attempts to overcome her racist socialization as a white southerner, and she hopes her white readership will follow her example and come to terms with their own deeply held racism. Blanch McCray Boyd’s *The Redneck Way of Knowledge* somewhat pessimistically

⁴⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writing* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 597.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, Book I.

⁴⁷ Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 328

tackles the same issue. Boyd abandons the moral highroad inhabited by Smith when she unflinchingly declares, “like every white American I’ve ever encountered, I am a racist.”⁴⁸

Boyd recalls an event that happened to her in the tenth grade, when she and some girlfriends accidentally ran over and killed an African-American man while driving down a South Carolina country road late one night. As she stared at the man’s bleeding body, which was wedged under the car, she tried to absolve herself of guilt saying, “It’s just niggers, isn’t it?”⁴⁹ Despite the racist training of her youth, she could not escape from what she had done, however unintentionally. She spends the rest of her young adulthood fleeing from the memory of that night by embracing radical politics, relocating to California where she participated in consciousness raising exercises and dialogues about race, and later experimenting with communal living in Vermont. However, she eventually becomes disillusioned with the tokenism of white liberals who claim to be racial egalitarians and calculatingly maintain a black “friend” or two to invite to cocktail parties to vouchsafe for their host’s liberal credentials. Fed up with hypocrisy and tokenism, she declared, “I couldn’t stop being white, so I stopped being political.”⁵⁰ Even as she is revealing her own deeply held racism as well as that of her readers, she is despairing ever finding a solution to the problem. She is in the peculiar position of trying to teach a lesson that she herself has never been able to learn. Thus unlike Franklin who blithely outlines a formula for American success, Boyd is a distinctly twentieth century autobiographer who implicitly questions Franklin’s self-satisfaction and easy answers.

⁴⁸ Blanch McCrary Boyd, *The Redneck Way of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 145.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 149.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 154.

Autobiography in the twentieth century has traveled far from its roots in the writings of Augustine, Rousseau, and Franklin. The greater democratization of education has led to increased rates of literacy, particularly among women and among historically oppressed ethnic groups, in the United States. Increased literacy has led to a much larger pool of potential autobiographers as well as to a wider readership. The genre is no longer the domain of educated men. However, despite these changes in the authorship of autobiography, many of the essential elements have remained intact. The core themes of personal evolution and the value of the individual experience are typically still found in contemporary autobiography. Even these characteristics may be moderated with a greater willingness to acknowledge personal failures as well as successes and a tendency to view one's life as something other than a linear progression towards a more highly evolved self (whether spiritually, monetarily etc.).

Also typically intact is the commonplace assumption on the part of the autobiographer that there is a union between the subject of the autobiography and the author of the autobiography. However, some modern autobiographers, most notably Roland Barthes, have deliberately begun to toy with this concept. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* bears only the faintest resemblance to autobiographical prototypes such as Rousseau's *Confessions*. Barthes' autobiography, if indeed the generic label is appropriate, is fragmented with no coherent narrative structure or sense of chronology. The text is interspersed with occasional photographs, facsimiles of some of Barthes' work, musical notations, and even doodles, which Barthes refers to as "the signifier without the signified."⁵¹

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 187.

Despite these unorthodoxies, the casual reader unversed in postmodern autobiographical criticism might still find it impossible to read *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* without assuming a reference between the author, the actual living and breathing Roland Barthes who composed the text and the Roland Barthes discussed in the text, whom the author refers to as “R.B.” After all, they share the same name, and the text contains many photographs of Barthes’ mother, who one assumes is mother to both the Roland Barthes who writes and the one who is written of. Barthes himself never says otherwise and seems to imply that photography is an inherently more referential medium than writing. So if, according to Barthes, there is some referential relationship between the physical, living being of his mother and her representation in a photograph, what is the relationship of the representation of Barthes who writes and R.B. who is written of?

Barthes make the assumption of a referential relationship between himself and what he writes about (presumably) himself an uncomfortable one, but he is inevitably unable to completely separate the author from the subject. Written in his own handwriting on the first page of the text, Barthes declares “It must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.”⁵² Barthes’ perception of his “autobiography” is completely contrary to the typical autobiographical project. He says, “I do not say, ‘I am going to describe myself’ but: ‘I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.’ I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination.”⁵³ In formulating his autobiography as a text with a life of its own rather than as a mirror pointed at himself, Barthes proclaims that his text owes felicity to no one, least of all himself.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 56.

The publication of Barthes' anti-autobiography adds another confusing dimension to an already bewildering proliferation of variations on the autobiographical models of Augustine, Rousseau, and Franklin. This is further complicated by the publication of novels written to appear like autobiographies, such as Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman* and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, and autobiographies written to appear like novels, such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Given these variations, it is no wonder that theorists have had a difficult time defining the genre of the autobiography. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I believe it is necessary to establish a working definition of autobiography; for it is impossible to claim that they are uniquely valuable historical resources without showing how these valuable historical tools can be identified. Therefore, I must examine the complicated question of generic classification of the autobiography and then outline the principals I used to select the autobiographies under consideration in Part II.

Genre

Autobiography is a peculiar genre, which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other. Memoirs claim to convey facts and are rooted in real historical events, thus making them appear to be logical resources for the writing of history. However--and this is particularly true in the case of memoirs written by professional writers--autobiographies utilize literary devices and aesthetic power to render emotional truths that cannot be conveyed through a mere recitation of facts.

Despite these obvious parallels with history and literature, it is inadequate to describe the memoir using a strict literature/ history dichotomy. The autobiographer assumes the role of literary artist in the process of actually writing her book, of historian

when claiming to accurately describe past events, and of something else altogether when commenting on events as they unfold or when reflecting broadly on the social structure of her community. The autobiographer frequently assumes the role of lay sociologist and cultural critic, and the autobiographer always functions as a cultural anthropologist of sorts. For what is the autobiographer if not a participant-observer living her life with a critical eye and then reporting her findings later?

The autobiography is a distinct thing in and of itself. It is not merely a peculiar kind of novel or a first-person history. However, theorists most frequently position autobiography between the poles of history and literature, describing it as James Olney did as something of a “stepchild” of each discipline. Herbert Leibowitz also utilizes a familial analogy to characterize the genre, but he describes it as a “foster child” of literature, implying that it has no direct biological descent but has instead been adopted by the field.⁵⁴ Leibowitz’s characterization may be in a sense more accurate if we conceptualize autobiography as a unique genre rather than a mysterious hybrid. However, even if we do characterize it as sort of a crossbreed between history and literature, its adoption by literature rather than history was not a foregone conclusion.

Up until the nineteenth century autobiographies (frequently referred to as “memoirs”) were generally conceived of as historical writings.⁵⁵ However, this was to change with the professionalization of the historical profession and the accompanying adoption of the Rankean paradigm of history as objective. Memoirs, being anything but objective, no longer qualified as history, which was now the domain of a new class of professional historians. Shunned by history, literature was originally reluctant

⁵⁴ Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1989), xvii.

⁵⁵ Marcus Billson, “The Memoir: New Perspectives on a Forgotten Genre,” *Genre* 10, No. 2 (1977): 263.

wholeheartedly to adopt autobiography because of its claim of reference to real events. Surely the relationship with real events would place strictures on the imaginative aspects of the writing, and the autobiography could not be as finely crafted as fiction. Besides, the genre had been tainted by its long association with history (which now proclaimed itself a “science”), and literature was, of course, considered *art*. This stalemate more or less held until the advent of autobiographical criticism in the twentieth century. Now that autobiography has been adopted as an appropriate subject for literary studies, how are literary scholars defining the genre? Or are they attempting to define it at all?

Although coming from quite different critical positions, James Olney and Paul de Man are equally skeptical about the possibility of coming up with a workable generic definition of the autobiography. Olney claims that “autobiography, like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other.”⁵⁶

Similarly, de Man writes:

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition: each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps, most revealing of all, generic discussions... remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.⁵⁷

Olney’s belief about the impossibility of defining “autobiography” puts him in the peculiar position of devoting his life to the study of something he cannot quite define. If autobiography indeed “refuses to stay still” long enough for us to recognize it, how can we possibly study it? The entire field of autobiography studies rests on the assumption that autobiographies have unique properties that distinguish them from other forms of

⁵⁶ Olney, *Autobiography*, 23-24.

⁵⁷ De Man, 240.

literature. If that were not so, why is not the study of autobiography subsumed under another kind of literature? So, what makes autobiography distinct from other kinds of literature? This is not a trivial question and is one that needs to be answered before we can begin to contemplate using autobiography as a historical resource.

Olney's writings in the field of autobiographical studies have been prolific, and he is comfortable making a number of generalizations about how autobiography functions and what autobiography reveals. How can he do this if he can't even comfortably define the object of his study? The truth is, he does provide us with some clues about how he recognizes an autobiography when he sees one. One of the ways that Olney defines "autobiography" is in opposition to biography. Biography, he leads us to believe, is a fairly straightforward genre, much easier to classify than autobiography. Biography is an account of a person's life, which is written by someone else. On that basis, we could think of autobiography as a subcategory of biography. Indeed that is how Jean Starbowski defines the genre: "A biography of a person written by himself: this definition of autobiography establishes the intrinsic character of the enterprise and thus the general (and generic) conditions of autobiographical writing."⁵⁸ However, Olney is not content with that straightforward definition, for he tells us that biography is "tied more closely" to history, while autobiography is much closer to the "creative and imaginative world of literature."⁵⁹

So what is it that "elevates" (for indeed that is Olney's implied assumption), the autobiography from a kind of historical writing to a form of literature? The answer seems

⁵⁸ Jean Starobinkski, "The Style of Autobiography," *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York, Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁵⁹ James Olney, "(Auto)biography," *The Southern Review* 22 (1986): 428.

to be “the presence of an authorial ‘I.’”⁶⁰ The presence of the self-reflexive “I” in the text and identification between author and subject makes the autobiography a unique “self-critical act,” unique partially because “the criticism of autobiography exists *within* the literature instead of alongside it.”⁶¹ A poet or a novelist generally does not comment on the text or the process of writing it within the text itself. That kind of thing must be left to essays published elsewhere or to interviews with the author. The reader of the primary text may not be exposed to these external resources or may choose to ignore them. This is not the case for the autobiography, where the process of writing is part of the author’s life and thus part of the subject of the autobiographical undertaking. The presence of the “authorial ‘I,’” which Olney identifies appears again and again as the benchmark of autobiography in generic discussions. Before returning to this subject, let us see what De Man has to say about the question of genre.

De Man posits autobiography as “a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.”⁶² An autobiographical “moment” happens, he argues, whenever an author “declares himself the subject of his own understanding” or anytime a “text is stated to be *by* someone and to be understandable to the extent that this is the case.” This leads De Man to somewhat derisively declare that “any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent autobiographical.”⁶³ Reading “autobiographically” sounds a great deal like the New Critical “intentional fallacy” and highlights one of the junctures where the unlikely allies of deconstruction and New Criticism collide. In

⁶⁰ Olney, “(Auto)biography,” 429. The “authorial ‘I,’” which is generally present in autobiography, is also capable, Olney tells us, of transforming biography into a work of art. This happens when the biographer makes her presence felt in the text. Although some autobiographers (such as Henry Adams) have chosen to write in the third person, the vast majority of life writing is written in the first person.

⁶¹ Olney, *Autobiography*, 25.

⁶² De Man, 921.

⁶³ De Man, 922.

describing the “intentional fallacy,” W.M. Wimsatt, emphatically states that “design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”⁶⁴ Both De Man and Wimsatt favor stripping texts from contexts—both authorial and historical—and thus reading autobiographically appears to be a lapse in judgement or an indication of critical naivete.

De Man is not alone in his assertion that autobiography is a mode of reading rather than of writing, but other critics have described it positively as a collaboration of author, text, and reader rather than as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of a literary text. H. Porter Abbot argues, “To read autobiographically is to ask of the text: How does this reveal the author?”⁶⁵ Reading autobiographically does not mean that the critic naively takes the autobiographer’s word at face value and assumes that the autobiography is an accurate mirror reflecting the author’s true self and the historical truth of the time period she lived in. Instead, the critic keeps an analytical eye on the author and is “aware...of the author present in the text, pushing and shoving the facts, coloring events.”⁶⁶ Francis Hart also suggests that autobiography is a function of the reader, claiming that there is nothing in a text itself to distinguish history from fiction. “Response,” he argues, “is determined strictly by the expectation the reader brings.”⁶⁷

The idea that readers create meanings both about how a text should be received and about how it should be interpreted is neither a new idea nor an uncomfortable one when it comes to imaginative literature. Critics such as David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, and Stanley Fish have long argued provocatively that readers play an

⁶⁴ W.M. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), 3.

⁶⁵ H. Porter Abbot, “Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories,” *New Literary History* 19, No.3 (1988): 613.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁶⁷ Francis R. Hart, “Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography,” *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 488.

active role in creating meanings, either as individual readers or (in Stanley Fish's formulation) as members of "interpretive communities."⁶⁸ If it is indeed the case that readers (whether on their own or in collusion with authors or texts) create meanings, then there is, as Robert Crosman points out, "no such thing as a 'right reading.'" Readings can be as various as readers.

In an examination of this concept, Crosman writes about a student's reading of William Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily." The student reads Emily as a sympathetic character who reminds her of her own grandmother. The student either ignores or misses completely the significance of the story's final scene, which depicts the corpse of Emily's former suitor, Homer Barron, decomposing in Emily's bed with one of Emily's gray hairs tellingly resting beside him on the pillow.⁶⁹ Rather than pulling his own hair out over what many would construe as an obvious "misreading" of the story's climax, Crosman gamely revisits the text, attempting to pull out some meanings he may have originally missed.

However, Crosman's attempts to demonstrate that there is no "right meaning" by taking seriously a student's literary interpretation ultimately falls flat. In the end, Crosman is "confident that sooner or later she would follow [his] example," implying, of course, that his own reading of the text is somehow superior.⁷⁰ Despite his pretense to the contrary, it is clear that Crosman still views himself as an interpretive authority. Crosman's exercise demonstrates one of the problematic aspects involved in reader-response theory: some readings are clearly inferior to other readings. This problem can be

⁶⁸ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁶⁹ Robert Crosman, "How Readers Make Meaning," *College Literature* 9 (1982):207-215.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 365.

at least partially resolved by theories of ideal readers or by making meaning the product of a community of readers rather than of individuals.

However, the existence of multiple, contradictory, or just plain naïve readings of imaginative texts does not have quite the same significance as multiple readings of an autobiographical text. After all, Emily is a fictional character, as are all of Faulkner's creations. No matter how well drawn fictional characters are, they cannot give the same kinds of historical insights that can be drawn from descriptions of real people. Fictional representations may help describe the ambiance of a historical moment or provide revealing descriptions of historical types. (For example, Faulkner is well known for his descriptions of poor white southerners in the early part of the twentieth century.) However, fictional characters cannot provide us with the kind of concrete historical facts that can be drawn from the life stories of real individuals. A misreading of Emily's story cannot somehow taint the historical record. What if Emily were a real person, a historical subject? If this were the case, a misreading of her life story has much greater consequences.

Autobiographies, however imaginatively written, are about real individuals who as such are subjects of history. If what a reader brings makes a text autobiographical, then the end result is interpretive havoc. If an autobiography is read as a work of literature, such interpretive havoc is of no major consequence. However, if we are reading autobiography as an historical artifact, interpretation must be reined in by historical context, feasibility, and authorial intent. Multiple readings of a text become problematic when our goal in reading autobiography is to gain historical insights and to establish

reference between the autobiographer and a real historical past, which exists outside the text.

Some readings are, from an historical perspective, quite simply, better readings than other readings. These “better readings” are historically grounded and take the author’s intentions into account. What constitutes such a reading and how we can recognize it will be issues we must explore further later in Part I. It is my contention that autobiography does not become autobiography in the moment of reading/ interpretation. The autobiography becomes autobiographical at the moment of creation.

The role of the author in creating meanings and in establishing generic conditions is more central in autobiographical writing than in fiction. The author’s intended meanings, if they can ever be disposed of, cannot be displaced in the autobiography. Intention is the key generic marker of the autobiography. This is a disturbing claim if one’s conception of genre dictates that generic markers must be found within the text itself rather than from sources external to the text, in this instance from the mind of the author. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren’s classic text, *Theory of Literature*, suggests that a “conception of genre should lean to the formalistic side.”⁷¹ However, formalism, with its emphasis on structure, is inadequate to the task of the classification of autobiography, which cannot be structurally distinguished from fiction. The idea that authorial intention is what creates autobiography is, no doubt, also disturbing to some critics who are skeptical about the possibility of ascertaining an author’s intentions in the first place. How can we ever hope to read an author’s mind? How can we know that an author’s stated intentions were indeed her actual intentions? Paisley Livingston accuses the

⁷¹ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956), 233.

Intentional Fallacy crowd of making “an unjustified demand for a kind of infallible justification of proof that is unattainable in any empirical domain.”⁷²

The idea that an author’s intentions should be taken into consideration when interpreting a piece of literature has been the subject of a great deal of debate among philosophers and literary critics over the past fifty years or so. According to Mark Bevir, “The criticism has been so fierce that intentionalism now has about it a definite aura of theoretical naivete.”⁷³ Although opposition to intentionalism has been fairly widespread, the most outspoken detractors have come from the schools of New Criticism, poststructuralism, and reader-response theory.

E.D. Hirsch offers one of the most impassioned defenses of extreme intentionalism or what he calls “the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant.” He argues that literary critics, in their attempts to illuminate meaning, have replaced authors.⁷⁴ These critic-authors produce multiple critical readings of a single work. In order to restore validity of interpretation, Hirsch argues, we must restore authors’ intended meanings because they are the only “compelling normative principle” in an otherwise bewildering profusion of conflicting meanings produced by multiple critic-authors.⁷⁵

Hirsch’s defense of intentionalism on the grounds that an author’s intentions could be used as a kind of arbitrator in interpretive disputes strikes me as neither justifiable nor compelling. Interpretive disputes cannot be decided on the basis of what

⁷² Paisley Livingston, “Intentionalism in Aesthetics,” *New Literary History*, 29.4 (1998): 833.

⁷³ Mark Bevir, “Meaning and Intention: A Defense of Procedural Individualism,” *New Literary History* 31.3 (2000): 385.

⁷⁴ E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

would make for the tidiest solution, and Hirsch does not defend his assumption that there is (or should be) a single, fixed meaning for a text.

Other pro-intentionalist theorists are less likely to view the author's intended meaning as equivalent to a work's total meaning. Paisley Livingston reunites an author's intentions with a work's meaning without simplistically equating the two with his framework of "moderate intentionalism." He defines moderate intentionalism as "the thesis that the *actual* maker(s)' attitudes and doings are responsible for some of the work's content, and as such are a legitimate target of interpretive claims... knowledge of some, but not all intentions is necessary to some, but not all valuable interpretive insights."⁷⁶ Intentionalism of this type does not rule out the possibility of alternate or multiple readings of a text. Nor does it claim that an author's intentions are necessarily realized in the finished product.

Livingston's definition of intentionalism is one that I believe should be applied to autobiographical interpretation. Simultaneously, we must read a literary memoir as a piece of literature, which can be construed as having meanings as various as its readers and also as a historical record, which must be examined as the product of a purposive historical agent. The autobiographer's intentions not only influence the meaning of the autobiographical text, but the author's intentions are also part of the historical record and thus themselves a subject for historical study. They quite simply cannot be dismissed out of hand. Right now I would like to look at one way of framing the intentionalism question that is particularly pertinent to the question at hand, the generic conditions that constitute autobiography.

⁷⁶ Livingston, 835.

Jerrold Levinson makes a valuable distinction between *categorical* intentions and *semantic* intentions. Categorical intentions refer to a maker's decision to make a particular kind of work. This kind of intention "govern[s] not what a work is to mean but how it is to be conceived, approached, classified."⁷⁷ For example, a poet's categorical intention may be to create a poem, which should be regarded as a work of art, rather than to create another form of written communication (for example, a recipe or directions to a party), which is not typically viewed as a work of art. Semantic intentions, on the other hand, refer to what the author intended the words in the text itself to mean.

Although I think both kinds of intention—categorical and semantic—should be taken into account when interpreting autobiographies, in the discussion of genre, categorical intentions are particularly pertinent. Categorical intentions describe the way in which the author (as opposed to the reader) makes a text into an autobiography.

An author's categorical intentions dictate what kind of writing she produces—whether a short story, a poem, or a "to do" list. In deciding what kind of work she will create, an author also dictates (to a certain extent) how the work will be received. No one would subject a "to do" list to literary interpretation. The language of a "to do" list is functional, designed to communicate information, not to constitute a work of art. However, an author could use identical language to that found in a "to do" list, label it a poem, and meet a much different reception. A good example of this concept is the "found poem." A poem is described as "found" when an author rearranges words she either reads or hears (someone else's language) and transforms them into a poem. Consider the

⁷⁷ Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation: A Last Look," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 222.

following example of a found poem by Marcia Southwick, which appeared in *Ploughshares* in 1973:

Found Poem

Recipe For Painting Gates (18th century)

Six pounds: melted pitch.
Half a mutchkin: linseed oil.
One pound: brick dust.
Mix well together.
Use it warm.⁷⁸

What was originally a set of instructions for performing a household chore has been transformed into a “poem” and published in a literary journal. The words themselves did not change as the text was transformed from instructions into a poem. The order, line spacing, and addition of the title “Found Poem” did change and were changed purposively as a manifestation of Marcia Southwick’s intention to write a poem. She makes her intention known to her reader quite simply by calling her work of art a “poem.” It is Southwick’s intention that makes this text a poem (not the words themselves) and dictates how it should be received.

Similarly, it is an author’s intentions that create autobiography. Without knowing an author’s intentions, it is impossible to identify an autobiography because there is nothing structurally different between a novel and an autobiography. We might *suspect* that a text is an autobiography rather than a novel because of the nature of its contents. If the protagonist’s story line seems incomplete and lacks the kind of *dénouement* we have come to expect in a novel we might *guess* that a work is autobiographical and that the ending is incomplete because the author is still living and the “story” of her life still in

⁷⁸ Marcia Southwick, “Found Poem,” *Ploughshares* 1.4 (Summer 1973): 89.

progress. We might *speculate* that a text is autobiography if we notice an extraordinary number of references to real individuals and places. Or we might read a text and note a correspondence between biographical facts in the author's life and some of the events portrayed in the text. On the basis of such, we might *infer* that a text is autobiographical to the extent that there is a resemblance between real life events and those in the text. However, we cannot truly label the text as the autobiography of an individual without her authorization as such. Autobiography is a self-conscious effort to tell a life story and must be distinguished from mere allusions to biographical information.

Elizabeth Bruss has made a useful distinction between the form and function of the autobiography, arguing that there is no distinct autobiographical form but rather that autobiography as a genre can be defined only by examining the way in which autobiography functions. She argues, "The genre does not tell us the style or construction of a text as much as how we should expect to 'take' that style or mode of construction—what force it should have for us."⁷⁹ Drawing upon the works of philosophers of language such as J.L. Austin and John Searle, Bruss conceptualizes autobiography as an "illocutionary act." When an action is performed *in* uttering language, it is described as an "illocutionary act." Examples of illocutionary acts are promising, demanding, and warning. According to Bruss, the types of actions a piece of literature carry out constitute its generic classification. When an author announces her decision to write autobiography, she is actually performing the action of autobiography.

However, genres cannot exist in isolation from other kinds of writing. Bruss argues that we can only gauge the illocutionary force of an autobiography in opposition

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), 4.

to other kinds of writing. In part, we must define autobiography by what it *not*. It is *not* a novel because it purports to tell the truth about a real person. It is *not* a history because its primary concern is one life rather than an historical era.⁸⁰

Bruss argues that generic categories are not fixed and may shift over the course of time. Nonetheless, she identifies three generalizations “about the dimensions of action which are common to...autobiographies” as we define them today. Her first rule states that the autobiographer must be both the subject matter of the autobiography and the creator of the text. The second rule concerns the truth-claims of the text. The autobiographer asserts that the story she is telling is true and can be verified by the reader. Rule three says that the autobiographer believes her own story. If certain events are not literally verifiable, the author was mistaken, not malicious in reporting misinformation.⁸¹

Philippe Lejeune has made another well-known attempt to define autobiography. According to his widely quoted definition, autobiography is a:

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is the individual life, in particular the story of his personality.⁸²

All the tenets of his definition do not necessarily have to be met or met completely in order for Lejeune to label a work an autobiography. For example, if a text occasionally switches into the present tense by including excerpts from diary entries, which are not retrospective, it could still be considered an autobiography. Similarly, even if subject matter besides the author’s personality assumes prominence in the text, it still

⁸⁰ Although historians generally write about particular historical moments rather than isolated individuals, this is not always the case. Biographies are an obvious exception to this generalization.

⁸¹ Bruss, 10-11.

⁸² Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

might be considered autobiography. However, there is one aspect of the autobiography, which is always present. He argues emphatically that “In order for there to be autobiography...the *author*, *narrator*, and *protagonist* must be identical.”⁸³ Lejeune makes a useful distinction between “resemblance” and “identity” in this regard, arguing, “Identity is a *fact* immediately grasped—accepted or refused, at the level of enunciation; resemblance is a *relationship* subject to infinite discussions and nuances, established from the utterance.”⁸⁴ The identification between author and subject does not mean that the protagonist as depicted in the text functions as a mirror absolutely and unambiguously providing a perfect reflection of the author. Linda Anderson notes, “identity” can never be established outside of the intention of the author.⁸⁵ Thus, intention emerges again as the key component in the creation of the autobiography.

If we can recognize an autobiography when we see one quite simply because the author makes it clear that she intends to write autobiography rather than fiction, how does the author make her intentions known? Lejeune argues that an autobiographer establishes an “autobiographical pact” with the reader. The pact assures the reader that the author and subject of the autobiography are the same person and that the text should be read as an autobiography, which contains references to real people, places, and events. The autobiographical pact is signed with the proper name of the author of the text.

We can generally assume that something is an autobiography if the name of the author as printed on the cover is the same as the name of the protagonist in the text.

Lejeune argues that the proper name on the cover of the book is “the only mark in the text

⁸³ Lejeune, 5.

⁸⁴ Lejeune, 21.

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Autobiography*, 2.

of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text.”⁸⁶ Although the correspondence of the proper name as it appears on the title page and in the text itself is a strong indication of intention, it is not a foolproof method for gauging intention. An autobiography written completely in the first person may not use the author’s proper name in the text at all. An author may name a protagonist after herself but make no effort to adhere to the biographical truth of her life in the text. An autobiography written under a pseudonym may exhibit a correspondence between the proper names inside and outside the text, but if the proper name itself is a fiction is the text still autobiography? What about anonymously written “autobiographies”?

Lejeune argues that cases where an identity between author and protagonist is presumed but not affirmed by the author herself should be labeled autobiographical novels. This is the case when the names of protagonist and author do not match. In cases where the author uses a pseudonym, he is willing to grant autobiographical status as long as the names match. In that instance, outside research is needed to verify the real, historical identity of the author/protagonist. Lejeune is reluctant to give an anonymous author the status of autobiographer, regardless of textual clues that label a text an autobiography. He argues, “If anonymity is intentional... the reader is in a state of legitimate distrust.”⁸⁷ The case of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which was originally published anonymously and thus understandably received as autobiography rather than as the novel that it is, seems to justify Lejeune’s suspicions. Nonetheless, one could plausibly argue that if outside evidence reveals the

⁸⁶ Lejeune, 11.

⁸⁷ Lejeune, 19.

identity of the author as well as evidence that the author intended to write autobiography, a text should be read and received as autobiographical.

This “signature” of the autobiographical pact often appears in the title of a work, such as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. It might also appear as a subtitle, which identifies a book as a memoir or autobiography, such as *This Dark World: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost*. This too is not a foolproof method of determining intention because many fictional books such as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* use the word “autobiography” in the title. However, this confusion is generally cleared up by looking at the proper name of the author and the protagonist. In the case of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, there is no correspondence between the name of the protagonist (Jane Pittman) and that of the author (Ernest Gaines), and any generic confusion is quickly clarified.

Both Bruss and Lejeune have established useful frameworks for the generic classification of the autobiography. However, only one tenet of each of their definitions must be met in order for a work to qualify as an autobiography. Namely, the author and the protagonist must be the same person. Some of the other generic laws they have established are less absolute and more subject to interpretation; many of the generic criteria they have established actually raise more questions than they answer. For example, Bruss claims that, “whether or not what is reported can be discredited...the autobiographer purports to believe what he asserts.”⁸⁸ Although in general a good principle, we know that autobiographers sometimes tell blatant lies that they never “purport to believe.” Is a text still an autobiography if it is riddled with deliberate falsehoods? What if there are only one or two such lies?

⁸⁸ Bruss, 11.

Furthermore, does an autobiography (as Lejeune asserts) necessarily have to be retrospective? What if the autobiographer writes about some events even as they are happening but does so with publication in mind rather than with the desire to keep a private journal? Does an autobiography necessarily have to be written in prose? Can't a poem be received as a poet's autobiography if we know it was the poet's intention for it to be read as such? Finally, how do we evaluate whether or not what we are reading is primarily the "story of [a] personality"? Do a certain number of references to people, places, and events external to the development of the personality drag autobiography beyond the point of no return, beyond which it is no longer autobiography but something else?

Many critics, including Lejeune, have indeed argued that if autobiography ceases to be primarily the story of a personality it becomes something else. It becomes a *memoir*, which some critics conceptualize as something distinct from autobiography. I, however, view the memoir as a distinct subcategory of the autobiography. It is a specific kind of autobiography and does not belong to a separate genre altogether. Marcus Billson defines memoir this way:

The memoir recounts a story of the author's witnessing a real past, which he considers to be of extraordinary interest and importance...the memoir attempts to convey the special, unique never to be repeated character of the past...the memoirist must also act as a participant sometime in the narrative.⁸⁹

An implied assumption among many literary critics suggests that the memoir, because it attempts to describe the past, is somehow inferior, or at least less literary than

⁸⁹ See Marcus Billson, "The Memoir: New Perspectives on a Forgotten Genre," *Genre* 10, No. 2 (1977): 261.

the autobiography, which emphasizes the development of the personality of the autobiographer. In making a distinction between the two, Michael Gorra writes:

Autobiography is about fashioning a self, shaping a consciousness, an “I.” But memoir looks out, not in—looks toward the external world in which that self must live and carries a corresponding density of social detail. Memoir seems modest. Autobiography never does.⁹⁰

Although there seems to be nothing “modest” in the exercise of conceiving of oneself as a subject of history and then recording history as personally experienced, the usage of the term “memoir” as something of a pejorative in autobiographical criticism is widespread.⁹¹ Nonetheless, separating autobiographies from memoirs strikes me as a far more hopeless enterprise than the elusive task of adequately defining autobiography in the first place. In most life writing or, perhaps more accurately in most *lives*, the development of the personality and the production of a public persona happen simultaneously and frequently grow or change in response to each other.

I have consciously chosen to label the specific autobiographical works that are the subject of the second half of this dissertation “memoirs.” I have done so in order to emphasize the way that the primary texts that I have chosen engage the past. I chose to do so not because I think they inaccurately reflect the development of the authors’ personalities and internal lives but because my interpretive interest in reading them is primarily a historical one. The development of the personalities of these historical agents is part of the past and thus a legitimate subject for historical inquiry. However, my particular interest is in how these individuals responded to and also helped create the historical circumstances that existed externally to them. In each of the memoirs I have selected, the social realities of the Jim Crow South form the backdrop.

⁹⁰ Michael Gorra, “The Autobiographical Turn,” *Transition*, 0 (1995): 144-45.

⁹¹ Billson, 259-282.

Whether directly or indirectly, the southern memoirist must grapple with racism and segregation. Jim Crow takes on anthropomorphic dimensions, functioning as a character in the southern memoir. The historical setting is not merely exposition but influences the shape of the southern autobiographer's life, including the autobiographical trademark of the "story of the personality." If indeed, as conventional wisdom dictates, the autobiography focuses on what Karl J. Weintraub calls "the inward realm of experience" while memoir is concerned with the "external realm" of fact, the southern autobiographer is necessarily always a memoirist.⁹² The social structure of the Jim Crow south was so entrenched and pervasive that it dictated to a large extent the social sphere that any southerner, regardless of race or class was bound to inhabit. Furthermore, although stories of the personalities of memoirists are themselves part of the historical record, my particular focus will be on how individuals interacted with and perceived their environment.

Ultimately, the hysteria over the impossibility of ever defining autobiography (and by extension memoir) as a genre seems to me to be a bit overblown. Marlene Kadar sensibly argues that life writing is "best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms from the so-called least fictive narrative to the most fictive."⁹³ We can label a text as life writing, or autobiography, if the intention of the author to write autobiography can be established, whether in the text itself through the correspondence of the proper name of the author and protagonist or outside the text through interviews with the author or through private correspondence and so forth. After genre has been

⁹² Karl J. Weintraub, "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1975): 823.

⁹³ Marlene Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 10.

established broadly, we can probe each individual text to determine its degree of historical truthfulness.

Presumably the least fictive texts would make the best historical resources. All memoirs must be, to some extent, historically verifiable and read within their historical contexts. Historical documents should vouch for the correspondence between author and subject as well for the historical existence of the places and things written of in the text. However, historical validation of every anecdote or personal (as opposed to public and thus well-documented) event in the text is neither possible nor desirable. Memoirs should contain the right historical spirit and generally coincide with the depictions of an era found in other memoirs as well as other historical writings. This kind of historical validation, rather than a literally verifiable catalogue of minutiae, is what is required to establish a text's status as a memoir.

Authorial intention and historical validation are the only absolute criteria needed to establish the generic identity of a work as autobiography. However, I have placed additional parameters on the selection of the memoirs that I will analyze in the second half of this dissertation. I have isolated characteristics that I believe will produce a body of memoirs that are comparable to each other and particularly well suited for historical analysis. My criteria are as follows:

1. The author of the memoir has made her intention to write autobiography clear and has established an identity between author and subject of the text.
2. The memoir is externally verifiable. Although fabrications and exaggerations may occur, the majority of the people, places, and events described in the autobiography can be identified or confirmed by examining the historical record.
3. The memoir was the product of a single consciousness. In other words, it was not an overtly collaborative effort.

4. The memoir was published and was written with publication in mind.
5. The memoir was written in prose and is book length.

As previously noted, I regard only the first and second of my criteria as necessary in order to establish a text's generic status as an autobiography. We must know that the author intended to write an autobiography, and the text should be able to withstand some degree of historical scrutiny. My third criterion, that the memoir should be the product of a single consciousness, is not strictly necessary in order for the work to be considered an autobiography. However, I believe that this criterion strengthens a text's viability as a source of historical insight.

There are different degrees of collaboration involved in the creation of individual memoirs. Some degree of collaboration inevitably occurs as a memoir is transformed from a private manuscript into a published text. Memoirists might discuss their work with family or friends and ask for feedback. Almost certainly a memoirist receives suggestions and changes from the editorial staff at the publishing house before the memoir goes to press. However, this kind of input, while it may help to refine, refocus, or edit a text, does not generally provide explicit instructions for the shape the memoir should take. It merely comments upon an already existing text, which is the product of a single author. This is not the case for truly collaborative autobiographies, which are no longer the product of a single consciousness.

One notable example of a collaborative autobiography is Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers*, which began its life as a series of interviews between Rosengarten

and Alabama sharecropper Ned Cobb.⁹⁴ Rosengarten transcribed his interviews with Cobb and masterfully intertwined Cobb's responses (sans Rosengarten's questions) into a novelistic format, which superficially reads like an autobiography.

Despite the fact that the words used in the narrative are indeed Cobb's words, he was responding to questions generated by Rosengarten. Furthermore, Rosengarten created the dramatic sequence of *All God's Dangers*. The language may be Cobb's, but Rosengarten imposed structure on Cobb's memories. In contrast, in a traditional memoir the author is not responding to questions posed from the outside but rather to an internal compulsion to communicate. The memoirist, over a period of weeks and months, carefully constructs the image of herself she wishes to convey to the reading public.

Using a broad definition, *All God's Dangers* could be considered autobiography. Cobb made clear his intention to tell his life story, and he is certainly the protagonist in the text. Furthermore, the story he tells resonates with the historical record. However, the presence of Theodore Rosengarten muddles this clear generic classification. If we use one of Lejeune's litmus tests for recognizing an autobiography, we would check to see whether there is a correspondence between the name of the author on the book jacket and the name of the protagonist in the text. In this instance Rosengarten's name appears on the book jacket, while Ned Cobb is the protagonist in the text. To make matters even more complicated, Rosengarten does not use Cobb's real name but instead refers to him in the text by the pseudonym "Nate Shaw."

The presence of Theodore Rosengarten exerts an unknown influence on the story Ned Cobb tells. Perhaps, if given the chance, Cobb would have included some of the details Rosengarten omitted from *All God's Dangers*. Perhaps he would have left other

⁹⁴ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

things out. Undoubtedly he would have remembered the same life event differently on different days, and were he constructing his own life story, Cobb would have had to decide which version to include in the finished project. However, after Rosengarten captured Cobb's thoughts on tape, they became for all intents and purposes part of the historical record and thus immutable. In contrast, the memoirist has the luxury of premeditation, reconsideration, and rewrites. *All God's Dangers* is a valuable historical resource, but in many respects it resembles a transcribed oral history rather than a memoir.

The memoirs I have selected to subject to historical analysis are all published and were all written with publication in mind. This particular criterion was necessary in order to distinguish memoirs from private forms of reminiscence, such as private journals. Diary entries may be in narrative form and may actually read like portions of a published memoir. However, diary entries were not intentionally written for public consumption and do not contain the vision of her life and times that the memoirist would like to give to the world. I consider the memoirist's "public" version of history a particularly important aspect of the published memoir. The memoirist is not a naïve reporter, merely chronicling events as she sees them. Instead she is reporting on a version of past events that is informed by her social class, racial status, and a variety of other factors and motivations, conscious and otherwise.

Private thoughts, although also informed by race, gender, and socioeconomic considerations, are presumably more candid than those written with the public in mind. Diaries, private correspondence, and so forth are valuable historical resources due in large part to their candor. As a result, they are widely utilized as historical source

material, as well they should be. However, these kinds of resources do not present the same kind of interpretive challenges encountered when using the memoir as a historical resource. Memoirists are staking claim to their particular version of the past and are trying to persuade the reading public of the veracity of their peculiar perspective. Because the interpretive task of reading published versus private reminiscence is so different, I do not believe that private life writing should be conflated with life writing written with the public and publication in mind.

The final guideline I have established in selecting the memoirs under consideration here is that they must be written in prose and be book length. Unlike Philippe Lejeune whose definition of autobiography dictates that a work must be written in prose in order to be classified as such, my broad definition of autobiography does not dictate that autobiographies must be written in prose. It seems perfectly natural and acceptable to me that a poet might choose to write her autobiography in poetry, and a musician might choose to write her autobiography in song. As long as authorial intention and historical validation can be established, a song or a poem could be labeled autobiography. That being said, the structure of poetry and music being much different from the structure of prose, the interpretive challenges in analyzing each are different.

Prose narratives seem particularly suited for historical source material in part because historical writing is itself frequently structured as a prose narrative. However, historians use a wide variety of source material that is neither narrative prose, any other kind of prose, or even textual. Since there is nothing about the nature of historical research that dictates that source material must be written in narrative prose, my decision

to choose only narratives written in prose was not due to a strict adherence to historical methods.

I chose narratives written in prose because prose autobiographies are generally lengthier and thus presumably more complete than autobiography found in poems or song and frequently adhere more closely to chronology, which is the backbone of historical writing. In addition although prose narratives may utilize figurative language such as metaphors, they are not as dependent upon such figurative devices as poetry. It is frequently difficult to establish linkages between poetic language and an external reality existing outside the poem. Any attempt to do so is highly contestable. The language of prose is generally much more suited to concrete descriptions of real people, places, and things.

Furthermore, I decided that each memoir I would select should be book length. I based this decision on the commonplace assumption that the longer a piece of autobiographical writing is, the more detailed and complete a portrait of the memoirist and her times it will provide. Obviously, this is not a hard and fast rule. Some memoirists write entire volumes of autobiography without addressing significant aspects of their lives. However, if we take the position of John Sturrock and others that an autobiographer cannot be anything but autobiographical, our chances to read between the lines and gather insights increase as the length of the self writing under investigation increases.

Furthermore, in selecting a body of works to be read in relationship to each other, I thought it was best to be consistent and to compare works that were of a similar size and complexity. It seems somehow unjust to compare an autobiographical essay that relates

an anecdote or two with a full-scale memoir, which attempts to account for a large portion of a life.

The guidelines that I have established in selecting the memoirs that I will analyze in Part II of this dissertation are by no means intended to be general guidelines for what kinds of life writing can and cannot be used as historical source material. There is no limit to what the writers of history can use as source material. Anything said, done, or created by human beings is part of the historical past, and any fragments left behind are fair game for use as resources for the writing of history. However, it is my goal in this dissertation to argue that memoirs give us insights into the past that are unequaled by most other kinds of historical evidence and then to articulate a methodology for their usage. With this goal in mind, I found it necessary to place parameters around what a memoir is and what types of memoirs seem to be the best suited for providing the kind of full-scale historical analysis that I will describe in the following chapters. However, even after having solved, for our purposes, the question of genre, we have yet to identify which academic discipline has the greatest disciplinary claim over the autobiography. We must take up the questions of who, if anyone, owns the autobiography in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE, HISTORY, AND THE DISCIPLINARY PROPRIETORSHIP OF THE MEMOIR

Autobiography seemed the foster child of literature: Nobody could certify its parents. Was it the scion of history or fiction—or, more probably, a hybrid, like an exotic orchid or a mule?

Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography* (1989)

Currently, autobiography studies has been more or less subsumed by literary studies. However, Albert Stone convincingly argues that “*Life* is the more inclusive sign—not *Literature*—which deserves to be placed above the gateway to the house of autobiography.”⁹⁵ Accordingly, my vision of autobiography studies is of a discrete area of inquiry, not a subcategory of literary studies, or history, or anthropology, or sociology, but a field in and of itself that freely employs methodological techniques and insights from various traditional disciplines. The lens of interdisciplinary autobiographical studies could be used to examine a seemingly endless range of issues ranging from identity construction to socialization to literary techniques and beyond, but this dissertation is concerned primarily with the question of what kinds of insight life writing can give us into the past.

Although autobiography is a relevant source material for many academic disciplines, it is most frequently associated with what James Olney has described as the genre’s “stepparents,” literature and history. This chapter will examine the way that the perspectives of scholars in these two fields frequently differ and will show that the memoir is sometimes caught in some interdisciplinary crossfire. I also hope to counteract some of the disciplinary xenophobia that sometimes exists just beneath the surface of

⁹⁵ Albert Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 19.

discussions among scholars from different disciplines. Because literary scholars have been the dominant voices in autobiography studies, my perspective may sound something like a defense of history. However, it is not my intention to privilege one disciplinary perspective over the other in the historical study of memoirs but rather to correct what I see as an imbalance in the way autobiography is generally interpreted. I believe that both history and literature offer valuable insights that can be brought to bear in the historical study of memoirs.

Literature has staked its claim over autobiography and has frequently done so with the only slightly veiled assumption that historians aren't necessarily up to the interpretive challenge anyway. The proponents of autobiography studies have fashioned a highly eclectic and jargon-laden body of autobiographical "theory" to govern the interpretation of memoirs and are suspicious of less theoretical approaches to the same material. James Winn argues that on occasion "old historians," whose methods are frequently less self-consciously theoretical, are "caricatured as reactionaries wishing to suppress a revolution."⁹⁶ Laura Marcus argues that "the work of some of the most influential North American autobiographical critics...is dominated by the project of 'rescuing' autobiography from incorporation into history and history-writing, and establishing it as an essentially 'literary' act."⁹⁷ Similarly, Linda Orr is somewhat scornful of historians' attempts to cordon off disciplinary territory and resist conflation with literature, claiming that "The edges that historians keep throwing out beyond the grasp of fiction continue... to fray, and the effort to fight fiction seems futile if not

⁹⁶ James A. Winn, "An Old Historian Looks at the New Historicism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35.4 (1993): 862. Winn is a professor of literature, but much of his scholarly work has involved primary research, and he self identifies as "an old historian."

⁹⁷ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 181.

doomed.”⁹⁸ Much of this desire to rescue the genre from the grasp of historians stems from the suspicion that historians do not have the theoretical wherewithal to handle the complex interpretive challenge posed by the autobiography and/ or other kinds of literature.

In their introductory primer, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, literary critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that a “life narrative cannot be reduced to or understood *only* as a historical record” (emphasis added). Their use of the word “only” is somewhat perplexing and can be construed as indicative of a lack of regard for the highly sophisticated way that historians must interpret the resources they utilize. It seems unlikely that they would caution their readers against viewing memoirs as “*only* literature.” The implication here may be that if life writing is viewed only as history it will not be properly scrutinized or outfitted with theoretical readings. It might instead be viewed simplistically as an unmediated representation of a past reality.⁹⁹

Smith and Watson’s flippant warning raises the question of what precisely is “reduction” to a historical resource anyway? What would something that is “only” a historical resource look like? Poetry, song lyrics, paintings and other cultural productions can be and are used in the writing of history, and the same kind of warning against viewing them “only” as historical resources could hold for these art forms as well. It is obvious that they are works of art that can be experienced in the present even as they are analyzed for the glimpses they give us of the past.

⁹⁸ Linda Orr, “The Revenge of Literature: A History of History,” *New Literary History* 18 (1986): 9.

⁹⁹ I am not suggesting that Smith and Watson are intentionally belittling the historical profession or the interpretive skills of historians. Instead I am questioning the usage of the phrase “reduced to... a historical record,” which seems to imply that historical documents are somehow less rich or complicated than other kinds of texts.

However, other kinds of historical resources, which are not typically considered to be literature or other kinds of art, are similarly multi-faceted. For example, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution are certainly historical resources. However, as artifacts of the past that are viewed in the present, they are frequently ensconced in display cases and are viewed by scores of schoolchildren, scholars, and tourists who necessarily view them not only as remnants of the past but also in a present-minded way. They are, after all, most likely stored in alarmed cases in climate controlled buildings. The juxtaposition between the modern technology and the aging documents is difficult to miss. Furthermore, both documents are invoked in the present in contexts never imagined by their original authors thereby demonstrating that it is naïve if not impossible to conceptualize them as “only” historical documents. We must assume that historians are aware of the multiple ways and multiple contexts in which a single document can be interpreted.

Even less exceptional historical resources can hardly be labeled “only” that. Any human production—whether a ship’s manifest, census report, or private correspondence—was originally created for one purpose and ultimately serves quite another when it is incorporated into historiography or placed in a museum and viewed by a curious public. This is always the case, and historians by necessity are cognizant of the way that time and perspective alter the way a historical resource is perceived. The diminutive “only” minimizes the extent to which historians must be mindful of the complexity of the historical resources they are entrusted with. Therefore, Smith and Watson’s admonition that memoirs not be read “only” as historical resources is erroneous in its applied assumption that any artifacts exist that can be interpreted “only” as sources

for the writing of history or that the status of “historical resource” can be used as something of a pejorative.

Smith and Watson further argue that “The complexity of the autobiographical text requires reading practices that reflect on the narrative tropes, sociohistorical contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text.”¹⁰⁰ Although the criticism they recommend appears to be an interdisciplinary one, what they have really done is to historicize literary criticism by adding “sociohistorical context” to the catalog of things literary critics typically examine in any work of literature. Embracing what Betsy Erkkila has labeled the “historical turn” in literary criticism, they are asserting that history does matter while still implying that the analysis of memoirs should still be left primarily to literary critics rather than to historians.¹⁰¹ Stephen Greenblatt, one of the most prominent critics to turn to history, declares that “an openness to the theoretical ferment of the last few years is precisely what distinguishes [the literary school of] the new historicism from the positivist historicism of the early twentieth century.”¹⁰² Thus, because of their willingness to embrace theory, a group of literary critics have declared themselves new and improved historians. Smith and Watson, having quickly and politely liberated autobiography from the clutches of historians, lay out a complex and highly theoretical framework for the interpretation of life writing.

Most of the discussions about the disciplinary proprietorship of the memoir have been initiated by literary critics rather than by historians, who have continuously used

¹⁰⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 10.

¹⁰¹ Betsy Erkkila, “Critical History,” *American Quarterly* 50.2 (1998): 358.

¹⁰² Stephen Greenblatt, “Toward a Poetics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York, Routledge, 1989), 1.

memoirs in their work without feeling the need to analyze or justify that usage. Historians have traditionally used memoirs as sources for specific historical facts or to add a human face and voice to a description of an era. Cultural and intellectual histories might devote lengthy passages to biographical information about the memoirist and to critical reception of the memoir. Some historians also offer their own opinions about the literary and historical merits of particular memoirs, much as a literary critic might. However, for the most part, historians and literary critics use the memoir towards different ends. The historian is more interested in what a piece of autobiographical writing reveals about a particular historical time and place. The literary theorist is more inclined to generalize about what kinds of things memoirs, regardless of their historical situation, might reveal about literature, or about the human condition, or about the construction of the self, or about any number of topics. This tension between the historian's quest for information about the particular and the literary theorist's desire to make broad generalizations has often been translated into a debate over the usefulness of theory in historical and literary studies.

For this reason, it is necessary to briefly explore the relationship of historians to "theory." I will demonstrate that historians are neither as naïve nor as unversed in "theory" as they have on occasion been made out to be and that in fact the disciplinary perspective of history yields something invaluable to my conception of memoir studies: the belief in a real, extra-textual past. In historical writing, as we shall see, this belief is more frequently implied than it is directly asserted. The belief in a real past is the philosophical underpinning of much historical writing. However, because this, like many of the philosophical positions of practicing historians, is generally taken for granted and

thus only implied in historiography, historians are often charged with not being reflective enough about the theoretical implications of their work.

“Theory,” according to Jay Parini has “frightened a whole generation of intellectuals into early mental retirement, mostly because they don’t have the stamina or will to enter into appropriate conversation with younger colleagues.”¹⁰³ What Parini describes as a generation gap in the academy (the conflict between those who “do theory” and those who go to great lengths to avoid it) is played out between different disciplines as well as between generations of scholars. Paraphrasing the sixties mantra, “Never trust anyone under thirty,” Parini playfully argues that the new anti-establishment catchphrase in the academy is something like, “Never trust anyone who doesn’t appreciate Foucault.”¹⁰⁴

Before we attempt to understand the role that theory plays in contemporary historical and literary scholarship, we must first come to terms with what precisely “theory” is. How has it alienated some scholars and empowered others? Discussions of theory are complicated by the fact that it is a vague term that is difficult concretely to define. Jonathon Culler describes theory as “an unbounded group of writings about everything under the sun.” However, Culler’s nebulous definition does not indicate what kind of objections Winn’s “old historians” could possibly have to theory. After all, it would quickly become meaningless to object to “everything under the sun.” Culler manages to identify four main points that he says characterize theory. Theory is:

¹⁰³ Jay Parini, “The Lessons of Theory,” *Philosophy and Literature* 21.1 (1997): 91.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

“interdisciplinary,” “analytical and speculative,” “a critique of common sense,” and is “reflexive, thinking about thinking.”¹⁰⁵

Theory is, on a fundamental level, an attempt, in any discipline, to articulate general truths. In the field of literary criticism, there has been a tension between those who believe that the study and interpretation of canonized literary texts is the primary goal of the literary critic and those who believe that developing theories (which individual texts might be enlisted to support) is the scholar’s real job. From the 1970’s on, the theorists have been the dominant voice in English departments throughout the United States. This is so much the case that in many instances theory has been elevated above or at least made equal to literature in some curricula. Many students of literature are as likely to read literary theorists (whose theories often engage specific literary texts only tangentially) as they are primary texts themselves.

Historians, for the most part, have been reluctant to turn to theory because they generally do not believe that historical events are important merely as instances of theoretical generalizations. Instead they believe that historical events are interesting and important in and of themselves. Incidentally, literary critics who have been reluctant to turn to theory feel much the same way, believing that literary texts are more significant than theory and are worthy of study by virtue of their own merits rather than as manifestations of general truths.

Because literature and history are engaged in conceptually different enterprises, it is an easier transition from literature to theory than from history to theory. Literary critics are presented with a finished work that they must find ways to appreciate and understand. Even though the amount of literature available for analysis is expanding as new texts are

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

written and texts by previously excluded authors are added to the literary canon, the number of texts that literary critics have at their disposal to analyze is limited. This has contributed to the popularity of theory as a means of seeing these texts in different lights, of tying disparate works together, and of linking literature to other kinds of non-literary culture and to broad philosophical concepts. Historians, on the other hand, are confronted with raw materials from which they must create their own narratives. There is a seemingly infinite supply of raw data for historians to uncover in archives. Because of the sheer volume of historical information yet undiscovered, historians cannot possibly hope to master all of the particulars of their field of inquiry let alone move into the realm of theorizing and making generalizations about this unending supply of historical data.

Although many literary critics and historians disagree over the importance of theory (in its most general sense) because of the nature of their respective disciplines, some of the most contentious recent debates about theory often concern a specific kind of theory. The term theory has frequently become associated with “a particular kind of theory, inspired by thinkers like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, [which has] a tendency towards relativism in respect of knowledge and interpretation.”¹⁰⁶ This particular mode of theory, rather than the more generalized view of theory as a search for general truths, is often the culprit in disagreements between literary critics and historians.

Part of what sets theory of this kind apart from other modes of inquiry is its trendiness and (sadly) also its highly specialized vocabulary, which makes its inner workings unnecessarily mystified and inaccessible to the uninitiated. Jay Parani argues, “Jargon has overwhelmed literary criticism to the point where the so-called Common Reader is now fiercely excluded.” (With this critique in mind, Parani refers to his favorite

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Mautner, ed., *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 563.

joke on the subject: *Question*: What do you get when you cross a deconstructionist and a mafioso? *Answer*: An offer you can't understand.)¹⁰⁷ This attribute, rather than the substance of the theoretical writings (which obviously varies from theorist to theorist), has sometimes proved to be the most off-putting to "old historians" and others who strive for accessibility in their work. However, many historians also have conceptual objections to some modern theories of this kind, which we will examine briefly later in this chapter.

Some historians have attempted to come to terms with the newfound influence of theory in many academic disciplines and have attempted to bridge the gap between history and theory. The hostility or indifference of many historians to theory in both the general sense as well as of the Derrida and Foucault variety has caused some hand wringing on the part of theorists like Keith Jenkins who bemoan the fact that:

If you go into an academic bookshop and look over the shelves occupied by texts on philosophy, you will find a vast array of works wherein the problem of the foundations and limits of what can be known and what can be done 'philosophically' are the staple diet... If you then wander over to the shelves on literature, you will find a separate section on literary theory... But then continue over to the history area. Here it is almost certain that there will be no section on history theory (even the phrase looks odd and clumsy—befitting unfamiliarity)...¹⁰⁸

Such gloomy assessments of the theoretical sophistication of the field of history have become familiar conventions in discussions of the philosophy of history. Hayden White criticizes historians for what he regards as a close-mindedness towards theoretical concerns and an unwillingness to engage with insights from other academic disciplines.

¹⁰⁷ Jay Parini, "The Lessons of Theory," *Philosophy and Literature* 21.1 (1997): 92.

¹⁰⁸ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.

He refers, somewhat snidely, to history as “the conservative discipline par excellence.”¹⁰⁹

Jenkins echoes White’s evaluation of history as a discipline rooted too far in the academic past and complains that history cannot be “modernized” until a shift in orientation takes place.¹¹⁰ Philosophers of history, many of whom have steered clear from what some view as the trendy excesses of theory, are also quick to bemoan the status of their field. Despite the fact that scholarly neglect was not sufficient to preclude the publication of his text, Michael Stanford’s introductory textbook on the subject contains a section entitled “Contemporary Neglect of the Philosophy of History”.¹¹¹

In contrast, Aviezer Tucker dismisses this dismal appraisal of the state of the field, noting instead that “the publishing of books in the philosophy of history is growing exponentially.”¹¹² For example, Tucker claims that from 1969-1977 around 130 articles related to the philosophy of history were published each year, while between 1983 and 1987 about 250 articles on the subject were published annually.¹¹³ A steady stream of book-length studies concerned with the nature and methods of historical inquiry, many of which have quickly become “classics” and thus part of graduate school history curriculum across the United States, seem also to back up Tucker’s assertion.¹¹⁴ The

¹⁰⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 28.

¹¹⁰ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 3.

¹¹¹ Michael Stanford, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 5-7.

¹¹² Aviezer Tucker, “The Future of the Philosophy of Historiography,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 37-56.

¹¹³ Tucker bases his findings on periodic bibliographies compiled by the journal *History and Theory*. 1987 is the last year *History and Theory* published such a bibliography.

¹¹⁴ A brief sampling of recent publications includes, Peter Novick *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Richard J. Evans *In Defense of History* (New York: WW Norton, 1999); Georg G. Iggers *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Peter Burke *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: WW Norton, 1995); Keith Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997); Norman Jenkins, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998).

University of California at Irvine in particular is making an effort to make sure that the next generation of scholars is particularly well-trained in the field of history and theory. The faculty in the department of history “believe that the best historical research involves the self-conscious use of theory to pose significant questions and to answer them in sophisticated ways.”¹¹⁵

Accordingly Tucker argues that the feeling of malaise among many would-be philosophers of history is not rooted in a lack of research interest in the field but rather in “the *academic status* of the philosophy of history.”¹¹⁶ He notes that throughout the 1990’s the job listings of the American Philosophical Association, the American Political Science Association, and the American Historical Association contained only two advertisements that mentioned the philosophy of history as a preferred field of specialization. Irvine, it would seem, if Tucker’s assessment of the state of the field is to be believed, is an anomaly. The readers and writers of the philosophy of history are an outspoken and prolific bunch, but their influence exists only in pockets and in most departments of history is felt only in the presence of a token class or two on historical methodology. Tucker claims that this ambivalence towards the philosophy of history stems from suspicion among academic administrators towards fields of specialization that are interdisciplinary in nature and thus don’t quite fit into the still rigidly compartmentalized academy. Thus it seems likely that the perceived lack of theoretical sophistication in the field of history is less a result of a lack of theoretical interest or familiarity on the part of practicing historians than an institutional climate that doesn’t value such perspectives.

¹¹⁵ “UCI Department of History, Graduate Program Information,” (Accessed on September 25, 1995); available at <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/history/graduate/program.html>; Internet.

¹¹⁶ Tucker, 39.

Nelson E. Bingham claims that hostility towards interdisciplinary approaches is frequently so intense that “the academic body has resisted each new interdisciplinary organism as if it were an invading virus.”¹¹⁷ Even in as interdisciplinary a field as American Studies, the temptation to protect their disciplinary turf is evident. According to Patricia Limerick, “when struggling for scarce resources, one can feel driven to imitate the behavior of departments and disciplines, to draw lines around the American studies approach that will make it bounded enough, solid enough, defined enough, to hold its own in the push and pull for money, space, faculty positions, respect, and status.”¹¹⁸ It can be no surprise then that history departments have felt some of the same pressures to isolate and protect their turf, particularly when challenged by movements such as “New Historicism” that unite history with literary criticism.

However, although Tucker’s findings contradict the common assumption that historians just aren’t interested in theory, it does not tell the entire story. The lack of available jobs in the philosophy of history is also the result of the wider split in history between theory and praxis than that found in many other disciplines. This may partially be the natural outgrowth of an institutional climate that has not traditionally valued theoretical history (although in the United State in particular, the climate is changing), but it also reflects the nature of the historical undertaking itself. Although Keith Jenkins, among others, has devoted his career to raising epistemological questions about the nature and limits of historical inquiry, his implication that other historians should be

¹¹⁷ Nelson E. Bingham, “Organization Networking: Taking the Next Step,” in *Interdisciplinary Studies Today*, ed. Julie Thompson Klein and William G. Doty (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), 86.

¹¹⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Insiders and Outsiders: The Borders of the USA and the Limits of the ASA: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 31 October 1996,” *American Quarterly* 49.3 (1997), 454.

found at fault for not doing the same thing strikes me as a bit unfair. Too much emphasis on the theory of history invariably interferes with its practice. Besides, as Clifford Geertz notes, “extreme self-consciousness certainly has its dangers—of irony, of elitism, of solipsism, of putting the whole world in quotation marks.”¹¹⁹ Is it really a manifestation of naivete simply to perform the kind of scholarly work you were trained to do (writing historiography), leaving it to other scholars to analyze what it is you are doing? If novelists, as conventional wisdom dictates, are frequently their own worst critics, it is possible that the same could be said for scholars?

There is after all something refreshing about a historian who is a good storyteller, who makes the past come to life, and leaves it up to her reader to decide just what she means by the “past” anyway. This is also, incidentally, what a good memoirist does. Just as it is refreshing when the historian relies on the sophistication of the reader to know that the historian’s text does not and cannot offer an unmediated view of the past, it would be refreshing if those critics of the historical profession gave their colleagues the same vote of confidence. It is unfair to think that if a historical text isn’t riddled with qualifications, asides, and footnotes referencing French theorists that the historian writing the text is not writing out of a clear conceptual framework about the past and the possibility of knowledge of it.

One of the most lucid defenses for the separation of theory from practice on the part of many historians was articulated by literary critic Stanley Fish. Fish was specifically responding to the criticism lodged against a particular school of literary criticism known as New Historicism. Many “New Historicists” (in an attempt to remove

¹¹⁹ Clifford Geertz ed. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 25.

themselves from what they see as a naïve realism among some historians) have asserted that history is a constructed text that may or may not bear a relationship to an external body of verifiable historical facts.¹²⁰ However, even while asserting the textuality of history, this same group of scholars often makes historical claims that are virtually indistinguishable from claims made by diehard historical realists, who believe that in writing history they are reporting about a real past rather than constructing one. This seeming contradiction explains why many scholars, like Keith Jenkins, are eager to philosophize about history but reluctant to practice it. However, Fish persuasively argues that there is no real contradiction:

...asserting the textuality of history and making specific historical argument—have nothing to do with each other. They are actions in different practices, moves in different games. The first is an action in the practice (i.e. metacritical) accounts of history, the practice of answering such questions as “where does historical knowledge come from”...The second is an action in the practice of writing historical accounts, the practice of answering questions such as “what happened”...If you are asked a question like “what happened” and you answer “the determination of what happened will always be a function of the ideological vision of the observer; there are no unmediated historical perceptions,” you will have answered a question from one practice in the terms of another and your interlocutor will be justifiably annoyed.¹²¹

Although Fish’s argument is aimed explicitly at only one issue debated in the philosophy of history, the implications resonate beyond that singular discussion. A historian’s point of view on a variety of topics such as causation, explanation, objectivity, and language invariably influence her historical interpretation. However, her philosophical beliefs are generally implicit rather than explicit in the historiographical text. Fish’s elegant and commonsense defense of the historian who practices her craft

¹²⁰ New Historicists are a loosely aligned school of literary critics united in their desire that history to be center stage in literary criticism.

¹²¹ Stanley Fish, “Commentary: The Young and the Restless,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Vesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 307-308.

without explicitly defending her philosophical viewpoint in every sentence delivers historians from the risk of being caricatured as “straw positivists” by their academic brethren in literature departments.¹²²

In many ways, some of the issues encountered in comparing the philosophy and the practice of history resemble the same issues encountered in comparing the philosophy of science to its practice. As Richard Rorty notes, philosophical “disagreements come up only in after-hours chat, not during the daily grind in the lab.” Rorty even goes so far as to argue that in the practice of science “philosophical differences just do not matter that much...philosophical correctness [is not] a requirement for useful work.”¹²³ Perhaps, protestations of Hayden White and Keith Jenkins aside, much the same could be said of much historical work.

Good historical writing, again like good autobiographical writing, is powerful because of its narrative style, the structure of the historical “plot,” the style of storytelling. On some level most historians would have to admit that at least some of these elements are indeed “constructions,” but the net impact of historical writing would be weakened if the historian were obligated to parenthetically draw attention to that fact or overtly fight against that assumption with every historical claim she makes. Even in structuring this dissertation, I have found it necessary to divide my work into two parts. My theoretical/ methodological observations inhabit the first section, while my attempt to apply the methodology to a particular time period/ body of memoirs constitutes part two. Although the two parts are somewhat interdependent, it would be unnecessarily

¹²² Laura Marcus writes, “It is time that autobiographical theorists recognised that historians are not straw positivists and that the autobiography can illuminate the past as well as the present.” in *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 246.

¹²³ Richard Rorty, “Phony Science Wars,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 284, no. 5 (November 1999): 120-122.

confusing to combine them. They are indeed, to borrow Stanley Fish's phrase, "actions in different practices, moves in different games."

So why then if the writing of history and the theorizing about it need not inhabit the same textual space, am I devoting such a lengthy introductory section to the state of the philosophy of history? Is it because this dissertation already inhabits the interdisciplinary netherworld that Aviezer Tucker claims instills fear in traditional academic departments and professional organizations and thus I have nothing to lose by straddling the divide? To a large extent, this is undoubtedly true. More fundamentally, however, what might initially appear as a digression from my stated topic of literary memoirs as historical source materials into the nature of historical inquiry itself is actually linked to the nature of the memoir.

Memoirists are not just creative writers; like historians, they describe real events. Memoirists are lay historians who, much like professional historians, set out to construct lucid, defensible narratives about the past. Like their professional counterparts, memoirists tell their stories from various philosophical perspectives, which influence the stories that they tell. Memoirs should be read the same way that historiography is read, first to grasp the story that the historian is trying to tell, and secondly, critically, to analyze how the historian's belief system might influence the shape the story takes.

However, insights from the field of history alone are insufficient for the analysis of memoirs as historical resources. Memoirs give us partial access to a past reality, and it is typically the job of historians to reconstruct the past. But memoirs are also a specific kind of literary genre and as such are distinct from other kinds of texts, which are not memoirs. It is generally the job of the literary critic to analyze and identify particular

kinds of genres. This dissertation proposes to do both but cannot do so without engaging the ways those practices are typically done. Furthermore, before asserting that an interdisciplinary perspective is necessary, it is necessary to examine the contributions and limitations of traditional disciplinary perspectives.

I have repeatedly made the claim that the memoir is a unique genre that is neither history nor literature. However, even though it stubbornly resists complete incorporation into either category, it nonetheless remains partially both. Its de facto adoption by literary studies is based in part on the fact that historians generally do not study genres but rather time periods. There is, however, some precedent in historical methodology for analyzing how particular kinds of sources should be used in historical research. There is a particularly large body of writing about oral history, and many of the issues addressed seem particularly relevant for memoir studies. Perhaps then it isn't such a leap to urge practicing historians to consciously reflect on how memoirs should be utilized and analyzed in historical writing.

One of the reasons that literary studies has adopted the memoir as an appropriate object of study is because English departments have become increasingly more interdisciplinary in orientation over the past quarter century. In many departments, the study of literature has been infiltrated by the forces of cultural studies. Cultural studies has increased the scope of literary discussions beyond a small body of canonized literary texts. Cultural studies includes popular culture in its analysis, a fact which is particularly pertinent to memoir studies since, with very few exceptions, the memoir's status as high art has traditionally been dubious at best. Furthermore, cultural studies is highly theoretical in nature and willing to draw on insights from across traditional academic

disciplines. Due to the complexity of the memoir, a highly eclectic criticism of this kind is necessary. A diverse criticism of this kind, however, should not view the historical perspective as somehow inferior to theory infused literary criticism. Instead it should acknowledge that history has its own unique contributions to make to the field of memoir studies. The memoirist has as much in common with the historian as she has with the novelist.

As Aviezer Tucker notes, not all academic departments have welcomed interdisciplinary approaches of this kind. Although many historians are openly interested in theoretical questions, some history departments and individual historians have been hostile to incorporating techniques and insights from other disciplines into their curriculum. Feared encroachment from literary studies in particular has helped launch a crusade on the part of many traditionalist historians to keep history separate. Sir Geoffrey Elton has voiced extreme hostility toward the possibility of utilizing both literature and the techniques of literary criticism in the study of history by opining somewhat hysterically, “In battling against people who would subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics, we historians are, in a way, fighting for our lives. Certainly, we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights—the intellectual equivalent of crack.”¹²⁴ Elton’s concern is shared by, among others, Keith Windschuttle, who in 1996 published a book length “defense” of history none too subtly

¹²⁴ G.R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27, 34, 41, 43, 49.

entitled, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past*.¹²⁵

So what is it that these figurative crack dealers are pushing, which if ingested is capable of “killing” the discipline of history? According to Windshuttle, literary critics and social theorists can be indicted on three counts. He finds critics and theorists, poststructuralists in particular, guilty of “undermin[ing] the methodology of historical research,” “destroy[ing] the distinction between history and fiction,” and erroneously believing “that it is impossible to access the past [and furthermore] that we have no proper grounds for believing that a past independent of ourselves ever took place.”¹²⁶ Although each of his accusations would make an interesting starting point for a discussion of how the methodology and assumptions of theorists and historians sometimes differ, I will concentrate on his third allegation. The debate over whether or not a past independent of our textual representations of that past actually exists is at the heart of the tension between literary and historical perspectives.

It is an obvious simplification to speak of monoliths such as the “literary perspective” and the “historical perspective” as if such unified and coherent viewpoints actually exist. Indeed there are as many variations and combinations of beliefs as there are scholars. What I am more specifically talking about is how some theories (specifically poststructuralist theories), which have been embraced to some degree by many (but not all) literary theorists, have called into question an underlying belief in a real past, which is held by most (but not all) historians. Because my conception of memoir studies is

¹²⁵ Keith Windshuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past*, (New York: Free Press, 1996). Windshuttle’s critique is actually much more well reasoned and level headed than his alarmist, attention grabbing title would suggest.

¹²⁶ Windshuttle, 36.

embedded in a belief in a real and (to some extent) knowable past, it is necessary to examine this conflict further.

Paul John Eakin has noted a shift in autobiography studies from “a documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential fact to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition” and notes that “the reality of the past seems quite simply to vaporize.”¹²⁷ Not only has autobiographical criticism shifted its emphasis to the act of writing autobiography; in some cases it has reduced the study of autobiography to a study of texts alone without reference to any context, authorial or historical. Roland Barthes poses the viewpoint held by many theorists with a rhetorical question imbedded in his own attempt at autobiography, “Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*”¹²⁸

Barthes is articulating a widespread point of view held in variations and degrees by theorists such as Derrida and Foucault and their adherents who claim language is a kind of prison or a closed system that refers endlessly only to itself rather than to a reality that exists outside of language. Michel Foucault’s relationship to historians and to the historical profession was an ambivalent one. His own writings straddle the disciplines of philosophy and history, but he remained somewhat suspicious of historians and their quest for historical knowledge, remarking in 1982, “I am not a professional historian; nobody is perfect.”¹²⁹ One of Foucault’s greatest critiques of professional historiography is what he saw as its arrogant quest for perfection, the perfection of historical truth. He characterized historians as demagogues, arguing, “As the demagogue is obliged to invoke

¹²⁷ Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 143.

¹²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 56.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Allan Megill, “The Reception of Foucault by Historians,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48.1 (1987): 117.

truth, laws of essences, and eternal necessity, the historian must invoke objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past.”¹³⁰ Foucault particularly objected to the historical search for “origins,” the idea that a historian can trace a historical event, idea, or institution “back to a sort of founding era or moment when their essential meaning was first revealed” up into the present in a linear, historical progression.¹³¹ Foucault rejects the idea of origins, just as he rejects the idea of essence or truth. According to Michael Confino, Foucault “rejects history *because* it assumes ‘reality, identity, truth.’ By the same token, historical discourse and historical writing melt entirely and disappear (Or do not exist at all except in figments of the imagination and representational fallacies), since historical discourse without referent reality is nothing but fiction.”¹³²

The effect of this theory on the enterprise of professional historiography is potentially devastating. As Confino further argues, theory of this kind, “posits, in the last analysis, that the writing of history is impossible; that language is indeterminate and, therefore, that historical events in the past cannot be narrated or analyzed; or, alternatively, that they can be narrated and analyzed in an infinite number of ways, none of which is more (or less) truthful than the others.”¹³³ Many literary theorists have accepted the conflation of context and text, either explicitly or implicitly by failing to actively engage what Paul John Eakin declares is the “commonplace assumption for

¹³⁰ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 158.

¹³¹ Larry Shiner, “Reading Foucault: Anti-Method and the Genealogy of Power-Knowledge,” *History and Theory* 21.3 (1982): 387. See Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 137-145.

¹³² Michael Confino, “Some Random Thoughts on History’s Recent Past,” *History and Memory* 12.2 (2001): 37.

¹³³ Ibid. 34.

students of autobiography...that the past is a fiction.”¹³⁴ Eakin remains one of the few literary critics actively to fight the easy acceptance of the belief that autobiographies (along with other texts) refer only to themselves and that the bridge between signifiers and real world signifieds cannot be traversed. He bluntly argues, “In the age of poststructuralism we have been too ready to assume that the very idea of a referential aesthetic is untenable, but autobiography is nothing if not a referential act.”¹³⁵

Historians as a whole have been far more reluctant than their colleagues in literature departments to dispose of the idea that autobiographies and other historical source material refer to a real past that exists independently from historical documents. Historians are often criticized for what many poststructural theorists and historical constructivists see as a naïve realism. However, most critiques of this kind are based on a version of extreme realism maintained by few, if any, practicing historians. According to P.H. Nowell-Smith this mythical extreme historical realist is “one who holds that the touchstone of historical truth must be direct observation of or an acquaintance with the object concerned.”¹³⁶ Since the past is gone and irretrievable and direct observation is impossible, this thesis of extreme realism quickly becomes untenable. Furthermore, the thoughts and emotions of historical agents are, as we shall see in the next chapter, part of the historical reality that the historian is trying to uncover and neither would be accessible by means of direct observation were such observation possible in the first place.

So, if the direct observation required by extreme realism is impossible when the past is the object of inquiry, what kind of realism do historians maintain that does not rely

¹³⁴ Eakin, *Touching the World*, 54.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 23.

¹³⁶ P.H. Nowell-Smith, “The Constructionist Theory of History,” *History and Theory*, Behiheft 16 (1977): 5.

on such observation? Chris Lorenz argues “contrary to widespread postmodern fashion—historians always claim knowledge of a real past; and as all claims of knowledge embody truth claims the justification of truth claims must remain equally central to history.”¹³⁷ Lorenz attempts to navigate what he regards as the “swamps of positivism and the quicksands of postmodernism” by adapting Hilary Putnam’s concept of “internalism” or what Lorenz labels “internal realism.”¹³⁸ According to Putnam, internalism “hold[s] that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that only makes sense to ask *within* a theory of description... [Furthermore,] there is more than one “true” theory or description of the world.”¹³⁹ Lorenz acknowledges the fact “that our knowledge of reality is mediated through language,” but he does not draw the conclusion that language constitutes reality.¹⁴⁰ Although our only access to the past comes through historians’ descriptions of the past, those descriptions should not be mistaken for the past itself, which Lorenz insists exists independently of our knowledge thereof. Lorenz allows for the possibility of multiple true historical claims, arguing that each is true within its own “specific frame of description.”¹⁴¹ Because we cannot compare historians’ claims to the actual past, we cannot ultimately decide on a correct interpretation but rather must evaluate each historical interpretation for its coherence within its own framework. As Putnam observes, there is no “God’s eye” point of view to serve as a final arbitrator of what is true. Instead we are left with “various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.”¹⁴² “Internal

¹³⁷ Chris Lorenz, “Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for ‘Internal Realism,’” *History and Theory*, 33.3 (1994): 298.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 327.

¹³⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49-50.

¹⁴⁰ Lorenz, 312.

¹⁴¹ Lorenz, 313.

¹⁴² Putnam, 49-50.

realism” provides a useful framework for memoir studies because it maintains a belief in a real past that exists external to the textual retelling of the past even while it acknowledges that historical truth often looks different depending on where you are standing... both literally and figuratively. The idea that historical truth is perspectival is particularly pertinent to the study of historical memoirs.

Historians Joyce Appleby, Lynne Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have called for a “practical realism,” that is “different, more nuanced, less absolutist...than that championed by an older...naïve realism.”¹⁴³ Realism of this kind recognizes that historiography cannot precisely mirror the past; there is always a gap between reality and our representations of it. Practical realism also acknowledges that history is largely interpretive, that historians invariably construct even as they attempt to reconstruct elements of the past. However, the fact that historians bring their own interpretations to bear on historical documents does not lead Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob to embrace what they consider the nihilism, extreme skepticism, and relativism of poststructuralism. Instead they steadfastly maintain that “some words and conventions, however socially constructed, reach out into the world and give a reasonably true description of its contents.”¹⁴⁴

Ultimately the belief that historians are able even somewhat accurately to describe a past that is removed from us is largely a matter of faith. As Robert Anchor observes, “this belief [in realism] can no more be proved or disproved than its opposite: that there is nothing beyond language, that ‘reality’ is a world of words without end.”¹⁴⁵ However,

¹⁴³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 247.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 250.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Anchor, “Realism and Ideology: The Question of Order,” *History and Theory* 22.2 (1983): 109.

even if a belief in a real past and our potential to uncover knowledge about that past is largely a matter of faith, it is a matter of faith that is crucial both to history and to memoir studies.

As my second chapter demonstrated, the genre of autobiography rests on the concept of reference. Identity between the author of the autobiography and the protagonist in the autobiography is what makes a work autobiographical. Without authorial context there can be no autobiography. Furthermore, my concept of memoir studies conceptualizes autobiographers as historical agents who are simultaneously documenting history as they perceived it and attempting to shape the way that their readers remember that history. Without belief in a past external to the text, autobiographical narrators are stripped of agency, of their potential both to affect the way that the past is remembered and to use their autobiographical accounts as political tools to either support the status quo or to agitate for change. Without accepting the existence of a social reality, both past and present, that autobiographers are both reacting to and attempting to create, the autobiographical project becomes meaningless. As Robert Anchor succinctly remarks, we simply “cannot live in a wholly meaningless world.”¹⁴⁶ A foundational belief in a practical realism, such as that held by most practicing historians, restores meaning by restoring context, which is crucial to my conception of memoir studies aesthetically, generically, and politically.

The historical study of memoirs is embedded in a belief that the memoir refers to a real (and to some extent knowable) past and is sympathetic to the practicing historian’s tendency to emphasize the particular and historically situated over the theoretical and general. However, because memoirs are works of literature as well as history, they often

¹⁴⁶ Anchor, 119.

transcend the particular and the historically situated and become universally relevant. The historical study of memoirs combines history and theory. Memoirs offer valuable insights into particular historical moments, but they might also shed light on general truths that go beyond one particular era.

Memoirs, which straddle English and history and inspire scholarly use both in praxis and in theorizing, also bridge another conceptual divide, that of history and memory. Just as memoirs contain elements of literature and history, they are also partially history and partially memory. Once again, since the memoirs rests at this significant crossroads, it is uniquely poised to mediate the divide between history and memory and to reveal how each functions and what each offers to our individual and collective understandings of the past.

CHAPTER 4

MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF MEMOIRS

Because my conception of memoir studies is embedded in a belief in a practical realism, the questions of verifiability and truth telling arise again and again. These issues are accompanied by concerns over deliberate lying and also with the way that memory operates, particularly in terms of mis-remembering and re-remembering. If we conceive of history, as Hayden White does, as a special kind of fiction, “the contents of which are as much invented as found,” we need not trouble ourselves probing historical narratives for truth.¹⁴⁷ However, if we believe that historical writing, however imperfectly, captures aspects of a real but vanished past, we must examine historical resources for the accuracy with which they recall and represent the actual past. That being said, discovered falsehoods and misrepresentations can give us insights into the past too. Distortions in the historical record can ultimately be just as revealing as they are initially misleading.

When historians analyze the testimony of historical witnesses (regardless of the form these testaments take, whether published memoirs, private diaries, or oral history interviews), the historian must try to ascertain the truthfulness of her informant and also must evaluate the reliability of her informant’s memory. Many historians working in the field of oral history have reflected on the difficulty of this task, and some of their insights are particularly relevant to the historical study of memoirs. In addition, scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of historical memory bring a useful perspective to memoir studies. History and memory, as we shall see, are frequently in opposition to each other

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki eds. *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 42.

(although each has the potential to influence the other). Memoir is at the crossroads of memory and history, and it contains elements of both.

A.J.P. Taylor, a well-known foe of oral history, has proclaimed his suspicions about the vagaries of the memories of “old men drooling about their youth.”¹⁴⁸ However, Taylor’s protestations aside, the historians who use oral histories in their research have long been aware of the ability of untruths or half-truths to reveal as much as they conceal. Paul Thompson, one of the primary champions of the oral history movement, proclaims that through the vehicle of compelling oral testimony, “in a flash, we may be in another world, normally beyond even the most painstaking researcher.”¹⁴⁹ Thompson is scornful of historians who are obsessed with the factual “reliability” of oral histories, claiming that such a preoccupation “obscures the really interesting questions.” For as Thompson eloquently argues, “reality and myth, ‘objective’ and ‘subjective,’ are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed one of the triumphs of the oral history movement is the reminder that how individuals conceptualized their world is every bit as vital to understanding the past as the more commonplace task of ascertaining “what really happened.”

Luise White claims, “For historians, the invented account is at least as good as the accurate one...Because dissembling is perhaps the most pointed telling we have...a lie, a cover story, not only camouflages but explains.”¹⁵¹ If the oral testimony of a historical witness is contradictory or does not align itself with other historical evidence, the historian may wonder why the informant would tell stories that ring false. In analyzing

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Gwyn Prins, “Oral History,” in *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 114.

¹⁴⁹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 131.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 135.

¹⁵¹ Luise White, “Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History,” *History and Theory*, 39 (2000): 11-22.

oral testimony with dubious literal truth value, the historian might learn a great deal about the way that an individual perceived herself and her times (if the witness's misrepresentation is honest) or about how she would like to be remembered (if her lies are more calculated). Cover stories, lies, and distorted truths are often crafted deliberately and the discovered intention to deceive makes "certain information so charged that its value and importance is unlike other information."¹⁵² An uncovered lie might function as a red flag, alerting a historian to an area where she should dig a little deeper. For example, in an oral history interview a slave own

For this reason, a published memoir is frequently a more complicated interpretive challenge than an oral history interview. Memoirists have the time to weave more complicated artifices of untruths and half-truths than the interviewee who must immediately respond to posed questions. Rather than dismissing fabrications in an autobiographical text as obstacles to deeper historical understanding, we should ask ourselves why the memoirist told the story of her life the way she did. Timothy Dow Adams claims that, "Lying in autobiography is not just something that happens inevitably; rather it is a highly strategic decision, especially on the part of literary autobiographers."¹⁵³ Obviously, as the generic discussion in the second chapter reveals, the vast majority of the people, places and events described in the memoir must be externally verifiable in order to establish generic classification as an autobiography. However, if the bulk of a text is harmonious with other historical data yet one or two episodes appear to be fabrications, the historian must analyze the cover story both to find what it initially conceals and also to see what the deliberate effort to tell a lie might reveal about the memoirist and her society.

Not all false testimony is deliberate, although when analyzing oral histories or memoirs, the historian must be on the lookout for deliberate lies. One of the primary concerns of historians reluctant to utilize oral history in their research is the accuracy of individual memories. To assuage the fears of traditionalists leery of oral testimony, Thompson cites evidence from a study of the memories of 392 high school graduates aimed at finding out how well they remembered the names and faces of their classmates. The study found "that for those classmates who were considered friends, *no* decline in

¹⁵³ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), x.

accuracy of recall can be traced, even over an interval of more than fifty years.”¹⁵⁴

Thompson’s conclusion naturally follows that people remember things that are important to them. However, an examination of memory that goes behind the recollection of a few names and faces quickly becomes more complicated. How reliable is individual memory that covers long sweeps of history? Is the question of reliability even a good question to ask? What is the relationship of memory to history, and how does the study of the memoir enter this discussion?

Any analysis of oral histories or of written memoirs necessarily touches on the ongoing interdisciplinary discussion about “historical memory.” History and memory are similar to the extent that both attempt to reconstruct the past, but they do so on very different terms. According to Pierre Nora in his seminal essay “Between Memory and History,” “memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition.”¹⁵⁵ Memory, according to Nora, is in a state of evolution and has life, while history is a lifeless reconstruction of “what is no longer.” Furthermore, memory is, according to Nora, “affective and magical,” while history is “prosaic.”¹⁵⁶

Memoirs share elements of both memory and history. They are a record of memories, certainly, but if we are to accept the idea that memory is dynamic rather than static, a memoir does not remain in the domain of memory for long. After it is written down it becomes fixed, a set interpretation, somewhat akin to historiography. When a memoirist writes her life story, she is, in a sense, transforming living memories into a fixed history. Nora refers to memoirs, monuments, anniversaries, and archives as the

¹⁵⁴ Thompson, 113.

¹⁵⁵ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations* 0 (1989): 8.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

“materialization of memory.”¹⁵⁷ The memoir or the archive is no longer living and in the process of change like memory itself; rather it is immovable, “a secondary memory, a prosthesis memory.”¹⁵⁸

Although the historical study of memoirs is rooted in the belief that historiographical accounts refer to a real past, history is inevitably partially construction as well as reconstruction of what is no longer. History is constructed when a historian filters through existing data about the past and attempts to build a plausible story of past events. Memory too, biologists agree, is constructed rather than recalled. “Biologists now support the recent subjectivist thrust in psychology that envisions each memory as an active and new construction made from many tiny associations, not a passive process of storing and retrieving full-blown objective representations of past experiences.”¹⁵⁹ Chances are that an individual never twice remembers the same event quite the same way. This becomes especially apparent in oral history interviews when a witness tells contradictory or slightly altered stories in successive interviews. In memoirs, we are unable to see the stages and alterations of memories that the author experimented with before permanently choosing one “materialization of memory.” Memoir writing, like history, like memory itself, is partially reconstruction of lived movements, but is invariably a construction too.

Memory may be rooted not in real life experiences but rather in the imagination. Historical memory is complicated by the concept of what Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes as “false memory.” Marquez’s mother described the house where she spent her honeymoon in such detail to the young Marquez that even as an adult he carries a mental

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁹ David Thelan, “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History*, 75 (1989): 1121.

image of the home with him, based not on his actual experiences (for he never actually saw the home) but rather on his mother's memories.¹⁶⁰ Harry Crews' memoir of growing up in rural Georgia begins with such a false memory. He claims, "My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew."¹⁶¹

Thus it is clear that memories are in flux, and even the most vivid memories may have no bearing in objective reality but could instead be products of the imagination inspired by someone else's experiences. Memoirs themselves, particularly those written with great aesthetic power, may eventually become a part of their readers' memories. Indeed, a historian might assemble a body of false memories and impressions of a past reality she never directly experienced. When reading memoirs it is important, indeed crucial, to be aware of the mutable nature of memory. However, this awareness should not detract from the historical value to be found in even "false memories," because as Thompson argues, "one part of history, what people imagined happened, and also what they believe *might* have happened—their imagination of an alternative past, and so an alternative present—may be as crucial as what did happen."¹⁶²

When reading a memoir, it is necessary to attempt to decipher the motivations of the author in writing the memoir and in remembering things in a particular way. The construction of memories, and by extension memoirs, does not occur in "isolation," as David Thelan reminds us, but in the "contexts of community, broader politics, and social dynamics."¹⁶³ Memories and thus memoirs are affected by the writer's gender, political

¹⁶⁰ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Serenade," *The New Yorker*, February 19 & 26, 2001, 140.

¹⁶¹ Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, (New York: Quill, 1983), 1.

¹⁶² Thompson, 139.

¹⁶³ Thelan, 1119.

outlook, social status, and-- especially significant in the memoirs of the Jim Crow south-- by the writer's racial identification. The south in the first half of the twentieth century was a politically charged environment, heightened by the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. Political neutrality in the midst of such turmoil was all but impossible and, unsurprisingly, the memoirs written during this time period reflect that and tend to interpret history from the writer's political perspective. *Memoirists are in fact filtering and manipulating their own memories in an attempt, conscious or otherwise, to alter the historical memories of their readers.* Read this way, the study of historical memory, or for our purposes, historical memoirs can be understood, as David Blight puts it, "as the study of cultural struggle, of contested truths, of moments, events, or even texts in history that thresh out rival versions of the past which are in turn put to battle in the present."¹⁶⁴

Thus memoirs give us insights not only into "what really happened" in the past, but also into the way the past was remembered. Furthermore, because memory is dynamic and because it is possible to have the sensation of remembering events that one never directly experienced, memoirs continue to influence the way the past is remembered every time they are read. Karen Fields emphatically declares that, "Our scholarly effort to get the 'real' past, not the true past required by a particular present, does not authorize us to disdain as simply mistaken this enormously consequential, creative, and everywhere visible operation of memory."¹⁶⁵

The way the past is remembered is often at odds with what really happened. It is the job of the historian, or the scholar of the historical study of memoirs, to compare

¹⁶⁴ David W. Blight, "W.E.B. DuBois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory," in *History and Memory in American Culture*, eds. Robert O'Meally and Genevieve Fabre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 46.

¹⁶⁵ Karen Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 153.

memoirs and other historical documents in order to compose as complete and as verifiable a depiction of a historical moment as possible. However, this is a job that is never finished. It is ongoing. The way the past is remembered is in a continual dialogue with historical consensus about the true nature of the past. When memories, false and otherwise, compete with history we must question the political motives of both she who remembers and she who chronicles.

Memories are frequently subversive and challenge official histories, which exclude the experiences of marginalized groups (whether marginalized by gender, religious affiliation, race, socioeconomic status, nationality, etc.). Milan Kundera poetically declares that, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”¹⁶⁶ Memory of this kind is emancipatory. It fights against fixed historical interpretations that silence dissenting voices. Memory of this kind is revealed in the oral histories of former slaves that show that slavery was cruel and debilitating, not paternalistic and benign. However, memory can also be utilized for opposite effect. It can be brought to the defense of the master and conjure images of contented slaves and peaceful, prosperous plantations. As Edward Said reminds us, “Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism of power and authority.”¹⁶⁷ Memory can thus both support and resist the status quo. It can confirm or resist reigning historiographical interpretations.

Memories and memoirs, regardless of their point of view, reveal a great deal about the person doing the remembering and her social world. This is true, as we have seen, whether or not her memory is always reliable, whether or not she is always telling

¹⁶⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Knopf, 1981), 3.

¹⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, “Invention, Memory, Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.2 (2000): 176.

the truth. Memoirs are valuable historical resources precisely because of their subjectivity; because they reveal the way that individuals perceive and later recollect the historical moments of their lives. They make these revelations without compromising the complexities and contradictions of both lived and recalled experience, without whitewashing vagaries and falsehoods in the name of a particular conception about what constitutes historical truth.

However, the unabashed subjectivity of the memoir clashes with still prevalent notions of scholarly objectivity. The subjectivity of the memoir raises questions about the relationship of particular experiences to general trends and of the connections between individuals and broader social groups. It also raises numerous questions about the nature of historical reality and the possibility of knowledge of past realities. Could it be that the subjectivity of the memoir is a scholarly asset rather than a liability due to the very nature of historical reality?

CHAPTER 5

HISTORICAL SUBJECTIVITY AND THE PERSPECTIVAL NATURE OF HISTORICAL REALITY

A quest for scholarly objectivity lies at the heart of traditional conceptions of the discipline of history. However, historians and other scholars have become increasingly skeptical about the possibility or even in some instances, of the desirability of such a perspective. Those who still believe that objectivity is achievable have sometimes proved to be suspicious about the value of the memoir, which is unabashedly subjective, as a historical resource. A. J. P. Taylor views life writing this way, claiming “written memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians and are ‘useless except for atmosphere.’”¹⁶⁸ Jeremy D. Popkins, one of the few historians to explore the similarities between autobiography and history explains the misgivings of some historians this way:

Autobiography may sometimes seem like history, but...it [is] impossible to maintain the pretense that an autobiography can achieve scholarly objectivity. Historians have long recognized this fact when using other people’s autobiographies as historical resources. Standard manuals for students caution them against reliance on these “least convincing of all personal records.”¹⁶⁹

Contemporary historians reluctant to embrace oral history or memoirs as historical resources are now among the minority of their field. Indeed it is unfair to infer that a staunch traditionalist like Taylor speaks for the majority of the members of the historical profession. Those historians who have expressed objections to utilizing either oral history or the memoir as historical resources often do so in the name of “historical

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 104.

¹⁶⁹ Jeremy D. Popkin, “Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier,” *The American Historical Review*, 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 726. Popkin is quoting from G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 67.

objectivity.” The birth of modern history as a professionalized field of inquiry in the nineteenth century is founded on the belief that it is the historian’s duty to, in the words of Leopold von Ranke, tell it “how it actually happened.” Put differently, in 1898 Lord Acton admonished contributors to *Cambridge Modern History* to “understand that...our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike.”¹⁷⁰ Acton’s remarks express the belief that a professional historian should let the facts speak for themselves and that a proper assemblage of historical facts must produce an interpretation that corresponds to a reality existing outside of that interpretation. According to this extreme vision of historical objectivity, any competent historian looking at the same body of historical data should come to the same conclusions. However, it quickly becomes clear (the best of intentions aside) that this is frequently not the case, and the notion of “objectivity” is then thrown into crisis.

Historical objectivity is generally understood in two different ways. The first way it is defined is as “value neutral.” This version of the doctrine of historical objectivity is focused upon the act of writing history itself. Following the guidelines of historical objectivity conceptualized this way, a historian should survey the historical evidence and generate historiography that does not bear the imprint of the historian’s own personally held viewpoints. It is frequently apparent when an historian is *not* being objective if her interpretation bears the obvious imprint of her nationalistic identification or ideological persuasion. Objectivity of this kind has quickly become a quality that is easier to identify in its absence rather than its presence. Historians are, of course, influenced by the times in which they are living, by their ideological perspectives, by the kinds of historical

¹⁷⁰ Acton letter reprinted in Fritz Stern ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 249.

resources they choose to utilize, by the politics of the academy, and by their individual life experiences among other things.

A belief in value neutral historiography rests on the assumption that a historian can put aside her own personal viewpoint and sketch a detached “objective” portrait of the past. However, historians are frequently unaware of how deeply held their own beliefs are and to what extent they influence their interpretations. For example, a historian’s deeply held racism could influence the kind of history she writes. Indeed, race has traditionally been a blindspot in American historiography. In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois effectively called into question the prevailing Dunning School interpretation of Reconstruction by writing his own study of the time period, empowered with the idea that “Negroes were ordinary human beings.”¹⁷¹ Similarly, Jefferson scholars who were blinded by their own racism refused to believe that the founding father could have had a longstanding sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings until DNA evidence demonstrated that the third President does indeed have both black and white and descendents. Racism has been so interwoven in American culture that the Dunning School tradition and many Jefferson scholars could not see their way around it when interpreting history. There is no reason to believe that we have not been similarly blindsided in many aspects of our current historical understanding.

The idea that historians can ever completely remove their own viewpoints from the writing of history has been discarded by most members of the historical profession. Historians have been set free to question how, where, and why their own perspectives color their interpretation of history. And yet, since no historian can ever completely

¹⁷¹W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*, (1935; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1995), 1.

escape the confines of her own perspective, such an interrogation is in the end compromised by her ultimate imprisonment inside her own worldview.

The second way in which historical objectivity is defined is in terms of the Rankean conception that it is possible to write a history that corresponds directly with a real past, which will then be equally true for each historical agent who participated in that past. The belief that a historiographical account can ever accurately represent the past it purports to illuminate is largely a matter of faith. It is therefore impossible to observe a historical moment and then compare it to a historian's version of that moment.

Furthermore, even if such observation were possible, a witness observing a historical event would be limited by her individual perspective. A historian, confined as she is by her own perspective, cannot even hope to know the "whole story" of the moments she has lived, let alone the whole story of a particular historical moment. Therefore, there is no way to "test" a historian's objectivity by comparing her interpretation to a real past, which neither the historian nor the historical agents who lived that past are able completely to access.

Both ideals of historical objectivity (value neutrality and correspondence with historical reality) are now generally (if sometimes grudgingly) viewed as ultimately unattainable. Michael Stanford suggests that "we might do well to admit objectivity as a 'regulative ideal,' so that it may guide us as nearly as possible to an impossible goal."¹⁷² This is more or less the tacit compromise most historians have made with the dictates of their field. It is something historians strive for, all the while knowing that it is impossible attain.

¹⁷² Michael Stanford, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 55.

However, the conception that there is a historical truth (however difficult to arrive at) that is actually true for all historical agents is ultimately a problematic one. According to Peter Novick the concept of objectivity asserts that “Truth is one, not perspectival.”¹⁷³ The implications of this claim have an obvious impact on memoir studies. The genre of the memoir is founded on the idea that memoirs make truth claims about the past. However, these claims are often very different from memoir to memoir. Generally a skeletal body of agreed upon facts emerges when reading a body of memoirs that recount the same historical moment, but the way that these facts are interpreted and experienced by individual memoirists often differs wildly. Different memoirists have witnessed different events and interacted with different people and thus report specific experiences unduplicated in other accounts. Although this fact in itself is not conceptually problematic, it does make the verification of individual accounts by means of corroborating witnesses (a cardinal rule among most historians) impossible to achieve in some instances. However, significantly, sometimes memoirists have witnessed the same event but perceived it much differently than other memoirists. How then is the historian to decide which version is true? Is it possible that these varying accounts are simultaneously contradictory and true?

The way that individual memoirists characterize the historical moments through which they lived is anything but objective, but in this respect do they differ from other historical resources? Any piece of historical evidence was generated by a historical subject and as such is inevitably “subjective.” This raises quite another question

¹⁷³ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2.

altogether from the possibility of achieving objectivity in history, and that is the desirability of such an attainment were it possible to achieve.

Thomas Nagel convincingly argues that there are many things that simply cannot be understood from an objective standpoint. He says, “a great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view or a type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives brings us into error.”¹⁷⁴ History is about people, and as Michael Stanford argues, “Fully to understand their doings and their predicaments it is necessary to enter, as far as possible, into their perceptions, their reactions, their calculations, their emotions.”¹⁷⁵

Viewed from this standpoint, the subjectivity of a memoir is not an obstacle a historian must try to overcome. Instead what Taylor derides as “atmosphere” is actually itself part of the historical reality the historian is trying to uncover. The way individual narrators perceived, experienced, and described their individual lives is itself history, which by its very nature is subjective. Because historical perspectives are as numerous as historical agents, it is impossible to understand an event from every possible perspective. Unfortunately there aren’t memoirs written about every historical event or representing each geographical location in each historical era. Even where memoirs do exist, they don’t always represent a wide cross section of society. When we do have access to a wide spectrum of memoirs, our historical understanding is richer and we are put in touch with the experiential aspects of living in history.

The view of historical reality I will maintain is multi-faceted where truth is in many cases perspectival. Understandably this concept threatens the idea of “grand

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

¹⁷⁵ Stanford, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 56.

narratives” or attempts at writing monographs that even approach being comprehensive or definitive. Jeremy Popkins has studied the attempts of many historians to write their own autobiographies and claims that this enterprise is complicated because, “they are often acutely conscious that their own stories complicated or contradict the generalizations they and their colleagues have painstakingly elaborated, the ‘grand narratives’ in which the discipline has encoded collective experience.”¹⁷⁶ When we have access to the recorded experiences of individual historical agents, our historical understanding is certainly richer, but we also become more aware of how necessarily partial and incomplete our understanding of history is and of how many voices from the past remain unheard. To think of history as multi-perspectival, with each individual experience at variance with the experiences of others, makes the historians’ task of recreating the past even more daunting.

I will elaborate on this conception of historical reality in a moment, but first I would like to make the observation that literary critics with their relentless focus on the “subjectivity” of autobiographical narrators have subtly challenged the assumption of an objective understanding of history. Memoirs offer detailed descriptions about how individual historical agents experienced and perceived the past. Grand narratives, which claim to describe the past “objectively” and to tell a story that is true for everyone living in a certain timeframe, fail to capture the experiential aspects of living in history. Literary theorists who study memoirs as expressions/ constructions of unique selves offer a reminder that the past cannot be painted with too broad a brush.

Literary critics by no means have a monopoly on appreciation for the subjectivity either of memoirists or of other historical subjects. For example, Leon Litwack is a

¹⁷⁶ Popkin, 727.

historian who has made a reputation writing histories colored by an understanding of historical reality as multi-perspectival. In *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, Litwack claims, “This book will draw largely from the perspectives and experiences of people who spent their lives in relative obscurity, who never shared the fruits of affluence, who never enjoyed power.”¹⁷⁷ Although Litwack does make generalizations about black southerners as a group, he never does so at the expense of multiple, individual voices. He attempts to describe not only “what happened” in the Jim Crow South but also “how it was experienced.” His historical project is not to write an objective history true for all southerners living in the Jim Crow South but to bring to life the experiences of the distinct group of African-American southerners and, even more specifically, individual voices in that group. Litwack did not attempt to construct a “Waterloo” that would be acceptable to both black and white southerners as Lord Acton had admonished. He knew that this was not possible.

Although many literary theorists (as well as historians like Litwack) have contributed to our growing understanding of the subjectivity of historical reality, the concept of “subjectivity” has become problematized over the past few decades. What exactly is a “subject” or a self? Is it something that is given? Is each person born with a distinct, unified sense of self or is it something that is made? Is the constitution of the subject merely the consequence of societal pressures and expectations? How does an individual subject or self relate to larger group identities?

As Jonathan Culler notes, the word “subject” itself provides a key to the theoretical problem of the constitution of the self. “The subject is an actor or agent, a free

¹⁷⁷ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1998), xv.

subjectivity that does things, as in the ‘subject of a sentence.’ But a subject is also *subjected*, determined, ‘her Majesty the queen’s loyal subject,’ or ‘the subject of an experiment.’”¹⁷⁸ The traditional view of the subject is of something that is given. Each individual possesses a unique identity present from birth, and each self could therefore proclaim along with Rousseau, “I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence.”¹⁷⁹ Rousseau maintains a claim for a self that exists outside of language. He is using the language of autobiography to describe a self, which he conceives as preexisting. In contrast, many contemporary autobiographical theorists have argued that the language of autobiography actually creates a self, which does not exist in any unified or coherent way outside of the autobiographical project.

Many theorists who have problematized the subject are following the lead of Nietzsche who claimed, “The ‘subject’ is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.”¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, Foucault claims that the traditional concept of the self has now been “decentered.”¹⁸¹ In other words, the existence of a distinct self is no longer seen as the given essence of an individual, instead it is seen as created by forces outside the self. The self is created by systems of oppression that limit the way that the subject is able to act and think. The societal and cultural amalgam of expectations that shape selves is so pervasive and insidious that individual subjects frequently do not recognize that their subjectivity is constructed rather than given and instead continue to conceptualize themselves as free agents in the tradition of Rousseau.

¹⁷⁸ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 104.

¹⁷⁹ *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (1782), Book I. An on line version of the text is available at http://www.orst.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/confessions/Rousseau_Book1.html.

¹⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1968), 267.

¹⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 13.

This conception of the constructed self has had a dramatic impact on the theory of autobiography and has led Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson to conclude that “People tell stories of their lives through cultural scripts available to them, and they are governed by cultural strictures about self-presentation in public.”¹⁸² However, a powerful and politically laden question emerges from the claim that autobiographers and other subjects can only work with the scripts that society hands them and are incapable of generating their own plot elements. “If individuals are constituted through discursive practices, how can they be said to control the stories they tell about themselves?”¹⁸³

This raises an issue that is central to my conception of memoir studies, and that is the question of agency. To what extent can we conceptualize memoirists as historical agents who are exercising free choice in the way they describe their lives and their selves as well as in how they lived the lives that their memoirs purport to chronicle? T. Dietz and T.R. Burns define agency this way:

Agency requires that actions be *effective* in changing material or cultural conditions, that they be *intentional*, sufficiently *unconstrained* that actions are not perfectly predictable and that the actor possesses the ability to observe the consequences of an action and to be *reflexive* in evaluating them.¹⁸⁴

A strong belief in the capacity of historical agents to affect the course of their lives as well as the textual retelling of their lives is at the heart of my vision of memoir studies. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, the revealed intention of a memoirist to write autobiography is the key generic marker for what kinds of texts should be read as autobiography. I regard the decision to write autobiography as the act of a purposive

¹⁸² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 42.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ T. Dietz and T. R. Burns, “Human Agency and Evolutionary Dynamics of Culture,” *Acta Sociologica* 35 (1992): 194.

historical agent; but agency is by no means limited to the act of writing autobiography, and historical agents have varying amounts of control over other aspects of their lives as well.

It would be ludicrous to suggest that any historical agent has absolute power over her life. As the history of the Jim Crow South, which is the subject of the second half of this dissertation, dramatically reveals, institutions, societal expectations, and cultural norms have a dramatic impact on the way that individuals perceive themselves and on the choices that are available to them. However, these systems of control are never all-determining.

African-American history is brimming with examples of individual historical actors who found multiple, ingenious ways to outwit societal expectations and publicly or privately to redefine or “recenter” themselves in response to the identities that the dominant society had assigned them. I am indebted to the work of the historians of the African-American experience who have revealed ways that countless historical actors exercised agency in even the most circumscribed situations, even from the confines of slavery. Historians like Peter Woods and Charles Joyner have demonstrated that slaves who found themselves in an institution designed to deprive them of agency and a sense of themselves as individuals found ways to fight that system and to define themselves in the process. For example, Eugene Genovese’s 1974 classic *Roll, Jordan, Roll* claims to tell the story of “the black struggle to survive spiritually as well as physically—to make a living space for themselves and their children within the narrowest living space and harshest reality.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, (1972; reprinted: New York: Vintage Books, 1972), xvi.

Even though slaves rebelled against the circumstances of their enslavement in numerous daring and creative ways (ranging from poisoning their masters to maiming work animals, running away, destroying farm equipment and feigning illness) and managed to define themselves in opposition to the slave-owning class by means of a rich and unique culture, it is obvious that their freedom to act was severely limited by the brutal institution of slavery. The fact that they managed to resist those who enslaved them at all (whether physically or culturally) is a testament to the theory of human agency. However, to deny that slavery was a brutal institution and that systematic oppression had an impact on the enslaved is naïve. Much of slave life was determined, and it follows that slave identities were partially determined as well.

Some theorists, like Anthony Appiah, have tried to make sense of the way that subjects simultaneously exercise agency and have agency denied them by coercive social structures. Appiah tries to resolve the tension by saying that agency and socially determined subject positions exist on different levels.¹⁸⁶ However, “the analytical separation of levels of theory will always be blurred in the lives of human beings who construct and are constructed as subjects by those theories.”¹⁸⁷ On the individual level, slaves might assert their agency by telling trickster tales that ridicule their masters and in so doing assert a concept of their own subjectivity at odds with the way the ruling class would define them. However, on another level the system of slavery continued to operate and limit the choices and identities that individual slaves could claim for themselves. Slaves could not simply decide to stop being slaves, go another direction and redefine themselves differently. When faced with these societal constraints, some slaves actually

¹⁸⁶ Anthony Appiah, “Tolerable Falsehoods: Agency and the Interests of Theory,” in *Consequences of Theory*, eds. Jonathon Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991), 63-85.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 84.

chose suicide as a preferable alternative to slavery. Even those who ran away knew that they might, in effect, be choosing suicide, an ultimate and final assertion of agency, as well.

Similarly, Philip Pomper argues, “An individual can be an agent when facing one ‘direction’ and be deprived of agency when facing another.”¹⁸⁸ What direction one chooses to emphasize when writing history is largely a matter of choice. For example, a group of Afro-American historians has dramatically reinterpreted Emancipation by putting slave agency at the center of their analysis, concluding that slaves and former slaves “played an active role... in destroying slavery and redefining freedom.”¹⁸⁹ However, their analysis does not displace the role of Abraham Lincoln and the Radical Republicans in the drama of Emancipation. Instead an emphasis on the roles slaves played in securing their own freedom makes the story more complex and shows how on different levels agency is simultaneously exercised and denied and how a historical actor might lack the freedom to act in one area of her life and find it in another. The story of Emancipation also reveals “that all history is—and must be—political.”¹⁹⁰

The writing of history is also a political act, whether or not this is acknowledged. The political import of historical writing is often a question of emphasis. In the case of this historical study of memoirs, I have chosen to emphasize the agency of the memoirists and the extent to which they control their own lives as well as the textual retelling of their lives for reasons that are at root political. Without a theory of agency, historical actors cannot be represented as capable of influencing the social and the political landscape of

¹⁸⁸ Philip Pomper, “Historians and Individual Agency,” *History and Theory* 35.3 (1996): 285.

¹⁸⁹ Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xv.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

the past, the present, or the future. Forgoing the possibility of agency in favor of a theory of a self that is completely determined and whose illusions of free will are instead a form of false consciousness is distressingly pessimistic.

The fact that the segregated Jim Crow south is a now a bygone historical era is a testament to human agency. Wasn't the Civil Rights Movement a mass action that proved undeniably "*effective* in changing material or cultural conditions"? The fact that the Movement failed to accomplish all of its goals, merely demonstrates that the freedom to act and to affect change is never unfettered. The Jim Crow memoirs that I will analyze in the second half of this dissertation attest again and again to the importance of human agency and to the unwillingness of many southerners—white and black, male and female—to accept the predetermined identities that southern society had devised for them.

By now we have established that it is not possible to write, to understand, or to experience history from an "objective" standpoint. Instead history is experienced, recorded, and understood subjectively. The historical study of memoirs should emphasize the subjective nature of history, with specific concentration on the power that each memoirist was able to exercise in both shaping and reporting upon her own life. The experiences of individual historical actors will be at the heart of my analysis of the memoirs of the Jim Crow south. This decision to emphasize individual experiences is an outgrowth of the nature of historical reality itself. As is perhaps clear by now, it is my contention that memoirs are uniquely able to give us insights into the past because they represent the viewpoints of individual historical actors and are, by their very nature, unabashedly subjective.

Wilhelm Dilthey argued that “the course of an individual life in the environment in which it is affected and which it affects” is “the germinal cell of history.”¹⁹¹ If we accept this conception of history, it follows, as Dilthey further claimed, that “autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us.”¹⁹² While biographies and historiographical writing may describe the events of an individual’s life, they are ill equipped to describe how a historical subject felt or how a historical subject perceived her own life. In biography or history, such topics are left to conjecture or are the outgrowth of analyses of the writings or recorded conversations of the biographical subject. However, the autobiography presents a cohesive and carefully constructed account of what living through a particular historical moment looked like and felt like from the perspective of the autobiographer. As we saw in Chapter 3, we cannot always take everything an autobiographer says at face value. Nonetheless, autobiographies offer us a better glimpse inside the life and mind of a historical actor than any other kind of historical writing.

Like Dilthey, R.G. Collingwood described historical reality in terms of individual historical actors. Collingwood begins his description of historical reality by contrasting the study of history with the study of the natural world. According to Collingwood, historical reality is fundamentally unlike natural reality and thus cannot be studied using the same methodology.¹⁹³ In order to describe the differences between natural processes and historical ones, R.G. Collingwood describes “the inside and outside” of events.

¹⁹¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History*, ed. H.P. Rickman (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 89.

¹⁹² Ibid. 85.

¹⁹³ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

Natural events have only an outside component. They are “mere events.”¹⁹⁴ The observable facts that leaves change color in the autumn or that water freezes or boils at certain temperatures are phenomena that occur in accordance with physical laws that are not the product of thought. In contrast human beings are capable of thought, and to understand the social world in either the past or the present, we must take into account that humans unlike objects in the natural world have the capability for reason. Unlike natural events, historical events have both an inside and an outside.

The outside of an historical event consists of the placement and movement of bodies in a given historical moment. Even if time travel were possible and we were able to watch a historical moment unfold, we would be unable to comprehend the event through observation alone. Collingwood’s classic example of this truth is the assassination of Caesar. A mere physical description of Caesar’s lifeless body and the location of the bodies of those responsible for his death would only describe part of the historical reality of the event. In order to understand this or any other historical event, we must look at the inside of the event, which consists of the thought of the historical agents.

According to Collingwood, “all history is the history of thought.”¹⁹⁵ True historical understanding is the understanding of the inside of an historical event and comes as a result of re-enacting past thought. The historian must actively and critically attempt to re-think the thoughts of an historical agent in order to understand the agent’s motivations and justifications for acting in a certain way. Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment has been a somewhat controversial one and has been critiqued by some as a ridiculous call for mystical telepathic communication between a living historian and a

¹⁹⁴ Collingwood, 214.

¹⁹⁵ Collingwood, 215.

deceased historical subject.¹⁹⁶ Much debate centers around whether or not Collingwood thought it was possible actually to re-think identical thoughts or whether his doctrine of re-enactment is simply a constructivist exercise in how historians produce historical knowledge.

Nonetheless, Collingwood's underlying assumption is undeniably valid. Because historians are human beings who are studying other human beings, the historian is able to identify closely with the subjects of historical inquiry. This stands in direct contrast to natural scientists who cannot have the same kind of affinity for the objects they study. Because we cannot directly interact with historical subjects who are no longer living, we must relate to them imaginatively, by re-enacting their thoughts or more colloquially, putting ourselves in their shoes. As Michael Stanford argues, "we can understand people—inwardly so to speak—largely because we ourselves are human."¹⁹⁷ Dilthey argues that historical understanding consists largely of "the rediscovery of the I in the Thou."¹⁹⁸ In other words, in order to apprehend past reality, the historian must draw on similarities between herself and the historical subject. Interestingly, as we shall see, these human similarities transcend the shared capability for rational thought, which Collingwood emphasized.

According to Collingwood, the historian can only hope to re-think rational thought and thus cannot comprehend either the emotions or the irrational thought of an historical agent. Thus, in Collingwood's formulation, true historical knowledge is only possible when historical actors behaved in a rational manner and were motivated by

¹⁹⁶ See Margit Hurup Nielsen, "Re-Enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 20.1 (1981): 1-31.

¹⁹⁷ Stanford, 72.

¹⁹⁸ Dilthey, 67.

conscious thought processes—which can be re-thought—rather than by unconscious motivations, by passions. Collingwood’s understanding of the inside of an historical event is limited in its applicability because of the emphasis on rational thought and conscious motivation. Human behavior, and thus the inside of an historical event, is not only cognitive but also affective. Furthermore, humans do not always behave in a rational manner and are not always conscious of what motivates their behavior. Does this mean that we cannot ever hope to understand the inside elements of historical events which were not rationally and consciously orchestrated? I would argue that it is indeed possible to gain insight into the affective and unconscious “inside” elements of an historical event.

Memoirs, especially those written by skilled creative writers, give us a richer and more complicated vision of the historical reality of a given moment than any other single source material. The next chapter will demonstrate that it is by virtue of the literary techniques utilized in a skillfully written memoir that the reader is able to come to a richer understanding of the emotive, inside elements of a historical event. Using the techniques of literary art, a memoirist finds ways to capture the relationship between purpose, affect, and perceptions and puts his or her own thoughts and feelings about a historical moment in relation to other persons in the same social scene. Archival materials, which are not works of literature, frequently cannot capture this complex reality, particularly when viewed in isolation. Historians using archival materials may indeed hypothesize about the inside of a historical event, but such interpretations are highly speculative. In studying history without the benefit of literary memoirs, the historian must project herself into a situation and imagine how she would have felt, what she would have thought, and thus how she would have reacted. Where memoirs exist, this

kind of speculation is not necessary, for the memoirist herself guides us, telling us what to think and how to feel. The well-crafted memoir enables us, in a way that no other single historical resource can, to re-experience the affective and cognitive inside of an historical moment.

In our attempts to recreate the past on the basis of the clues that we are able to access in the present, we cannot afford to distance ourselves emotionally from the subject of our historical inquiry and content ourselves with unraveling the “what happened in the past?” question without tackling the more evasive but equally intriguing question “how did it feel?” By daring to ask the second question, we come closer to the historian’s goal of understanding the past on its own terms. We must dispense with the tired myth of history as detached and objective, as a science, and embrace Jacques Barzun’s inclusive definition of history as “vicarious experience.”¹⁹⁹ “Knowledge of history is,” according to Barzun, “like a second life extended indefinitely into the ‘dark backward and abysm of time.’”²⁰⁰ The memoir, unlike any other genre of historical writing, is uniquely poised to give its reader the chance to live vicariously and, however briefly, to indeed experience “a second life,” which is acted out in the interplay between the written word and the reader’s historical imagination.

If we conceptualize history as Barzun does as “vicarious experience,” we can expand Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment beyond the realm of rational thought and “re-feel” what historical actors felt. David Stockley has argued that “empathetic reconstruction” is an important aspect of historical knowing. Empathy should not be

¹⁹⁹ Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, Fifth Edition (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), 40.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

confused with sympathy, which is defined frequently as merely “benevolent concern.”²⁰¹ In contrast, empathy involves “the projection of one’s personality into the personality of another in order to understand the person better.”²⁰² In order to “re-feel,” the historian should actually draw on her own life experiences and embrace her shared humanity with the object of her inquiry. Because the historian has experienced hope, sorrow, anxiety, and the rest of the spectrum of human emotions, it is possible for her to project her own understanding of those emotions onto the historical subject she is studying. Brian Attebery argues that “we can recognize in the products of the past the same kind of sifting, structuring, and evaluating of experience that we undertake in our own lives.”²⁰³ Rather than trying to remove her emotions from her work as the doctrine of historical objectivity dictates, the student of history should use her own experiences and emotions as tools to help her understand what it felt like to live in the past.

So not only can a historian identify with the cognitive and affective aspects of historical subjects (largely because the historian too is capable of thinking and feeling), but the historian is also aware of the way that thoughts and emotions intermingle, sometimes contradict each other, and frequently take on a different significance when transferred from the realm of direct experience into that of memory.

In contrast to Rankean calls for historical objectivity, my conception of the historical study of memoirs emphasizes the subjectivity not only of the memoirist but also of the person analyzing the memoir. The reader cannot hope to understand what it felt like to live through a particular historical moment without allowing herself to

²⁰¹ Thomas Mautner ed., *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

²⁰² *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Third College Edition (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991).

²⁰³ Brian Attebery, “American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method,” *American Quarterly*, 48.2 (1996): 316-343.

empathize with the memoirist. There are times when empathetic understanding is difficult or even impossible to achieve. Students of history may have difficulty projecting aspects of themselves into an understanding of the actions of notorious or violent historical characters. Indeed it may be too frightening an exercise even to attempt to identify, no matter how imaginary and tenuous the connection, with the thoughts and emotions of someone like Adolf Hitler. Similarly, it might be difficult fully to empathize with the white racists who wrote some of the memoirs that will be the subject of the second half of this dissertation. However, it also might be easier to empathize with the thoughts and feelings of evildoers than we would like to think, and in the empathetic identification with people whom we have come to identify as depraved, we might discover darker recesses of ourselves. However, attempting to see the world from the perspective of a particular historical actor should not be confused with a justification or wholehearted embrace of his or her thoughts and values. In trying to understand how it felt to be living at a particular time in history and how the world looked from a particular perspective, the historian is not endorsing or adopting another person's worldview. Empathetic reconstruction can be replayed again and again from the perspective of different historical actors. Such identifications are only temporary and are necessarily moderated by the historian's own ethical concerns and present-minded worldview.

Empathetic reconstruction or re-feeling is not purely instinctual, nor is it uncritical. David Stockley insists that "Empathetic reconstruction may well be an imaginary act, but it is also an analytical one and one that must be prepared for."²⁰⁴ To truly "live vicariously" another life in the past, even for just moment, requires immersion

²⁰⁴ David Stockley, "Empathetic Reconstruction in History and History Teaching," *History and Theory*, Beiheft 22 (1983): 58.

in historical material about a given time period. My approach to the historical study of memoirs demands that individual memoirs not be read in isolation. Various memoirs from the same time period should be read together and compared to one another. They should also be read along with secondary scholarship about the time period in question, so that the reader will notice if certain details or descriptions are at variance with the vast majority of writing about the period. Historical empathy is impossible if certain details ring false, and the historian must verify the feasibility of specific autobiographical accounts.

This emphasis on empathetic reconstruction of the thoughts and feelings of individual historical agents reminds us that history contains a multiplicity of perspectives. Each memoirist is herself a center of consciousness, who interacts with other centers of consciousness, each of whom perceives the historical reality of her life differently. Historical reality is comprised of the sum total of these individuals' varied experiences. As a result, it is clear that no total understanding of the inside of any historical moment is possible. The more involved the student of history becomes in attempting to reconstruct the experiences of one historical agent, the more aware she becomes of the voices from the past that we do not have direct access to and thus of how necessarily incomplete our understanding is not only of the past but also of the moments in which we ourselves are living.

When faced with the vast and largely unknowable scope of historical reality, it is easy to see the appeal of a belief in a Waterloo that rings true for everyone. However, we are faced with the truth that historical reality is inherently perspectival. Robert Paul Wolff demonstrates the perspectival nature of social reality by first comparing the natural world

to the social world, specifically examining the concept of time. Natural events happen in isotropic time. No moment of time is any more important than any other moment. In contrast, human time is anisotropic. Human beings experience some moments as more significant than others. We distinguish between the past, the present, and the future and each has a different significance to us. Human time is “organized by our affective and evaluative orientation toward the content of moments of time.”²⁰⁵ In distinguishing between moments of time and in making some moments more important than others, we are actually creating the structure of time that will govern our society.

Similarly, human beings not only impose structure on time as they perceive it, they also construct a wide variety of social roles and institutions that characterize their social reality. Wolff uses a wedding as an example. Although the wedding has “a spatial location in physical space and a temporal location in physical time,” its spatial and objective time location do not make an event a wedding.²⁰⁶ A wedding ceremony becomes a wedding ceremony due to shared meanings and expectations of the participants in the wedding ceremony and the larger society about what a wedding should be. Without those communal understandings, the wedding has no meaning. Indeed, without these shared meanings, the wedding *qua* wedding does not exist. Thus the wedding exists solely from the perspective of the society.

The same can be said for other social institutions and social roles. They are constructed by human beings and do not exist outside of the perceptions of the humans who create and sustain them. Wolff compares social reality to fictional narratives. Much

²⁰⁵ Robert Paul Wolff, “Narrative Time: The Inherently Perspectival Structure of the Human World,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XV (1990), 216.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 218.

like fictional worlds, which exist only from the perspective of the narrator, the social world exists only from the perspective of humans. Wolff argues:

...because who one is is a consequence, in large measure, of what normatively organized social roles one has internalized, because there is no coherently formed natural man or natural woman beneath a scrim of civilization who could stand back and achieve an objective cognitive or evaluative perspective on one's society, it follows that the perspectival, evaluative orientation to society and history in which each of us is embedded simply *is* social reality.

Social reality is perspectival and is organized broadly on a societal level. It is clear that different societies have different ways of structuring time, defining social roles and institutions, and generally creating their social reality. What then is the relationship of individuals to the larger social structure? If an individual cannot create a social role, can an individual fight against it, as an individual? The answer, according to Wolff, is yes. "Those who occupy the roles can embrace the evaluative structure of the role, resist it, play off against it, vary it, but they cannot avoid engaging with it in some way, because that structure is part of what the role *is*."²⁰⁷ Thus even though social reality is created collectively, it is also experienced individually.

Social reality (and thus also historical reality) is perspectival on both the societal and individual levels. Social reality and human time do not exist without collective recognition of their attributes. However, this fact cannot completely dictate the way that individual agents perceive and interpret their own social roles. The memoir is particularly well suited to illuminate the way that individual historical agents "play off... vary... and engage" with the social roles available to them.

These individual experiences and actions, which are driven both by thoughts and emotions, constitute social reality. The conflicting ideas and perceptions of individual

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 219.

historical agents constitute a many sided picture of a single historical event. Even when different witnesses disagree about what happened in a particular historical moment, these disagreements too are part of the historical reality, which by its very nature is perspectival. In the memoir we are given a rich description of how one individual agent perceived and then remembered the events of her life. When we read a memoir actively and empathetically, we are able to have a fuller understanding of the past from the perspective of one historical agent. However, not all memoirs are equally adept at describing a complex historical reality. As the next chapter will reveal, the ability the memoir has to impact the reader varies greatly from memoir to memoir. The power the memoir has over our historical understanding and historical imaginations comes not just from the subject matter of the memoir but from the language with which the memoir is written.

CHAPTER 6

LITERARY TECHNIQUES AND AN EXPERIENTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIVING IN HISTORY

Although any memoir is a valuable historical resource, the memoirs I have chosen to analyze in the second half of this dissertation are all a particular variety of memoir. They are “literary memoirs,” which I contend offer particularly revealing historical insights due to their literary merits. The specific memoirs under consideration in Part II of this dissertation were written (to borrow Susanna Egan’s phrase) by “artists—not writers by happenstance.”²⁰⁸ I am defining the “literary memoir,” quite simply, as a memoir written by a professional writer who has written other imaginative texts in addition to her autobiography. It is not my desire to enter into the conversation about canon building or canon debunking. In the case of Jim Crow memoirs, there are in existence published memoirs written from a wide range of perspectives—black and white, male and female, political conservatives and progressives—so the question of excluded voices is not as critical here as in some other arenas. Nor do I want to enter into the contentious and open-ended debate about how to define literature, a question far more complicated than the already difficult problem of how to define autobiography. For my purposes, I am solving the question of defining the literary memoir by saying that it is written by individuals who self-identified as and are widely recognized as skilled, creative writers.

Why, given the wide spectrum of Jim Crow memoirs written by southerners from various walks of life--ranging from politicians to maids--did I elect only to analyze texts written by professional writers? After all, one might convincingly argue that I would have

²⁰⁸ Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 30.

access to a larger range of southern experiences were I to read memoirs written by members of various professions, rather than those written exclusively by men and women of letters. Ignoring this well-reasoned consideration, did I isolate a body of literary memoirs to analyze because literary texts are simply more enjoyable to read than non-literary ones? Did I make this decision because works that have been elevated to the status of literature are more frequently in print than those written by less skilled writers? The decision to use literary memoirs exclusively did, of course, save me a number of trips to remote, musty archives to read the unpublished reminiscences of various southerners.

Although literary memoirs may indeed be more pleasurable to read and are certainly more accessible than non-literary ones, those were not factors in my decision. I have chosen to analyze literary memoirs because I believe that through the vehicle of literary art the memoirist is able to give us a richer and more detailed description of historical reality than that contained in any other single historical resource. This, as is readily apparent, is a strong claim that I must endeavor to defend.

We must first begin by reflecting on the language used in literary memoirs. How is it different, and thus more historically revealing, than that used in non-literary memoirs? Literary memoirs utilize language that is distinct from that employed in popular autobiographies (many of which are ghost written or collaboratively written) by entertainers, CEO's, politicians and others who are not skilled, creative writers. Unlike popular autobiography, with its titillating claims to "reveal all" and its unabashed allegiance to the market place, each literary memoir is intended to be a work of art as well as a chronicle of a life. Literary memoirs are generally not written exclusively to sell

books or to score publication relations points (although these might be partial considerations on the part of the author); they are primarily intended to be works of art that will outlive the memoirist herself. However, we cannot make the distinction between literary and non-literary memoirs by appeal to the author's motivations alone. After all, some authors no doubt set out to create works of art but write critical failures nonetheless. How do some memoirs become works of art while others do not? Why is something like Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Invitation of a Memory* considered literature, while Lee Iacocca's co-authored autobiography is not?

According to Terry Eagleton, "Literary discourse estranges or alienates ordinary speech, but in doing so, paradoxically, brings us into a fuller, more intimate possession of experience."²⁰⁹ How does literary language perform such a remarkable feat? It does so, in part, merely by drawing attention to itself as literary language and causing the reader to pause, to reflect, and to analyze the content of what she is reading. To merely say that literature causes us to think more carefully about what we read seems at first a fairly unremarkable claim. However, the endeavor, discussed in the last chapter, to both "re-think" and "re-feel" the thoughts of historical agents is a slow and deliberate process. The more involved we become in analyzing a text, the closer we come to understanding what the text's author thought and how she felt. Autobiographical texts that do not demand intensive reading or inspire interpretive quandaries simply do not allow the reader to identify as closely with the authors of the texts. A literal text may be read quickly and put aside, but a literary text requires the kind of ongoing interaction between author, reader, and text that helps facilitate empathetic reconstruction of past events in the present. This

²⁰⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

kind of intense interplay is necessary if the historian is to be in a position to understand the complexity of an author's thought and to, as Collingwood would have it, rethink those thoughts.

Eagleton's claim that literary language "estranges" everyday speech relies on the assumption that we have a consensus on how ordinary language looks and sounds. For how can something be considered strange without a standardized basis for comparison? Because judgements about what makes language "strange" vary chronologically as well as culturally, we cannot have a set basis for comparison. A line from a Keats sonnet such as, "Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art" immediately draws attention to itself as literature. After all, the poet appears to be addressing a star directly or is addressing a person whom he is comparing to a star, neither of which are common conventions in ordinary speech. However, if we were to pluck out of context a phrase or two of the spare, unadorned prose Hemingway writes, we might not have the sense that what we are reading is literature per se. It quickly becomes clear that to recognize literature by the extent to which it "alienates ordinary speech" is not a foolproof identifier, but it is frequently useful nonetheless. If we compare two representative samples of the same genre side by side when one is widely considered literary and the other is not, we can frequently recognize significant differences in the way language is used. Take Iacocca and Nabokov's autobiographies as a basis for comparison.

Iacocca's autobiography begins almost conversationally as if he were answering the question "where did your family come from?" He answers: "Nicola Iacocca, my father, came to this country in 1902 at the age of twelve—poor, alone, and scared."²¹⁰

Because adjective series are more characteristic of written than of spoken language, the

²¹⁰ Lee Iacocca and William Novak, *Lee Iacocca: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 3.

usage of “poor, alone, and scared” draws attention to the fact that he is writing, rather than speaking. However, the adjectives themselves are unimaginative and as such not particularly descriptive nor very literary. The adjectives chosen conform to clichéd, linguistic expectations rather than subverting them. It is also immediately clear that the text we are about to read will follow a formula. Iacocca’s autobiography is one of many variations on *the* American story: child of immigrants makes good, pulls himself up by his bootstraps, rises from rags to riches and so forth. We know the basic plot in its entirety from the very first sentence even without possession of the specific details, and the substance of his life story is quickly revealed in all the complexity it will ever assume.

Contrast this formulaic stab at autobiographical writing with the first sentence of Nabokov’s autobiography: “The cradle rocks above the abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities and darkness.”²¹¹ Without a formula we can quickly recognize, we are caught off guard. Already, from the very first sentence, we know that Nabokov’s conception of himself and of the autobiographical act is more complicated than a long list of his accomplishments. We are already told to be aware of the relationship of one individual life to eternity. We quickly are confronted with what we intuitively already know: from the moment of birth, life is uncertain. Unlike Iacocca, Nabokov captures something of the experiential aspects of living alongside uncertainty. We do not already know all the plot elements that will comprise Nabokov’s life story. Nabokov’s cradle precariously “rocks above an abyss,” while the trajectory of Iacocca’s life is already clear from the first sentence.

²¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1966), 19.

It is immediately obvious that Nabokov's autobiography poses a greater interpretive challenge than Iacocca's, and we can assume that our greater efforts to understand Nabokov's story will have a greater payoff in the form of a richer, more nuanced reconstruction of Nabokov's life. How can we describe our initial, unreflective understanding that due to the literary techniques it utilizes *Speak, Memory* somehow has more to offer us in our endeavor to understand human nature and to get an insight into the inner workings of one particular life than does Iacocca's autobiography?

Eagleton compares language to the air we breathe. Most of the time we are unaware of it. However "if the air is suddenly thickened or infected we are forced to attend to our breathing with new vigilance, and the effect of this may be a heightened experience of our bodily life."²¹² The same thing is true of language: we suddenly become aware of it when it ceases to function merely to communicate information but is instead transformed into art. On a fairly superficial level, Nabokov's text has a greater impact on us than Iacocca's simply because he succeeds in getting our undivided attention. As we shall see later, once the literary memoirist has our attention, she has at her disposal various techniques of literary art that she utilizes to give us a complex glimpse of the historical reality of her life.

When we read Iacocca's autobiography, we are not fully aware of the particular language that he is using because it is unremarkable. We might read it absentmindedly on the beach or on an airplane because we are interested in finding out the skeletal facts of his life: his educational background, his tenure at Ford, the business decisions he made while managing Chrysler. We might initially open Nabokov's memoir with the same motivations in mind, but the language Nabokov uses is so evocative, so sensory, so

²¹² Ibid.

strange that the atmosphere does change. We are no longer halfheartedly leafing through it on the airplane; we are, if we allow it, transported into another realm and are able to enjoy the thrill of “vicarious experience,” which Barzun claims draws people to history. This changed atmosphere is due to the literary merits of the text. Instinctively we read a literary text with a higher state of awareness than when we read a newspaper, a recipe, or a non-literary memoir. Literature simply demands more from its reader, and the reader who actively engages with it receives more for her efforts.

Not only does the aesthetic power of language made strange so change the atmosphere that the reader is primed to live vicariously while reading a text, but the more artfully an autobiography is written, the longer and more vividly the reader will remember the text and her interaction with it. David Blight has argued that W.E.B. Du Bois made a conscious shift in his work from “social science to art” in large part because Du Bois believed that artfully written prose could convey his message more powerfully. Blight situates himself among “many scholars [who] have stressed the importance of aesthetic appeal in the art of memory.” He claims that “The emotional power of a historical image or of an individual or collective memory is what renders it lasting...The more profound the poetic imagery or the metaphoric association, the more lasting a memory might be in any culture.”²¹³ With these criteria in mind, Blight labels Du Bois’ classic text *Souls of Black Folk* as a “memory palace... of unforgettable images, conveyed with such aesthetic power that readers and writers might return to it, generation after generation, for historical understanding and inspiration.”²¹⁴

²¹³ David W. Blight, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 53.

²¹⁴ Ibid. 55.

Literary memoirs are particularly valuable historical resources in large part simply because they form lasting impressions and inspire vivid mental imagery. When images are artfully drawn, they make a lasting impact on the reader's imagination and in the process often become resident false memories in the minds of their readers. If we conceive of history as vicarious experience, it only follows that such experiences should produce memories as well as a deeper subjective understanding of the past. Images from literary memoirs form memory palaces that we add to or subtract from as we learn more about an historical era.

In my particular case, my first exposure to the social realities of the Jim Crow south came through Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy*, which I first read when I was twelve years old. I still carry with me powerful mental images inspired by the text, such as an image of young Richard's attempt to sell his pet dog to a white woman in order to buy food, images that conjure up the essence of that historical era for me. My mental images have become more detailed and complicated as I have read other memoirs and historiographical accounts of the era. My false memories of young Richard (for I was, of course, not there myself) have become contextualized (and no doubt altered) now that I have been exposed to historical data from a wide variety of sources. Nevertheless the sense impressions I gained from reading *Black Boy* remain at the heart of my understanding of Jim Crow. That kind of impact may be just what Wright, who consciously and deliberately used his arsenal of literary tools to create a particular effect, intended.

Powerful aesthetic imagery is not confined to formal literature nor dependent upon the skill of classically educated writers like W.E.B. Du Bois. Robert O'Meally

argues that “more than any other form of human expression, art communicates the excitement as well as the treacherous unpredictability of history’s flights.”²¹⁵ However, the art O’Meally is referring to is primarily vernacular art. Folktales and folksongs might conjure imagery as vivid as that in a work of literature. It is not my intention to draw a distinction between “high” and “low” art, but rather to contrast the figurative and artful use of language with the literal and commonplace.

So what techniques do literary artists use, which enable their texts to serve as “memory palaces” in the minds of their readers? Interestingly, in describing the difference between reading literature and non-literary writing, Eagleton gives us a clue. He tells us, “Language is like air.” His use of a simile demonstrates one of the many techniques of literary writing that enable it to describe a complex social reality better than literal prose. Faced with the difficult task of contrasting literary and non-literary language, Eagleton chose to describe the difference by means of an effective comparison. Even if his reader had never thought about the distinction before, Eagleton knew that his reader would know what it felt like to be suddenly blasted with humid air, or to breathe in smoke or smog. When the air quality is altered, breathing can no longer be taken for granted. Just as we don’t notice the quality of air unless it changes, he tells us, we generally don’t notice language unless its quality changes too and it becomes literature.

Metaphoric language enables authors to describe one thing in the terms of another. Sometimes, as with Eagleton’s comparison of literary language and infected air, a metaphor enables an author to explain a difficult concept in terms of a more familiar one. However, this basic definition of the metaphor does not do justice to the power that

²¹⁵ Robert O’Meally, “On Burke and the Vernacular: Ralph Ellison’s Boomerang of History,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 245.

metaphorical images can have. By grouping often seemingly unrelated objects or concepts, the writer who utilizes metaphor inspires a reconceptualization of the object under comparison. For example, the metaphor “A mighty fortress is our God” conjures up one image of the nature of God, while another metaphor might highlight a different, even contradictory aspect of God such as “God is a consuming fire.” The more benign image of “God as the baby infant Jesus” characterizes God in yet another way, and each metaphor could be used for a different rhetorical effect and will cause the reader to conceptualize God much differently.

Metaphor, in causing the reader or listener to juxtapose different images and to actively engage in interpretation, is capable of revealing things that literal language cannot. William Franke argues that, “The sense of the world must lie beyond the limits of the totality of facts that make up the world and that *can* be articulated in straightforward, fact-stating language saying *how* it is.”²¹⁶ Metaphor brings to life images that are not literally true but can nonetheless be more revealing about the nature of things than unadorned fact. For example, love is not literally a rose. However, we could argue that the language of fact is far less adept at explaining romantic love than the single image of a perfect red rose.

Some recent theories of metaphor argue that metaphor is more fundamental than an ornamental figure of speech and that human beings think and structure their experiences through metaphors. For example, conceptual structure theories of metaphor argue that, “linguistic metaphors are not arbitrarily generated through the random contrast of any two conceptual domains, but reflect a constrained set of conceptual mappings,

²¹⁶ William Franke, “Metaphor and the Making of Sense: The Contemporary Metaphor Renaissance,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33.2 (2000): 147.

itself metaphorical, that structures our thinking, reasoning, and understanding.”²¹⁷

According to this theory, humans are able to interpret commonplace metaphors as easily and unthinkingly as literal speech because “metaphorality [is] a central cognitive mechanism.” Yeshayahu Shen claims, “Its centrality has been established by demonstrating the role played by metaphor in such diverse contexts and domains of (cognitive) activity as... problem solving... categorization mechanisms... similarity judgments, and analogical reasoning.”²¹⁸ If indeed this is true, this might explain why literary metaphors are so powerful; we are hardwired to process information that way. Literary metaphors have a particular impact on us, according to Raymond W. Gibbs, because of “their novel way of articulating some underlying conceptual mapping that already structures part of our experience of the world.”²¹⁹ Metaphors of this kind do what good literature in general does according to Eagleton and the Russian formalists. It, to quote Robert Anchor, “fulfill[s] expectations along unexpected lines.”²²⁰

To begin to examine how figurative language is more evocative than literal language, let’s look at the concluding paragraphs of Richard Wright’s memoir *Black Boy* as an example. At the conclusion of the autobiography, Wright has decided to leave the Communist Party and to continue fighting against racial injustice as a politically independent writer. His first move will be to write his own life story. In straightforward, non-literary prose, Wright might write a sentence summarizing his intentions much as I

²¹⁷ Raymond W. Gibbs, “When is Metaphor? The Idea of Understanding in Theories of Metaphor,” *Poetics Today* 13.4 (Winter 1992): 595.

²¹⁸ Yeshayahu Shen, “Cognitive Aspects of Metaphor Comprehension: An Introduction,” *Poetics Today* 13.4 (1992): 568-569.

²¹⁹ Gibbs, 597.

²²⁰ Robert Anchor, “Realism and Ideology: The Question of Order,” *History and Theory* 22.2 (1983): 116.

just have. He might say, “I will write my autobiography and examine the question of racial injustice in the process.” Instead he writes:

...I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

I would hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.²²¹

The net impact of Wright’s closing lines of *Black Boy*, because of the literary language he chooses, is much greater than what would be achieved if the same information were conveyed in summary or in a non-literary fashion. In fact, the disparity between the non-literary summary, “I will write an autobiography that expresses what it is to be human” and what Wright actually says is such that Wright’s feelings can *only* be conveyed using the techniques of literary art.

Wright not only communicates the basic information that he has decided to devote his life to writing, but he also sheds light on the hardships inherent in the writing life. He is aware of the difficulties in using language to represent the reality of his life and thus compares writing to building a bridge. Wright is aware of the distance between his lived experience and its retelling as described in the pages of an autobiography. Although his goal is to paint so vivid a picture of life in the Jim Crow South that his readers will be forced to experience it vicariously, with or without their consent, he knows that there is necessarily a gulf between reality and representations of it. By coming clean with the problem of representation, he is asking his reader to collaborate with him to bridge the gaps between their present reality, Wright’s past reality, and the language Wright enlists to describe it.

²²¹ Richard Wright *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, The Restored Text, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 384.

He makes a startling language choice when he tells us that he will “hurl” (like a grenade?) words into a potentially unfriendly world. This somewhat violent imagery stands in direct contrast to images of a cloistered intellectual stolidly writing in an isolated corner of a library. He personifies, then deputizes language, ordering it “to tell, to march, to fight.” The description of words as soldiers quickly and economically conveys a great deal to the reader. We are shown how difficult the life of the writer, any writer, is. It is so difficult to find the right words that writing is a lot like warfare. Even more significantly, Wright’s description of words as soldiers also reminds us of the brutal realities of the Jim Crow south. In giving voice to nameless “black boys” throughout the south and in asserting their humanity, Wright is fighting an uphill battle. He is not writing to a receptive or even disinterested audience. He is writing to a nation steeped in institutionalized and legalized racism, and a large portion of his audience is hostile to his autobiographical efforts before they have read the first sentence. He will indeed have to “hurl” language at people who would rather not listen to him.

None of the complexity of what he is saying could have been conveyed had he chosen to write straightforward, literal prose. He might have painstakingly and longwindedly written a treatise on representation and on the craft of writing fiction. He might also have inserted one final denouncement of racism. Instead he leaves us with the imagery of words as soldiers and in so doing captures the difficulties of his undertaking while reminding us of the precarious position he is in. As a black writer he does not have the luxury of being only a writer. He must also be a soldier and his words his weapons.

As we can see from this brief examination of the conclusion of *Black Boy*, Wright’s use of metaphorical language conveys a complexity of meaning that could not

have been conveyed without using figurative language. Similarly, literary artists have at their disposal the tool of irony, which can also be used to convey many levels of meaning. Irony can take various forms. The earliest usage of the concept is found in Plato, where we are introduced to Socratic irony. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates feigns ignorance and asks seemingly naïve questions in order ultimately to expose the true ignorance of his interlocutors. Plato and his readers are aware of the ironic situation because they know that it is Socrates' questioners who are ignorant, not Socrates himself. Irony is often expressed when one says something one does not mean. In speech, this kind of ironic meaning is often indicated by the inflection with which it is spoken. For example, it would be ironic to see a forty-dollar hamburger listed on a menu at a fancy Manhattan restaurant and to declare, after a sharp intake of breath, "That's quite a bargain!" Situations can be ironic as well. For example, it would be ironic if a soldier lived through a war only to be hit and killed by a car immediately after his tour of duty was over. Regardless of the form it takes, irony generally involves a tension between the way that things appear to be (or should be) and the way they really are. In order to be effective, Socratic or dramatic irony also relies on the existence of two different audiences, a superficial audience, which is aware of the surface meaning, and a true audience, which is aware of the true meaning of the words or situation.

Irony is often used in literary memoirs to great effect. For example, consider the wedding scene in Carolyn Briggs' memoir *This Dark World*. Briggs is describing her wedding. She is eighteen years old and pregnant. Out of obligation and necessity, she is marrying her first boyfriend, an awkward nineteen year old with no real job prospects and is pushing aside dreams of college to take up a life of poverty and motherhood in a tiny

trailer park in the middle of Iowa. However, despite the unhappiness surrounding the event, all the trappings of a happy wedding are present: flowers, expensive new clothes, cake and punch. Briggs writes, "...my father in cowboy boots and I in my dotted swiss approached the altar. My bridesmaids, Lisa and Katherine, waited tearfully for me, wearing lavender dresses and carrying yellow roses."²²² From the perspectives of Lisa and Katherine, the tears they were crying were tears of happiness. They were caught up in the appearances of a happy wedding and not in tune with the grim significance this ceremony had in the life of their friend. However, Briggs, her parents, and the readers of the memoir constitute a true audience, which is not fooled by the yellow roses and the silk dresses. For them this was an unhappy occasion, for them the bridesmaids' tears are tears of sadness. Here appearance and reality are at odds. Weddings should be happy, and bridesmaids should (if they cry at all) cry tears of joy. Briggs, when confronted with the carefully constructed artifice of a joyful union, is able to catch a glimpse of what her wedding day *should* have been like and to compare that vision with her present situation. If Briggs had not chosen to highlight the irony of an unhappy wedding, she could not have as accurately conveyed what it felt like to be an eighteen-year old pregnant bride embarking on a life she did not chose. The melancholy nature of her situation is highlighted in contrast to the image of what a wedding should be.

Robert Paul Wolff provocatively argues that there are certain concepts that can only be conveyed ironically. He uses the example of a lapsed Catholic who now considers herself an atheist. How should this person answer if asked whether or not she presently believes in God? The answer "yes" is obviously inaccurate since she now considers herself an atheist. However, the word "no" does not accurately convey her true

²²² Carolyn Briggs, *This Dark World*, 76.

convictions either if she, like many formerly religious people, still maintains in one part of herself a shred of superstition that indeed there is a God. To answer, “I once believed in God, but I do not now” would also be an inaccurate answer that would deny part of her true feelings and would also dismiss the profound impact her Catholicism and her one time belief in God have had on the person she presently is. In order to succinctly describe her true feelings, Wolff suggests, she might “reply—employing, ever so faintly exaggeratedly, the singsong tone of the Apostle’s Creed—‘I believe in God the Father Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth and in Jesus Christ...’” This ironic voice would convey to a true audience that she grew up in the Catholic faith and is no longer among the faithful but still bears the imprint of her time in the church. Wolff argues:

...if the speaking self is complex, many-layered, capable of reflection, self-deception, ambivalence, of unconscious thought processes, of projections, interjections, displacements, transferences, and all manner of ambiguities—in short, if the *history* of the self is directly present as part of its current nature—then only a language containing within itself the literary resources corresponding to these complexities will suffice to speak the truth.²²³

Willie Morris, a white Mississippian by birth who moved north both physically and metaphorically as he tried to conquer his native racism, describes the same kind of tension between a former self and a current self that Wolff’s lapsed Catholic experienced. In his memoir *North Towards Home*, Morris describes a day in the mid-1960’s that he spends in Manhattan with two other transplanted southerners, the novelist William Styron and the historian C. Vann Woodward. The three men spend the day giving radio interviews about the south and their feelings about the Civil Rights Movement. They are cast as enlightened, white southerners who are speaking to similarly enlightened northerners and Canadians (a scenario that Morris negates elsewhere by talking about the

²²³ Robert Paul Wolff, *Moneybags Must be so Lucky: On the Literary Structure of Capital*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988), 32-35.

virulent racism he has encountered in New York). At lunch Woodward tells his friends about witnessing the March on Montgomery and in so doing vividly describes the “red-necks” who come out in droves to oppose Martin Luther King. Woodward confesses, “And I’ll have to admit something. A little part of me was there with ‘em.”

As the men are leaving the restaurant, Styron and Morris lag behind Woodward, who is forced to wait for them on the other side of a busy intersection. Woodward shouts, “You’re the slowest country boys I ever saw.”²²⁴ Woodward is jovially complaining because his companions are literally lagging behind, but perhaps unwittingly, he is also impatient with himself. He has spent the day talking about books, giving interviews, and drinking martinis in Manhattan, but part of him is still a “country boy” who was socialized as a southerner and a racist, try as he might to suppress that aspect of his former self. C. Vann Woodward may have written *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* to expose the roots of institutionalized racism, but the rational part of him, which could analyze and condemn southern injustice, must coexist with the part of him that grew up under its tyranny, the part of him that could momentarily identify with the outspoken racists out to stop Dr. King. The gap between the person he is and the person that he would like to be is revealed in the characterization of his friends (and by extension himself) as slow country boys who, despite their fame and their sophisticated lifestyles, are unable completely to escape their roots.

Irony is a particularly useful tool for literary memoirists writing about the Jim Crow south because southern memoirists are writing about a social situation fraught with irony. Because southern conventions demanded outward subservience from African-Americans regardless of their personal feelings, any interaction between a white

²²⁴ Willie Morris, *North Toward Home*, (New York: Dell, 1967), 399-400.

southerner and black southerner might be weighted with irony. White southerners expected cheerful deference, and African-Americans who did not exhibit the right attitude might be watched with suspicion, labeled “uppity,” and fired from their jobs. Because of this expectation and the grim consequences if it wasn’t met, black southerners might answer questions such as, “Are you happy working for me?” with exaggerated smiles and emphatic, “Yes, sirs.” While the requisite responses delivered in the requisite fashion might satisfy whites who wanted to reassure themselves about the contentment of their black employees, an African-American listener overhearing the same exchange would interpret the energetically proffered “Yes, sir” differently. The African-American primary audience would understand that the put upon black employee meant the opposite of what she was forced to say. These Jim Crow interactions between black and whites were incarnations of earlier dealings between masters and slaves. Slaves would sing spirituals that the masters interpreted as purely religious songs but that the slaves knew were cries for freedom in this world. Slaves also told folktales that were outwardly about animals but had another layer of meaning where the animals enacted master-slave relationships in which the slaves came out on top.

Because so many of the black and white relationships in the Jim Crow south were laden with irony, an accurate portrayal of that era would have to convey this crucial aspect of social interactions. Literal depictions of southern race relations that do not capture irony cannot capture a primary aspect of the social reality of that time. Every interaction between a black and white southerner contained layers of meanings. The outward reenactment of prescribed social roles camouflaged but could not erase deeper meanings. White southerners, if they allowed themselves, knew that black southerners

could not be as content as they pretended, and black southerners learned to perform the societal script they were handed without really meaning it. A work of literary art that utilizes irony can capture this complex reality and these layered meanings.

Let's return for a moment to the final paragraph of *Black Boy* where Wright attempts to do something else that great literature does: he universalizes his experiences. Although the main goal of the memoir is to indict southern racism, he also wants to use his writing to convey "the inexpressibly human." Thus *Black Boy*, like all literary memoirs, is simultaneously particular and universal. It can be read as a historical resource that allows us to come to a greater understanding of Jim Crow, but it is also applicable to other times and other contexts. Literary memoirs are allegorical, that is they have more than one level of meaning. According to E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "Such writing typically intends to convey meaning beyond its immediate occasion into a future context which is very different from that of its production... authors of such future-oriented writings intend to make them applicable to (in other words, allegorizable to) unforeseen situations."²²⁵ Good ethnography, like literature, is also allegorical according to cultural anthropologist James Clifford. According to Clifford, "A recognition of allegory emphasizes the fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are 'convincing' or 'rich' are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, esthetic, moral) additional meanings."²²⁶ An understanding of ethnography as allegory allows Clifford to interpret a scene from Marjorie Shostak's book *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* on two different levels. The passage Clifford analyzes recounts Nisa giving birth

²²⁵ E.D. Hirsch, "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History* 25.3 (1994): 552.

²²⁶ James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 100.

alone in the bush, but on another level Clifford reads it as “an allegory of (female) humanity.”²²⁷ Similarly, *Black Boy* can be read simultaneously as Richard Wright’s memoir, as the story of all “black boys” in the Jim Crow south, and also as an allegory of all human oppression.

If our goal is to read literary memoirs for the historical insights they can give us, why do their universal applicability and allegorical qualities matter to us? If we are reading *Black Boy* to understand one historical time period better, how relevant is it that Wright’s suffering might be analogous to other situations and other eras? In order to understand this, we must return to our earlier discussion of empathetic reconstruction. The historian is better able to re-feel the past experiences of Wright or any other historical agent if she can draw on her own emotions and feelings to help her. Because literary memoirs are universal as well as particular, the historian cannot help but find aspects of the lives chronicled that resonate with her own, and she can draw on those similarities to achieve a greater historical understanding. “Why,” E.D. Hirsch, Jr. asks rhetorically, “should anyone be interested in a story that lacks analogical applications to his or her own experience?”²²⁸ Although it would seem harsh and narrow-minded to categorically declare that all non-literary memoirs are uninteresting, it is generally true that the allegorical and universal aspects of great literature enable its readers to identify more closely with it than with non-literary texts.

So far in our attempt to come to terms with what makes the literary memoir a particularly good historical resource, we have discussed its ability to gain the readers’ undivided attention, its effectiveness in inspiring lasting mental images in the minds of its

²²⁷ Ibid. 99

²²⁸ Hirsch, 553.

readers, its usage of metaphors and irony to convey concepts that can't be expressed through literal speech, and its allegorical qualities that make it relevant to any time and any place. Although all of these things make the literary memoir a potentially powerful and highly descriptive text, all of these characteristics could be equally true of a novel. What kind of insights can the literary memoir give us, if any, that a novel can't?

Of course, as discussed in the last chapter, a literary memoir is historically significant because, unlike the novel, it is based in fact and refers to a real past rather than to a fictional world. Because of this the memoir can give us facts, which are literally verifiable, as well as insights into the way the historical reality it recounts was structured. Novels, like the works of Dickens, might give us revealing glimpses of what life was like during the historical period they are set in, but they are not intended to be literally verifiable. Memoirs, despite the myriad ways that they might stretch, evade, or incorrectly portray the truth, are grounded in real people, places, and things and thus are better suited to tell us "what really happened" than fictional texts.

However, even though they are rooted in fact, literary memoirs also are free to utilize the techniques of fiction. Because literary memoirists are skilled writers, they are experienced at creating fictional worlds, and they bring their expertise to bear when describing the real one. Because she literally writes the fictional world into being, an author of a fictional text has a god-like perspective over the text. The talented creative writer knows how to describe a fictional world in all its complexity: to capture the interpersonal relationships between characters that inhabit that world and to vividly describe what that fictional world looks like, sounds like, and smells like. Creative writers bring this same set of skills with them when they turn to autobiography, and the

result is often a description of the real world that is as detailed and as revealing as that found in a finely crafted novel.

Literary memoirists, when they write autobiography, essentially transform themselves into characters and then describe the world as it exists from their point of view. This is not something a historian of a particular time period can do, for the historian must write a narrative that describes a world that simply does not exist from her personal point of view. Historians write about vanished worlds. Since historians are not characters in the historical worlds that they describe, they cannot be expected to have the same kinds of insights as an inhabitant of that world. Historians cannot capture the immediacy of past experience the way a literary memoirist can. They write from fixed but arbitrary chronological divisions. Historians pick beginning and ending dates when they write histories of an era, and these dates are imbued with a great historical significance, often the beginning or ending of a war, the election of a political leader, or the start or close of economic catastrophe or unusual prosperity. Real life does not have this same kind of structure. Robert Anchor claims that one of the realist writers' goals is to be able to "produce and sustain a sense of the openness of history within the closed circle of narrative."²²⁹ The literary memoirist is frequently able to capture a sense of the chance, the possibility, and the arbitrariness of life in a way that a historian cannot. This is so because the memoirist is familiar with the uncertainty she felt at various stages in her life and at various points in history, while the historian always knows the outcome.

Literary memoirists also give us important clues as to the way that they and others like them may have conceptualized their world. Each memoirist reveals a great deal about her society simply by means of the language she uses. For, as David Harlan argues, "by

²²⁹ Anchor, "Realism and Ideology," 115.

studying the conceptual language of a particular culture, we could learn what it was or was not possible for people in that culture to have thought.”²³⁰ When we read memoirs written in periods of time other than our own, it quickly becomes clear that the operating assumptions about what is possible, desirable, good, and conceivable vary greatly from era to era. According to J.G.A. Pocock, the historian must “point out conventions and regularities that indicate what could and could not be spoken in the language, and in what ways the language *qua* paradigm encouraged, obliged, or forbade its users to speak and think.”²³¹

In Jim Crow memoirs, the way that the issue of race is talked about is a prime example of the way that the conceptual language of a particular culture can dictate what kind of conversations can take place. In memoirs by many white southerners, racism is taken for granted. The southern caste system is so much a part of the world the memoirist inhabits that she can’t think her way outside of that system. In contrast, African-American memoirs and memoirs written by whites politically opposed to the southern way of life deliberately challenge the conceptual language of their culture, which legitimates racism. These memoirs attempt to redefine the way society thinks about race by transforming the way it is spoken of. However, even when memoirists make efforts to transcend the language about race available to them, it often becomes clear that they are more influenced by the conceptual language of their times than they would like to think.

Lillian Smith’s memoir *Killers of the Dreams* was written to fight racism and to describe the socialization of southern racists. Nonetheless, Smith’s text unwittingly bears

²³⁰ David Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” *The American Historical Review*, 94 (1989): 589. Harlan is paraphrasing some of the thought of J. G. A. Pocock.

²³¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 10.

the imprint of the racial thinking of her time. She maintains essentialist ideas about racial differences, referring to the “biologically rooted humor” of southern mammies and claiming that all slaves possessed “a marvelous love of life and play, a physical grace and rhythm and a psychosexual vigor.”²³² Although Smith calls upon what she believes are positive stereotypes to counteract the racism of her day, they are stereotypes nonetheless. The fact that Smith was able to overcome her socialization as a white racist and actively to fight against the southern caste system is remarkable. However, her belief in innate racial differences demonstrates that despite her ability to transcend the grossest manifestations of the racism of her society, even she could not completely break free of the conceptual framework of her times. Thus often in spite of themselves, memoirs give us a glimpse into some of the deeply embedded assumptions of a particular society.

All texts, not just literary ones, reveal aspects of the conceptual language of a particular culture. We can also get insights about the structure of the world from diaries, from letters, and from more public kinds of writing as well. The usage of language that is culturally revealing in memoirs and in other kinds of writing is generally unwitting. Writers utilize the language that is available to them. However, sometimes literary memoirists use their skills as writers to give us more deliberate clues about the prevailing conceptual structure of the world they inhabit.

Literary texts are able to reveal important things about the nature of the social world that other texts cannot. Skilled, creative writers are able to give us important clues about the shape of their conceptual world by the usage of repeated symbols or words. The literary memoirist might deliberately give certain words, phrases, or images a charged significance in her memoir in order to emphasize the significance these ideas had in her

²³² Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 129, 117.

own life. Whenever one of these words or phrases appears in the text, it is designed to evoke a certain set of associations about the memoirist's own subjective experience. Because daily living is continually impacted by the way, on a symbolic level, the social world is structured, the usage of these evocative words and phrases conveys something important about lived experience. Powerful symbols often resonate through an entire culture and influence politics, specific events, and social behavior in ways that we cannot hope to understand without a comprehension of the pervasiveness of these symbols.

In Jim Crow memoirs, particularly those written by white southerners, repeated references to geographical space reveal a great deal about the southern worldview. Southern novelist Eudora Welty famously waxed poetic about the importance of a "sense of place" in all fiction writing.²³³ Both she and her fellow Mississippian William Faulkner produced fiction rooted in a belief in southern distinctiveness, which could only be secured in opposition to the north. Harry Crews too shared this southern fascination with geographical space as revealed in the title of his memoir, *A Childhood*, which he tellingly subtitled "The Biography of a Place." Sometimes this north/ south opposition is accompanied by feelings of southern inferiority, with some southerners feeling marginalized as inhabitants of an intellectual backwoods, H.L. Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozart." William Howarth claims that when people "speak of going *up* north and *down* south," they are often implying a "vertical scale of values."²³⁴ Intellectual curiosity and a repugnance for institutionalized racism led southern memoirist Willie Morris to repudiate the south and, upon graduation from college, to head "*North Toward Home*," as the title

²³³ Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 55 (1956): 62.

²³⁴ William Howarth, "Writing Upside Down: Voice and Place in Southern Autobiography," in *Located Lives: Place and Idea in Southern Autobiography*, ed. J. Bill Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 4-5.

of his memoir reveals. Other southern memoirists have proclaimed hostility toward the north and asserted southern superiority. William Alexander Percy, author of *Lanterns on the Levee*, matter-of-factly proclaimed, “The North destroyed my South.”²³⁵

Others have become most aware of the significance of the north/ south dichotomy only after traveling north. Faulkner depicts this fictively in *Absalom, Absalom!* When Quentin Compson’s Harvard roommate asks him why he hates the south. “ ‘I dont hate it,’ Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I dont hate it,’ he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*” Compson’s defensiveness reveals his ambivalent feelings about the south and how out of place his southernness seemed in a different geographical space. In an autobiographical essay, J. Bill Berry remembered his own experience of leaving Fayetteville, Arkansas to attend graduate school at Princeton University in 1967. Upon his arrival to the campus, he immediately met a fellow southerner, whose “accent filled the air with molasses.” His fellow southerner declares “You’re going to hate it here.”²³⁶ Berry recalled that transplanted southerners at Princeton chose either to assimilate and deny their roots (one Mississippian even went so far as to acquire a fake British accent) or to embrace the south and to risk being stigmatized as different. Berry remembered an incident when a Princeton anthropology student asked him what he was like to grow up in Arkansas. After answering her, he realized that “[he] was...her very first Samoan.”²³⁷ The juxtaposition of north and south not only influenced his perception of himself and his region but also colored other people’s perceptions of him.

²³⁵ William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 156.

²³⁶ J. Bill Berry, “Class Southerner,” in *Located Lives*, 165.

²³⁷ Ibid. 169.

Regardless of the context, the contrast between north and south and the symbolic significance of living “down south” implies a feeling of difference in southern memoirs. Sometimes these feelings take the form of regional pride; sometimes they take the shape of southern inferiority complexes. Whenever the north is mentioned in Jim Crow memoirs, it is accompanied by a complex set of sometimes contradictory associations. It represents freedom (both political and intellectual) to some and tyranny to others. It is both culturally enlightened and morally bankrupt. It is everything the south is not, for good or for bad. It the yardstick that the south must measure itself by; Jim Crow southerners, particularly those who were well read or well traveled, were aware of the south’s status as a region set apart. Repeated geographical references in southern memoirs highlight this feeling of difference and demonstrate the way that a southern identity (in contrast to a northern one), whether construed positively or negatively, impacted the way the memoirist saw her world and her place in it. The south lived in opposition to and in shadow to the north, and this is represented by repeated geographical references in southern autobiography.

Reference to segregated spaces also are of great significance in Jim Crow memoirs. These allusions are, for obvious reasons, particularly pervasive in African-American autobiography but are present in white memoirs as well. References to separate facilities for African-American and white southerners demonstrate the way that the nation was not only divided between north and south but the way that the south was also divided against itself. Maya Angelou captures the impact of segregated spaces on her psyche by comparing herself to a “caged bird” in her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The pervasive imagery of forbidden geographic spaces where black southerners

cannot enter also highlights the anxiety southerners felt about the simultaneous distance and propinquity of whites and blacks. Interaction between the races was simultaneously necessary, often mutually desirable, but in some contexts taboo. Lillian Smith shows that the metaphor of racial segregation was so pervasive that it could be used in other contexts as well. She claims that all southerners learned, “parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children.”²³⁸

By artfully and deliberately making references to geographical spaces—both in terms of a north/ south dichotomy and in terms of segregated spaces—the southern memoirist reveals to her reader something important about the southern psyche.

Wherever a Jim Crow southerner went, whatever a Jim Crow southerner did, she was accompanied by a feeling of difference. She was a southerner, not a northerner; she was either white or black. These differences could make the southerner feel either inferior or superior. They might make her feel angry or content, vulnerable or safe. They might also physically inhibit where she could go, in terms of segregated spaces. As a consequence, these geographies had a profound impact on both the southerner’s daily life and in how she conceptualized herself. A skilled creative writer can capture this reality by constantly reminding her reader, in myriad, sometimes subtle ways, that these geographies influenced every other aspect of life. To be a southerner meant living “down south.” It also meant using particular restrooms and drinking fountains. The significance of these locations, however, transcended the physical everyday reality of where one lived and

²³⁸ Smith, 87.

where one went. They took on a greater significance, also influencing how the southerner saw herself and her world.

The creative writer's usage of symbols, of literary language, of irony, of metaphors, and of allegory enables her to more accurately describe the way a complex historical reality looked, smelled, sounded, and felt. A novelist can capture these same sensations, but unlike a memoir a novel is not rooted in real people, places, and events and thus cannot make literal truth claims. A skillful historian can also convey a sense of the experiential aspects of life in another historical era. In the case of Jim Crow, Leon Litwack's *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* masterfully describes life in the segregated south from a variety of perspectives and illuminates not only the fundamental historical question of "what really happened" but also ventures into the territory of determining "how did it feel." However, because Litwack is not himself a black southerner from the Jim Crow south, he must sacrifice the depth of personal experience available in a memoir for the breadth of partial insights the historian is able to assemble after the fact.

Our historical insights are enriched by the efforts of realist novelists artfully to capture aspects of a particular social reality. Furthermore, we could not have a wide ranging understanding of any particular era without the efforts of historians like Litwack to condense and synthesize vast amounts of information. We should read novels, histories, and memoirs together in combination in order to achieve a complex historical understanding comprised of information from various perspectives. However, despite the valuable insights provided by both history and fiction, they are unable to capture the detailed depiction of one life, the way that a historical era looked and felt from the

perspective of one individual. If we think of our understanding of history as “vicarious experience,” we are able to more deeply and actively re-think the thoughts and re-feel the emotions of one particular historical agent than a whole host of historical characters or types presented to us in synthesis in a historical text. Because it is halfway between literature and history, a good memoir combines assets of both and (using the techniques of literary art) can offer us deeper historical insights than any other single resource.

PART II: REMEMBERING JIM CROW: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE USAGE OF LITERARY MEMOIRS AS HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL

CHAPTER 7

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES: RICHARD WRIGHT AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON REMEMBER JIM CROW

Richard Wright's *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945) is perhaps the most widely read and certainly the most commented upon memoir of the African-American Jim Crow experience.²³⁹ Wright portrays life in the Jim Crow south as unrelentingly bleak and as characterized by poverty, violence, and anxiety as well as by a spirit of anti-intellectualism that Wright found just as oppressive as the economic deprivation of his childhood. Protest is at the center of Wright's autobiographical writing just as it is in his fiction. *Black Boy* is a literary rendering of great anger, with a depiction of life so grim that many have questioned Wright's veracity as a result.

In contrast, Zora Neale Hurston, Wright's contemporary, sidesteps protest altogether in her Jim Crow autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942). She infamously declares that she is "not conscious of [her] race no matter where [she might] go," thereby confounding many of her readers unable to believe that such a lack of race consciousness could be feasible, particularly during the dismal political climate of Hurston's day.²⁴⁰ This chapter will examine Wright and Hurston's contradictory

²³⁹ Wright's first draft of his autobiography was titled *American Hunger* and chronicled his childhood years, his migration to Chicago, his involvement with the Communist Party, and his early attempts to become a writer. In 1945, only the first part of the book, dealing with his childhood in the south, was published under the title *Black Boy*. A restored version of the text as Wright intended was published in 1991 by the Library of America under the title *Richard Wright: Later Works*. In this dissertation, I am quoting from a restored addition, but my analysis concerns the first half of the book, which describes his life in the Jim Crow south.

²⁴⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writing*, (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 664.

accounts of life in the Jim Crow south and show what kinds of unique historical insights these memoirs can give us. It will also tackle some of the criticisms launched at each of these texts and demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile these contrary and sometimes suspect literary renderings of Jim Crow reality into a cohesive understanding of the time period.

Wright Remembers Jim Crow

Wright's emphasis on racism and white cruelty is common in the historiography about Jim Crow, understandably so since state-sanctioned racism is clearly the defining characteristic of the era. Most historical accounts of the time period concentrate on the issues of racial tension and black oppression. Studies such as David Oshinsky's "*Worse Than Slavery*": *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1996), Pete Daniel's *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (1972), Herbert Shapiro's *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (1988), and W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (1993) paint an uncompromisingly grim portrait of black southern life in the years from Reconstruction up through the Civil Rights Movement. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is part and parcel of this same understandable tendency to indict racism and its impact on African Americans, sometimes reducing depictions of black life to one long, uphill struggle against oppression without reprieve. Thus the question arises: if the emphasis of Wright's autobiography is so similar to that of much historical writing about the time, what kind of historical insights can his first person experience offer us that histories culled from the synthesized experiences of many cannot?

As discussed in Part I of this dissertation, historians writing about any time period, regardless of how empathetic or insightful they might be, are relying on second hand information when they report about past events or the emotions of historical agents. When attempting to write about emotions, the historian must speculate about how she might have felt in similar circumstances or perhaps more convincingly, she must rely on the testimony of the historical actors themselves about what it felt like to live during the Jim Crow era. Historians do not generally write about events they themselves experienced or emotions they themselves felt. As a result, historians are generally more adept at reporting irrefutable actions, what happened on a certain day, than they are at recording emotions. Reporting “what really happened” in the past is frequently a tricky enterprise, but it is never as elusive as the task of determining “how did it feel.” Returning to Jacque Barzun’s definition of history as “vicarious experience,” we realize that historical understanding must encompass both action and thought, both emotions and perceptions.

That being said, good historians are sometimes surprisingly effective at describing the emotional texture of a particular time period. They do so by painting a detailed portrait of an era designed to elicit emotional responses from their readers who in turn are inspired to imaginatively attempt to re-feel a past moment. Other times historians might quote from literature or poetry or song lyrics that seem to capture how it felt to live in a certain era. Most frequently, they use quotations from people who witnessed and participated in the historical moment they are writing about. In the case of Jim Crow, Wright is called on frequently to testify about how it felt to grow up in segregated Arkansas and Mississippi, and he does so repeatedly through lengthy quoted passages

from *Black Boy*. These devices are indeed effective at giving the historian, and by extension the reader of history, snippets of insight about what it must have felt like to live in a particular era.

In *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (1992), historian James Cobb quotes Wright's observations about the poverty and squalor that Delta black tenant farmers lived in. He enlists Wright to observe that the tenants represented "a bare, bleak pool of human life," which he "hated."²⁴¹ Wright, a black Mississippian and an actual observer of the historical moment that Cobb is attempting to re-create, can make emotive observations that Cobb cannot. Cobb is not himself free to reveal his own emotions and cannot himself claim the intermingled scorn and pity that Wright felt when surveying the grim reality of tenant life. Similarly, in *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (1990), David R. Goldfield quotes *Black Boy* to demonstrate the anxiety that many blacks felt about the intricacies of racial etiquette.²⁴² In Leon Litwack's *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (1998), which I regard as the most evocative and masterful single history of that era, Litwack repeatedly quotes Wright to illustrate points on topics such as southern education, the allure of the north to southern blacks, and African-American religion.

These quotations from *Black Boy* as well as excerpts from other memoirs, oral history testimony, diary entries and so on serve to attach real human faces to a broad historical era and give hints and suggestions about felt experience of the past from the

²⁴¹ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

²⁴² David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 5-8.

perspective of a variety of historical agents. There is, however, inevitably something intrusive about the use of quotation marks, ellipsis, and broken up phrases. It is a scholarly convention and a grammatical necessity to use them. Certainly this dissertation is riddled with such devices. This is necessary for it is impossible to quote texts in their entirety. It is also intellectually honest to bring other influential voices into a discussion. However, these grammatical tools draw attention to the fact that we are being guided through a mere representation of the past and are not interacting with the past itself. When reading *Black Boy*, a reader enjoys a certain intimacy with Wright himself--an authentic voice from the actual past--as she puzzles over his text and weighs its meanings. This immediacy is lost when reading a historian's take on the same era, which uses Wright's words in a context Wright did not intend. There is no doubt that many things are gained by reading history, and as I argue in Part I, reading autobiography is not a substitute for reading professional historiography. However, it is important to remember that when reading history the reader is interacting with a representation of the past rather than an actual remnant of another time and place. Obviously memoirs, which are written after the fact, are themselves representations of a moment that is past. However, since the memoirist was a participant/ creator of the historical reality she is writing about, she is a step closer to that past than the historian.

By the time a reader reads a historical study of Jim Crow that tries to evoke the emotions of that era, she is reading about these emotions third hand. The historians who read and collected these quotations from *Black Boy*, for example, may indeed have been able to empathize and re-feel Wright's emotions, but the reader of history is presented with Wright's feelings only in summary and does not gain their full impact. The historian

begins to function as a third party in her attempts to mediate between reader and historical subject and serves as a barrier to re-feeling Wright's experiences the way Wright intended. Again, the purpose of this observation is not to downgrade the importance of the historian's task in assembling and synthesizing a great deal of data about the era. This is invaluable. However, the next step after reading Wright's quotations in say Litwack's context is to go to the original text of *Black Boy* and take an extended look at Wright's re-creation of his past in its entirety. Historical studies are a necessary addition to autobiographical accounts, allowing us to evaluate, contextualize, and verify first person testimony. However, when reading a history it is frequently less possible to re-experience another life than when reading a masterful literary memoir. Histories that offer fragments of observations from a large number of historical actors are unable to offer sufficient detail about the interior of one life needed for the empathetic reconstruction of the past experience from a single perspective.

Since, as established in Part I, historical reality is inherently perspectival, the richest understanding of a historical moment is achieved when we re-feel a moment from an acknowledged perspective. When writing the history of an era, a historian generally attempts to present something of a god's eye view, a history that is true for everyone. However, such a point of view ultimately does not exist. Historical reality is comprised of each individual historical agent's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. A historian's re-creation of a historical moment, no matter how finely crafted, cannot possibly even begin to capture the true complexity of the historical reality of any given time period. Our best chance of empathetically reconstructing a historical moment is to attempt to re-think the thoughts and re-feel the emotions of one historical agent at a time. Nowhere are the

thoughts and emotions of a single historical agent as clearly expressed as in the literary memoir.

In *Black Boy* Wright provides many details from the interior of his life that reveal not only what happened to him but also how the events of his life made him feel. Wright's emotional responses, his fear and anger, are as much a part of the social reality of Jim Crow as the events of his day. When gauging the impact of the injustices of the southern caste system on his personal development, Wright recalls, "Nothing challenged the totality of my personality so much as this pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites."²⁴³ Wright's characterization of whites as "invisible" is curious and stands in direct contrast to the kind of observations that historians make about the Jim Crow era. Historical writing frequently must concentrate on action, events, concrete happenings, in essence on whatever is "visible" to the historian.

For Wright, one part of Jim Crow reality was the concrete, the visible, what happened to him and to people he knew. He encountered overt white violence. He knew people who were beaten or lynched. He recounts numerous humiliating interactions with white people when he was injured, insulted, and belittled. He attends segregated schools and lives in all black neighborhoods. As recorded in the text, neither he nor anyone in his family participates in southern politics. Thus he documents concrete experiences with the segregation, racism, and disenfranchisement that are characteristic of Jim Crow in much historical work.

However, another part of his Jim Crow reality, the part which historians cannot as effectively capture, is the way Jim Crow made him feel, the psychological impact of white hatred and the unpredictability of white violence even when he was not bearing the

²⁴³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, Restored Version, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 73.

brunt of it. In fact before young Richard is old enough to look for an after school job, he has very few direct interactions with the white world. As a small child, the reality of white oppression exists for him only in rumor and innuendo. However, he demonstrates repeatedly that anxiety stemming from “invisible whites” impacted every aspect of his life even when there were no white people around. He tells us:

The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew.²⁴⁴

This passage and other testimony throughout the text yield important information about the reality of Jim Crow. Wright repeatedly reminds his reader that the threat of white violence accompanied him during every moment of every day. It was there when he attended his segregated school in the morning. A “dread of white people came to live permanently in [his] feelings and imagination.”²⁴⁵ It was there in family interactions. Wright’s mother became irritated when he quizzed her about the white world. He sensed her anxiety and was aware that he was being “shut out of the secret, the thing, the reality [he] felt somewhere beneath the words and sentences.”²⁴⁶ The anxiety accompanied him when he was hanging out on the street corner with friends his own age. The “touchstone of fraternity” between Wright and his peers was the level of hostility that they could express about white people. This hatred of whites was a natural outgrowth of the constant state of anxiety Wright lived in.²⁴⁷

Returning to Collingwood, we remember that each historical moment is comprised of an outside and an inside. Wright’s discussion of “invisible whites” gives us

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 172.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 78.

insight into his felt experience, the inside of his historical moment. His felt experience of Jim Crow was impacted both by the things that happened to him directly and by the idea that something could happen at any moment, the constant threat posed by the invisible white world. Historians who strive to capture the inside of a historical moment without benefit of direct testimony from historical actors must do so imaginatively as they attempt to re-think and re-feel from the perspective of a historical actor. However, Wright's perceptions, emotions, and thoughts actually comprise the inside of his historical moment. Through the memoir, he offers his readers unmediated access to that aspect of historical reality. Wright need not imagine what he thought or how he felt. Instead his task, using the vehicle of literary art, is to express those thoughts and feelings.

Even when Wright attempts to capture some pleasant recollections from his childhood, his memories are permeated by his ever-present state of apprehension. The book's opening incident sets the tone of violence and fear that characterizes Wright's entire autobiography. As a four-year-old, while playing with fire, Wright set his grandparent's Natchez home ablaze and then hid under the burning house in an attempt to avoid being punished. Acting out of rage and fear, Wright's mother savagely beat him after discovering his hiding place. After recounting this event, with Wright claiming that his mother nearly killed him, he abruptly switches moods with a lyrical passage about the pleasures of rural life. Evocatively and poetically he describes how his physical environment looked, felt, and tasted. He catalogs twenty-three different sense impressions inspired by the rural Mississippi of his childhood:

There was the wonder I felt when I first saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black and white horses clopping down a dusty road through powdered clay.

There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon.

There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in early morning.

There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez.

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky.

There was the tantalizing melancholy in the tingling scent of burning hickory wood.

There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads.

There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey.

There was the disdain that filled me as I tortured a delicate, blue-pink crawfish that huddle fearfully in the mudsill of a rusty tin can.

There was the aching glory in masses of clouds burning gold and purple from an invisible sun.

There was the liquid alarm I saw in the blood-red glare of the sun's afterglow mirrored in the squared panes of whitewashed frame houses.

There was the languor I felt when I heard green leaves rustling with a rainlike sound.

There was the incomprehensible secret embodied in a whitish toadstool hiding in the dark shade of a rotting log.

There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father's wrist.

There was the great joke God had played on cats and dogs by making them lap up their milk and water with their tongues.

There was the thirst I had when I watched the clear, sweet juice trickle from sugar cane being crushed.

There was the hot panic that welled up in my throat and swept through my blood when I first saw the lazy, limp coils of a blue-skinned snake sleeping in the sun.

There was the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart, dipped into boiling water, scraped, split open, gutted, and strung up gaping and bloody.

There was the love I had for the mute regality of tall moss-clad oaks.

There was the hint of cosmic cruelty that I felt when I saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun.

There was the saliva that formed in my mouth when I smelt clay dust potted with fresh rain.

There was the cloudy notion of hunger when I breathed the odor of new-cut, bleeding grass.

And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights...²⁴⁸

His recollections of “the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins” and “the aching glory in masses of clouds burning gold and purple from an invisible sun” are unambiguously positive, the kind of nostalgic associations one would expect an autobiographer to have about his birthplace.²⁴⁹ He uses the words “delight” and “love” and “nostalgia” to describe the physical world. However, these images, from one of the few passages in the book where Wright ascribes childlike wonder or joy to his younger self, are punctuated by the violent imagery of “watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been broken” and “the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart.”²⁵⁰ Even these, his most positive associations from his youth, are interrupted by startling word choices. The natural world also inspires associations with “hunger,” “hot panic,” and “quiet terror.” Included in this

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 7-9.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

list of sense impressions is the “the hint of cosmic cruelty that [he] felt when [he] saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun.” We see here a dim, childlike awareness of the consequences of the southern caste system as he looks at what may be a sharecropper’s cabin, perhaps even his earliest home, and sees signs of poverty and the toll that the harsh environment has taken. He already vaguely knows that the universe is unfair. Thus even when Wright tries to recall positive associations from his childhood, he quickly returns to the imagery of violence and fear, demonstrating that anxiety about the hostile white world permeated every aspect of his waking life.

This passage from *Black Boy* reveals one of the unique historical insights the literary memoir can give us. Wright lulls us with idyllic descriptions of rural southern life only to jar us later with his use of surprisingly dark descriptive words that seem out of place. The most positive recollections, characterized by “love,” “delight,” “sensuality,” and “nostalgia,” are at the beginning of the list. His emotive responses to his environment become progressively more ambiguous. Finally the reader is left with the image of a warped shack. Wright recalls being filled with a “cloudy notion of hunger” and being overcome with “quiet terror” as he looks at the sky. The reader is able to experience these things as Wright did as she imaginatively scans his environment and follows his stream of consciousness. The tone of hunger and terror with which he ends the passage is amplified throughout the rest of the text.

To live as a black person in Wright’s south was to live a life of uncertainty where a single false move could have deadly consequences. A historian who has not directly experienced this kind anxiety, even if she understands, perhaps more lucidly than Wright, the political climate, the economic realities, and the events of southern history cannot

hope accurately to describe what living in Jim Crow felt like. A historical study of Jim Crow that endeavors to describe the physical environment of the region can not do so emotively as Wright does in his passage on rural life. For example, when describing the Mississippi Delta, the same region Wright surveyed with both wonder and fear, James Cobb writes:

Approximately fifteen thousand years ago... the Mississippi River and its tributaries cut deep valleys within the Lower Gulf coastal plain. As these glaciers melted and the level of the sea around the mouth of the Mississippi rose, these engorged and sediment-laden streams backed up, flooding the lower Mississippi valleys... One of the many basins marking the irregular surface of this vast alluvial bed is the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta... The area within its boundaries is approximately 7, 110 square miles.

Detached and scientific, Cobb identifies the physical characteristics of the region under consideration. No doubt the Delta must conjure up emotions in Cobb as he drives through it on his way to an archive to conduct research. The landscape must inspire associations drawn from the history he knows as well as from his present-day trips through the terrain. However, as a scholar he cannot interject his work with his own emotions. As he describes the daily routine of tenant farmers in the region, he cannot reflect on the beauty of the Mississippi or on the way driving down dirt roads makes him feel. Such observations, Cobb's own personal perceptions and reflections, are part of the historical reality of the moments he is living. No doubt Cobb's thoughts and emotions also bear untold influences on the kinds of representations of past reality that he creates. However, he cannot directly and openly mobilize them. To do so would be to manifest dubious scholarly methodology. Cobb's own personal responses to the landscape would, of course, be an appropriate part of his "Memoir of a Historian" were he to write one. At any rate, Cobb's personal observations would reveal more about a present social reality, rather than the historical reality of Jim Crow.

Wright, on the other hand, is free from pretensions of scholarly objectivity. He, unlike Cobb, is not playing the part of the scientist objectively describing the physical location and attributes of his local geography. His observations about the natural world and his associations drawn from it are part of the social reality of his day. When he surveys his landscape his thoughts are laden with myriad associations. For Wright, the natural world reflected some of the tensions present in the social world. No doubt a white southerner surveying the same landscape would entertain a different set of associations. To Wright, or any other social agent, no object, natural or manmade, is innocent or can be surveyed outside of personal perceptions.

In *Black Boy* Wright powerfully coaxes his reader into re-feeling life as an African-American in Jim Crow, not just during the dramatic moments, in interactions with white racists such as when his family was forced to flee from murderous whites in the middle of the night, but also in day to day life. When describing sunsets, the sounds of leaves rustling, the “regality of tall, moss-clad oaks” and so on in the brief passage devoted to describing his environment, Wright demonstrates that he was not immune to childlike wonder. Despite the hardships of his life he was still aware of beauty and still, as a small child, filled with hope. However, the language in that same passage also reminds the reader that Wright lived in a constant state of anxiety. Co-mingled with tranquil, positive associations he unexpectedly interjects phrases such as “liquid alarm” and “quiet terror” to remind us that all is not well. His Jim Crow experience is a total experience. He cannot compartmentalize the anxiety and anger that he feels and manifest it only when interacting directly with southern whites. It accompanies him everywhere he

goes. Using the vehicle of literary art, he captures the uncertainty and fear of his life by using the language of dread and apprehension even in unexpected places.

Wright achieves a similar effect through his usage of “hunger” as a metaphor to describe not only his physical state but also his emotional condition. Wright recalls:

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent.²⁵¹

Wright is referring here to physical hunger. His father had recently abandoned his mother, leaving the family without money or food. His description of deep and abiding hunger is gripping and yields powerful insights about the dire economic conditions many African-Americans found themselves in from time to time after the loss of an income, no matter how meager. The fact that Wright’s mother did not have a crust of bread to feed her children nor anyone to turn to for help reveals very succinctly how little southern states cared for the physical welfare of their black citizens. The aesthetic power of Wright’s language, his personification of hunger as a “hostile stranger,” better facilitates a reader’s ability to re-feel Wright’s hunger and desperation.

However, Wright’s hunger has another dimension as well. This is hinted at in a conversation with his mother, when he is begging for food in the following passage:

“Mama, I’m hungry,” I complained one afternoon.
“Jump up and catch a kungru,” she said, trying to make me laugh and forget.
“What’s a *kungru*?”
“It’s what little boys eat when they get hungry,” she said.
“What does it taste like?”
“I don’t know.”
“Then why do you tell me to catch one?”
“Because you said that you were hungry,” she said, smiling.
I sensed that she was teasing me and it made me angry.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

²⁵² Ibid., 15.

In this scene, Wright poignantly captures his desperate mother kidding with her child in order to distract him while she tries to figure out how to feed him. However, he also hints at another dimension of his hunger when he recognizes that his mother is teasing him and becomes angry. Throughout *Black Boy*, Wright becomes enraged when he is not taken seriously, when his intellect, his integrity, or his dream to be a writer are belittled by anyone, white or black. In fact, interestingly, Wright's family members are frequently just as dismissive of his talents and abilities as the white world is, and his family is certainly more persistent in their disdain. Young Richard is angry because his mother won't reason with him and explain to him why there isn't any food in the home. When she finally relents and helps Richard make the link between his father's absence and his hunger, Wright transfers his anger to his father and "whenever [he] felt hunger [he] thought of him with a deep biological bitterness."²⁵³ Young Richard resents the attempts of adults to shield him from harsh realities for he is too perceptive to believe their evasions and falsehoods but too young to have direct access to all of the information about his environment he craves.

Wright makes a more overt linkage between his physical hunger and his hunger for respect, for knowledge, for a life that would be richer both materially and intellectually later in the text when he "vowed that someday [he] would end this hunger of [his], this apartness, this eternal difference."²⁵⁴ He shows the reader that he is starving physically, intellectually, and socially. Indeed there is an important social dimension to his hunger. As we will see, he hungers to feel a sense of belonging to his fellow man, particularly to the black community, but a sense of belonging seems always to elude him.

²⁵³ Ibid., 16.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 126.

Black Boy is permeated with references to hunger, both physical and spiritual. Wright painstakingly describes the meager diet of mush, greens, and lard he ate while living at his grandmother's house in Jackson. Just as he learned to associate hunger with his father's absence as a small child, he continues to blame not only the racial inequalities perpetuated by Jim Crow for his hunger but his family as well. His grandmother's staunch devotion to Seventh Day Adventism is a contributing factor to his hunger. This is due to the religion's prohibitions on eating pork (the source of protein most widely available to poor southerners) as well as on working on the religion's Sabbath, Saturday, which made it nearly impossible for Wright to get a part time job to feed himself.

His grandmother's religion also contributed to Richard's intellectual hunger. She forbade him from reading fiction, which she regarded unambiguously as "lies." Wright recalls that he had his first "total emotional response," when he defied his grandmother's rules and induced Ella, a young school teacher boarding at his grandmother's house, to tell him the story of "Bluebeard and his Seven Wives." Although Granny interrupted the story mid-stream, declaring it "devil stuff" and Ella an "evil gal," for Wright this encounter with a fictional world made a lasting impression and gave him a clue for how he could hope to satisfy at least one dimension of his hunger. Again, he makes the comparison between intellectual and physical sustenance, declaring, "I had tasted what to me was life, and I would have more of it."²⁵⁵

In the hands of a less skilled writer, Wright's metaphor of hunger might appear heavy-handed. In the hands of even a talented novelist, it might seem contrived. However, rooted as it is in the material world, in a deep and abiding physical hunger that was the result of nearly crippling poverty, his metaphor of being starved intellectually

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

and socially is very effective. He shows his reader that the southern environment was so stifling that his desire to be free of it was as pressing as his need to have his minimum physical requirements met. Leaving the south and that environment was every bit as urgent to his survival as having enough food to eat.

Wright could not have conveyed his feelings of deprivation as effectively without comparing them to physical hunger. If he wrote, however earnestly, using literal language--something like, "I found the environment of the south intellectually stifling" he could not--have conveyed the depths of his suffering. The metaphor of hunger allows the reader more effectively to re-feel Wright's Jim Crow experience. Since he compares his intellectual and social longings to physical hunger, his readers, who have all experienced physical hunger to some degree, can draw on their own familiarity with that sensation in order better to understand his yearnings. Using the image of hunger to describe both his material and his spiritual state, the reader is reminded of the depths of Wright's deprivation. His very survival depended on finding a way to sate his hunger on many different levels.

Not only does Wright employ metaphor to effectively describe his social reality, he also utilizes the literary device of irony to capture certain aspects of his felt experience of Jim Crow. Historians, of course, cannot employ metaphor or irony as effectively as a literary artist. Although a historian might use a metaphor briefly to make a point by means of comparison, she is unlikely to utilize a sustained metaphor like Wright's "hunger" throughout the text to impart meaning or for poetic effect. Since historical writing is typically received as a literal rather than a figurative kind of communication, the usage of irony could be confusing and easily misinterpreted. As a literary artist,

Wright has the tools of metaphor and irony at his disposal and can use them to convey meanings that historians and non-literary memoirists could not.

As discussed in Part I, relationships between whites and blacks in the segregated south were fraught with irony. Because of the code of conduct, what Wright refers to elsewhere as “the ethics of Jim Crow,” that whites expected black southerners to adhere to, African-Americans repeatedly found themselves in the position of being forced to say things that they did not literally mean. In many black/ white interactions, when African-Americans were forced to acquiesce to whatever the white person wanted to hear, other blacks served as a true audience who understood the real meaning behind these scripted encounters.

These kinds of layered communications have their roots, of course, in slavery. Slaves might sing spirituals that their masters would interpret as religious songs yearning for heaven and communion with God. However, the slaves themselves, the song’s true audience, knew that references to geographies such as the river Jordan and the Promised Land hinted only secondarily at religious longings but were truly concerned with freedom from slavery and physical locations outside of the south. Of course, this is southern irony in its most exaggerated form. Frequently it was much less complicated, as simple as a black person telling a white person “yes,” to avoid repercussions, when she really meant “no.”

Wright brilliantly inverts the device of irony to show how contrary adhering to the ethics of Jim Crow was to his character. His protagonist, his younger self, is breathtakingly immune to irony. He attempts to communicate with the world around him on literal terms and is baffled when his earnest efforts are met with exasperation. One

such interaction occurs when Richard receives his first job working for a white family as part time domestic help. During his interview for the job he fails to perform as the social mores of his time dictated.

“Do you want this job?” the woman asked.
“Yes, ma’am,” I said, afraid to trust my own judgement.
“Now, boy, I want to ask you one question and I want you to tell me the truth,” she said.
“Yes, ma’am,” I said, all attention.
“Do you steal?” she asked me seriously.
I burst into a laugh and then checked myself.
“What’s so damn funny about that?” she asked.
“Lady, if I was a thief, I’d never tell anybody.”
“What do you mean?” she blazed with a red face.
I had made a mistake during my first five minutes in the white world. I hung my head.²⁵⁶

Wright succinctly highlights the absurdity of the racial situation with this anecdote, which frighteningly reveals how little intelligence or sophistication this white woman had ascribed to her potential employee. This Jim Crow interaction comes as a shock to Wright who is young, earnest, and eager to earn money to buy school clothes and books. Astonishingly this encounter with the white woman reveals that he does not yet have the tools necessary to succeed in the southern caste system. He must learn to behave ironically in order to survive in this hostile environment.

Black Boy powerfully captures Wright’s personal growth and his gradual understanding of his environment. He masterfully conveys various stages of his consciousness as he learns to negotiate the world around him. He does not enter the world with full-blown knowledge about how to survive in it. Instead he is to discover by trial and error what the world demands of him. It is common in African-American fiction, memoirs, and in histories of the African-American experience to write about the moment a child becomes aware of American racism. For example, in “A Letter from Birmingham

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 145.

Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. recalls the agony of telling his daughter that “Funtown is closed to colored children, and see [ing] the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky.”²⁵⁷ The protagonist in Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* “discovered” he was black when a school official told him that he was different from his white classmates, giving him “a sword-thrust that day in school which was years in healing.”²⁵⁸ Wright too shows the reader how his consciousness as a black man was formed as he chronicles his growing awareness of the extent and the virulence of southern racism. However, he shows his reader that awareness comes to him in bits and pieces.

There is no huge, transformational moment when all becomes clear to Wright. Instead he evolves gradually. He painstakingly re-creates his thought processes for the benefit of his readers. In describing his personal evolution, he captures an important aspect of felt Jim Crow experience. His understanding of and sophistication in dealing with his environment changes. A historian quoting from *Black Boy* might partially capture Wright’s emotions and understanding of his social world at one particular moment, but as the full text of *Black Boy* reveals, Wright’s partial revelations tend to grow and change. Wright biographers may be able to capture this to some extent, but the complexity of his felt experience cannot be adequately conveyed in historical summary. One of the lessons Wright gradually learns is that he must figure out how to live ironically, to perpetually say one thing and to mean another.

²⁵⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963),” reprinted in *Black Writers of America: A Contemporary Anthology*, eds. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 865.

²⁵⁸ James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, reprinted (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 19.

Wright's friend Griggs patiently instructs him about how to live in the south, how to get out of the way of white people, how to appear non-threatening, how to keep a job. Griggs has been able to master the art of surviving in the south, of appearing docile and contented while concealing a deep hatred for his oppressors. He tells Wright, "You know, Dick, you might think I'm an Uncle Tom, but I'm not. I hate these white people, hate 'em with all my heart. But I can't show it; if I did, they'd kill me."²⁵⁹ At this point in his development, Wright is too naïve and unskilled at southern irony to automatically constitute Griggs' true audience during interactions with whites. To make Wright understand, Griggs must painstakingly explain that he masks his true feelings in front of white people in order to survive.

Wright attempts to put Griggs' lessons into practice but soon finds it, "utterly impossible...to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot, all the time. [He] would remember to dissemble for short periods, then [he] would forget and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artifice of race and class."²⁶⁰ For Wright, to live "straight" and free of irony was a matter of pride. He wanted to look whites "straight in the face...to talk and act like a man."²⁶¹ By presenting himself as a naïve but dignified teenager who cannot comprehend or remember to abide by the social code, he shows us how oppressive and how crippling to his personal identity Jim Crow was. Every word uttered or movement made had to be gauged for its impact on the whites around him. This kind of self-censorship did not come naturally to Wright and by extension we can assume that other black southerners may have found it equally difficult to absorb the lessons of Jim Crow.

²⁵⁹ Wright, *Black Boy*, 185.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

Ultimately, Wright learns how to behave in the south well enough that he manages to survive long enough to make his escape. After being dismissed from many jobs because he could not play by the Jim Crow rules, he eventually learns how to mask his true feelings. He also learns to adapt his personal ethics in another way when he decides to supplement his escape money by stealing. Theft violated his own sense of ethics just as much shuffling, smiling, and pretending to acquiesce in the presence of his white employers. However, he eventually became desperate and calculating enough to temporarily violate his own moral code in order to escape. He had discovered that he was not suited for long term survival in the south. He could not live ironically, telling the white world what it wanted to hear and then taking comfort in the bosom of a black community that understood his true meanings. When he was finally ready to join the great migration northward, he showed how far he had evolved in learning the lessons of Jim Crow beyond his first encounter with the white woman who asked him if he was a thief. On his last day on the job as he is taking his leave of the white men he worked for he demonstrated that he had finally learned some of the lessons Griggs had attempted to teach him.

“How’re you going to act up there?”

“Just like I act down here, sir.”

“Would you speak to a white girl up there?”

“Oh, no, sir. I’ll act just like I act here.”

“Aw, no, you won’t. You’ll change. Niggers always change when they go north.”

I wanted to tell him that I was going north precisely to change, but I did not.

“I’ll be the same,” I said, trying to indicate that I had no imagination whatever.²⁶²

In this passage, Wright demonstrates that he has at least partially mastered irony. He has learned to conceal his true feelings, however, he continues to have difficulty in finding a true audience in the black community to understanding his layered meanings.

²⁶² Ibid., 256.

Much of the anger and suspicion he felt for the white world was directed at the black community, including members of his own family, as well.

In one of the most controversial passages of *Black Boy*, a parenthetical aside where the voice of the mature Wright blatantly interjects itself to comment on the experiences of his younger self, he remarks on “the absence of real kindness of Negroes.” He continues his indictment, grimly noting “how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories.”²⁶³ Wright’s descriptions of the black community in the text are surprisingly dismal. In fact, he appears almost as alienated from his family and his peers as he is from the white community. He blames white racists both for their own pathology and for what he viewed as the sorry psychological state of the black community. His intention in writing *Black Boy* was to “render a judgement on [his] environment.”²⁶⁴ In his estimation it was the brutal environment of Jim Crow that created the frailties he saw in black people, the absence of real kindness, bare traditions, timid joy and so on. He believed that “the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.”²⁶⁵

Wright’s belief that racism crippled blacks psychologically even allowed him to feel a measure of pity for his father who had deserted him as a child. Recalling a trip he made as an adult to visit his father in Mississippi, he writes:

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life...how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body...From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn

²⁶³ Ibid., 37.

²⁶⁴ Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 252.

²⁶⁵ Fabre, 252.

the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him. As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope.²⁶⁶

Wright's own assessment of the toll that white racism took on his own father, who was the son of a slave and the disappointed heir to the early promises of emancipation, bears a striking resemblance to some early historiography about the impact of slavery on slave personalities. Wright's analysis of the impact of racism on African American culture amounts to a Jim Crow version of the notorious Elkins thesis about slave life. Stanley Elkins attempted to refute U.B. Phillips-style visions of contented slaves and benevolent slave masters with the 1959 publication of his controversial book, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Elkins thought slavery was so harsh that slaves brought to the New World were crushed psychologically. According to Elkins, the horrors of the middle passage and plantation life proved so traumatic that it erased the slaves' African culture and created a timid, docile, dependent working class. Wright's assessment of Jim Crow Afro-Americans is not dissimilar.

As Wright describes it, his childhood, growing up among the children and grandchildren of slaves, is almost unrelentingly bleak. He implies that it is only by sheer determination and a rich imagination that Wright escapes his father's fate. He recounts poverty, hunger, abandonment by his father, a short stay in an orphanage, his mother's debilitating illness, and the lynching of an uncle all in very short order. His family life, instead of offering him comfort in the midst of external problems he has no control over, compounds his misery. His strict religious grandmother cannot understand her moody, imaginative grandson, and her disapproval sets the tone for how the entire family views

²⁶⁶ Wright, *Black Boy*, 34.

Richard: as “brutal and desperate,” unsaved and perhaps irredeemable.²⁶⁷ The sense of alienation that Wright describes during his childhood in the south follows him after he leaves Mississippi for Chicago. Upon arrival he claims, “In my life—though surrounded by many people—I had not had a single satisfying, sustained relationship with another human being.”²⁶⁸

In a passage in the text similar in its poetic structure to his earlier catalog of rural pleasures, Wright recounts much of the African-American folklore he heard as a child. He recites a list of twenty-five superstitions about what would happen if he broke a mirror, stepped over a broom, made fun of a crippled man, spit in his urine and so on. This passage demonstrates that Wright was familiar with folk traditions, remedies, and wisdom. He even toys with the possibility that these superstitions could all be true, “Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible...”²⁶⁹ However, this brief description of folk wisdom quickly ends, and Wright never describes his integration into the community that spawned the wisdom he recites so earnestly. As Jay Mechling observes, “in *Black Boy* there is no sense of African-American folklore as a resource for living.”²⁷⁰

Despite this feeling of alienation, Wright figures himself as a spokesman for the black community. On one hand, Wright is unabashed in his assertion that his life story is his alone. He recalls an epiphany he had at the age of twelve. He realized that he had “a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone...a conviction that the meaning of living

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 172.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 261.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁷⁰ Jay Mechling, “The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*,” *Journal of American Folklore* 103.413 (1991): 291.

came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.”²⁷¹

Wright’s conception of himself and his life is a solitary one. He accepts his alienation from the southern white community which rejects him and also from the black community which he believes misunderstands him. He is girded with his own feeling of exceptionality. In this regard, Wright’s autobiography fits strongly within the western tradition of life writing as a celebration of uniqueness and one’s accomplishments. However, Wright simultaneously figures himself as an exceptional individual on a solitary journey and as a racial spokesperson with a group identity.

Although *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* was not Wright’s original title for his memoir about his southern childhood, the title was his suggestion and was deliberately chosen after an ongoing discussion with his editor and the selection committee at the Book of the Month Club. His choice of the title indicates his desire to speak for a much larger group than just himself and his willingness to testify as a representative “black boy.” He claimed that “One of the things that made me write is that I realize that I’m a very average Negro.” This claim seems perplexing after his repeated disassociation from the black community of his youth. He recalls that his motivation in writing his memoir was that he, “wanted to give, lend my tongue to the voiceless, Negro boys.”²⁷² His willingness to speak for a group that he doesn’t quite allow himself to belong to becomes a pronounced tension in the text, making Wright, despite his best intentions, appear as an ambivalent racial spokesperson.

As a self-described misfit, Wright marvels at the way that others are better able to negotiate life in the Jim Crow south than he is, yet he simultaneously claims to be a

²⁷¹ Wright, *Black Boy*, 100.

²⁷² Quoted in Fabre 251-252.

spokesperson for the collective experiences of black youth in the south. Herein lies one of *Black Boy's* most compelling historical insights. If we are to read Wright's memoir with the goal of re-feeling his experience, an important dimension of his life was the tension between his assertion of both an individual and a group identity. We can imagine that this tension, which Wright began to experience as a child, only heightened as he grew in fame and stature as a writer and his connections with the southern black community of his youth weakened. Wright reveals the hardships of an African American writer struggling to find a way to combine allegiance to his craft, his self, and his feelings of duty to the community.

Wright views himself as set apart from the black community, affiliated but not an integral part even of his own family. Carla Cappetti has described Wright's role as creator of *Black Boy* as "three fold... as informant, participant observer, and sociologist."²⁷³ Wright does survey the cultural landscape of his childhood environment with a certain kind of detachment. After describing his classmates at a Seventh Day Adventist school he attended as "will-less, their speech flat, their gestures vague, their personalities devoid of anger, hope, laughter, enthusiasm or despair," he claims, "I was able to see them with an objectivity that was inconceivable to them."²⁷⁴ He participates in the world, but he repeatedly inserts the suggestion that he is not of that world, that he is chronically misunderstood. His yearning to be somewhere else, doing something else is so extreme that he never allows himself to become fully a part of that community. While attending church and surveying the congregation he recalls, "I longed to be among them,

²⁷³ Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Wright and the Chicago School," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 267.

²⁷⁴ Wright, *Black Boy*, 104.

yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away.”²⁷⁵ It is almost as if Wright is playing the role of social scientist, living in a culture alien to him, observing what he saw, and biding his time until he can leave that environment.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston too, due to her training as an anthropologist and the participant-observer role all autobiographers fulfill, functions as a something of a social scientist. However, she does not maintain Wright’s level of detachment from the black community and her Jim Crow experience is a much different one as a result. If Wright adheres to a Jim Crow-era version of the notorious Elkins thesis to explain black psychology and to describe the black community, Hurston subscribes to a “resistance through culture” thesis common in historiography of the African-American experience. For Hurston, African-American culture thrives in spite of white oppression. For her, celebrating and practicing a rich, unique culture provides some insulation from, perhaps even compensation for, racial injustices. However, her position is complicated by an uneasy acknowledgement of the impact of white racism. “Resistance through culture” theses generally emphasize the way culture is a form of resistance. Hurston acknowledges receiving sustenance from the bosom of community. However, because she won’t openly acknowledge some of the detrimental impacts of racism, she is unable to make a direct linkage between practicing culture and resistance.

Hurston Remembers Jim Crow

In contrast to *Black Boy*, Zora Neale Hurston’s Jim Crow autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, is rooted in black folk culture. Hurston did not use either her creative writing or her autobiography to protest white racism, and she found the sense of community that Wright could not. As a result, her description of Jim Crow reality bears

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 151.

little resemblance to that depicted in *Black Boy*. Hurston's autobiography does not follow the traditional linkage in African American autobiography of freedom and geography. Hurston travels north to New York where she attends Barnard College and participates in the Harlem Renaissance, but the south never loses its allure for her. She returns to it on numerous occasions, and biographical information about her reveals that in a counter migration, she eventually returned to Florida where she spent the rest of her life.

Unlike *Black Boy*, which has become heralded as the representative Jim Crow autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* has not been as widely embraced. *Dust Tracks* does not enjoy the same prominence as *Black Boy* in the footnotes of historical works about the Jim Crow era. Neither has it received the same kind of scrutiny as *Black Boy* from literary critics. Some, like Alice Walker, view it as "the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote."²⁷⁶ Hurston subverts her readers' expectations in a number of ways. *Dust Tracks* covers a larger period of Hurston's life than *Black Boy*, which ends before Wright had achieved success as a writer. Her autobiography begins with a description of her birth as described in her family folklore and ends at the time she wrote the autobiography. However, despite this fact many, particularly those most interested in her fiction, have deemed *Dust Tracks* as infuriatingly incomplete. Hurston devotes little space to describing her involvement with the Harlem Renaissance and not much more to the writing of her most-prized books, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In addition, the book concludes with a series of essays on topics such as friendship, religion, and love, which interrupt the book's already lopsided chronology. Most

²⁷⁶ Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston—A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Robert Hemenway (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), xvii.

perplexing to many of her readers is her unwillingness to make race and racism central in her autobiographical account. It is in this regard that Hurston's vision of Jim Crow life differs most strikingly from Wright's.

Critics such as Robert Hemenway have observed that *Dust Tracks* was “apparently written self-consciously with a white audience in mind.”²⁷⁷ Indeed her editor Betram Lippincott did ask Hurston to remove two chapters from the manuscript, one of which contained a strong indictment of American imperialism, which he felt would offend readers inspired to patriotic fervor due the recent U.S. entry into World War II. Similarly, Alice Walker believes that Hurston's warm descriptions of white friends, and perhaps by extension, her refusal to comment on their racism, was “out of character” as well as “a result of dependency, a sign of her powerlessness, her inability to pay back her debts with anything but words.” Walker refuses to believe Hurston's expressions of gratitude to white friends and patrons, claiming that the people Hurston thanked were individuals “one knows she could not have respected.”²⁷⁸ However, Hurston's complex views on the issue of race, which may indeed have been partially censored due to audience expectations and limited by societal strictures on free expression by a black woman, cannot be simply dismissed on this basis alone.

For Hurston, avoiding bitterness of any kind was a matter of pride. She proclaimed, “to me, bitterness is the under-arm odor of wishful weakness.”²⁷⁹ Anecdotal evidence about her willingness to overlook racial injustices, to silently conform to Jim Crow convention by uncomplainingly descending back staircases or sleeping in the servants' quarters when visiting prominent whites, is rife in Hurston biographies. Her

²⁷⁷ Hemenway, 278.

²⁷⁸ Walker, in Hemenway, xvii.

²⁷⁹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 765.

most recent biographer, Valerie Boyd, recalls how Hurston would overlook rude treatment by waiters and the hostile stares of other customers when dining with her editor Bertram Lippincott or others in New York City. Boyd speculates that Hurston reasoned that the “other customers’ sullenness would not prevent Hurston from enjoying her free meal, unless she *allowed* it to have that effect.”²⁸⁰ Although unorthodox and politically suspect to those who believe racial injustice should be tackled head-on, by some measures her strategy proved to be surprisingly effective. Hurston became, for a time, a prominent African-American woman of letters who was amazingly able to support herself as a writer and a researcher even during the lean years of the Great Depression.

Hurston was resentful of expectations forged in the black community that dictated that she should use her writing to fight racial oppression. When she sat down to write her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, she was daunted not only by the vastness of the task but also by the series of expectations that she labored under as an African-American writer. She recalled, “What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color.”²⁸¹ Eudora Welty, a fellow southerner and a white woman, famously echoed Hurston’s assertion that her craft should be separated from her politics in her essay, “Must the Novelist Crusade?” in 1965. In fact, Will Brantley argues that *Dust Tracks* has much more in common with Welty’s memoir, *One Writer’s*

²⁸⁰ Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, (New York: Scribner, 2003), 359.

²⁸¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 713.

Beginnings, than it does with *Black Boy*.²⁸² In her autobiography, it is Hurston's expressed desire to recount her individual achievements and experiences as hers alone rather than as those of a representative black woman. To do so, she felt it necessary to separate herself from the "sobbing school of Negrohood" and to frequently deny the impact of racism on her life chances.²⁸³

A historian writing a history of the Jim Crow south would not likely choose to de-emphasize southern racism—for political reasons as well as for reasons of historical accuracy. After all, state sanctioned racism is the defining characteristic of the era. Hurston, on the other hand, is not writing the history of an era but the history of her own life. Whether the decision to subvert racial issues represents calculation on her part, an accurate assessment of how she viewed the world, or a combination of these factors may be debatable. For whatever reasons, Hurston, by sheer force of will, pushed racism to the periphery of her life and her retelling of that life, placing herself on center stage in the process. Hurston's unusual decision gives her readers another insight into how Jim Crow could have been experienced. Segregation and other forms of discrimination may have impacted various individuals differently, due not only to different life experiences but also to varied personal outlooks. While Hurston's choice to downplay racism may not have had any effect on the harsh, concrete realities of the Jim Crow social order, her worldview certainly impacted the way she experienced her social reality.

Dust Tracks is peppered with disavowals of the significance of racism that have infuriated many of the text's readers. Even though she was writing almost a quarter of a

²⁸² Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 187.

²⁸³ Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me," in Alice Walker, ed. *I Love Myself When I am Laughing...A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1979, 153.

century before the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960's outlawed the most outward vestiges of racism, she startlingly claimed:

I do not share the gloomy thought that Negroes in American are doomed to be stomped out bodaciously, nor even shackled to the bottom of things. Of course some of them will be tromped out, and some will always be at the bottom, keeping company with other bottom folks...we will go where the individual drive carries us like everybody else. It is up to the individual. If you haven't got it, you can't show it. If you have got it, you can't hide it. That is one of the strongest laws God ever made.²⁸⁴

Hurston is not reflecting heady civil rights era optimism, writing as she was in an era when African-Americans fighting against Nazis abroad were simultaneously waging a Double Victory battle against deeply held racism at home. Her belief that blacks could rise or fall according to individual attributes, even in the midst of a Jim Crow system designed to severely circumscribe their life chances, has startled many. Despite this and other strong statements like it, elsewhere in *Dust Tracks* Hurston is less flippant in her belief in American meritocracy and grudgingly admits to racial inequalities. In one of the few passages in the book where she alludes to segregation or insitutionalized racism, she expresses a deep ambivalence.

While she was a student at Howard University in 1919, she worked as a manicurist at a black owned barbershop in Washington D.C. that served only white customers. One day a black man came into the shop, sat in a barber's chair, and demanded to be served. The employees of the shop and the white customers banded together and physically threw the would-be customer out of the shop and onto the street with Zora's silent approval. Only later did she begin to reflect on what had taken place. She realized:

I was giving sanction to Jim Crow, which theoretically I was supposed to resist. But here were ten Negro barbers, three porters, and two manicurists all stirred up at the threat of our living through

²⁸⁴ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 732.

loss of patronage... That was the first time it was called to my attention that self-interest rides over all sorts of lives.²⁸⁵

She does think fleetingly that it might have been a “beautiful thing” if all of the black workers had expressed solidarity with the would-be integrator. She finally avers that she does not know what the “ultimate right” was in that situation while simultaneously defending her first reaction by contending that there is something “fiendish and loathsome about a person who threatens to deprive you of your way of making a living.”²⁸⁶ This incident certainly reveals that Hurston was not in the vanguard of the direct resistance arm of the civil rights movement, but what else does this tell us about the way that she experienced Jim Crow and navigated the racial realities of her day?

This anecdote seems designed to please neither a white nor a black audience. White readers opposed to integration might resent Hurston’s acknowledgement that serving the black patron might have been a “beautiful thing.” They might also note that Hurston’s argument for not serving the man is not a defense of Jim Crow ethics. Instead, their refusal to serve him, thereby risking their livelihoods, was a result of the black employees’ precarious economic position, which was itself an outgrowth of the Jim Crow system. Much of her black audience, of course, was appalled by the fact that she found it possible to justify segregation on any grounds. Such a mixed and unpopular position may indicate that Hurston is not playing to any particular audience and is instead conveying her own, unvarnished beliefs.

Her views on the Jim Crow system in the south and the racism in the north as expressed in *Dust Tracks* are complicated and sometimes contradictory. For example, in

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 679.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 680.

one passage she claims that she was “not conscious of [her] race no matter where [she might] go.” However, in a passage later in the text she remarks offhandedly, “no Negro in American is apt to forget his race.”²⁸⁷ So which is it, is she conscious of her status as a black woman or not? It would be hard to imagine that she did not confront racism daily while residing in the north. It would be absurd to defend the position that she did not think of her race while she was living or traveling in the south where segregation was much more institutionalized than in the less outspokenly racist north. How could she avoid thinking about race when every move she made ranging from what railroad car she traveled on to what water fountain she drank from to where she could eat or sleep was dictated by her racial identification? Why would she go to great lengths to argue, even at the height of Jim Crow that she had noticed “no curse in being black, no extra flavor in being white” when the entire Jim Crow system was ordered to insure that such a situation existed?²⁸⁸

The answer to this question gives us an important insight into felt Jim Crow experience from Hurston’s perspective, and perhaps by extension from the perspective of other black southerners who shared Hurston’s ambivalence. Hurston does not share Wright’s singular focus to indict racism. Nor does she share the constancy of his anger and outrage at the Jim Crow system. Her reaction is more complex and just as logical a response to white racism as Wright’s rage. Despite her protestations to the contrary, throughout *Dust Tracks* Hurston reveals that she is all too aware of racism. The realities of the racial situation are always on the fringes of her autobiography, but she resists letting them become central.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 664, 721.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 731.

Like so many other black autobiographers, Hurston records a moment of racial awakening when she left the all black town of Eatonville of her childhood to travel to Jacksonville where she attended school. She recalled, “Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl. Things were all about the town to point this out to me. Street cars and stores and then talk I heard around the school.”²⁸⁹ Passages such as this reveal undeniably that she was indeed painfully conscious of the grimmer aspects of the southern caste system. Why then elsewhere in the text does she proclaim that she is not conscious of her race? Why after uttering these contradictory statements doesn’t she, a deliberate, reflective, artful memoirist, take the pains to reconcile them?

The contrary opinions that Hurston expresses are simultaneously contradictory and an accurate assessment of how she perceived Jim Crow. They reveal her understanding of the society she lived in both as she experienced it and as she wished it could be. Harold Bloom has labeled Hurston a “vitalist,” who, like Walt Whitman, was full of exuberance and life.²⁹⁰ She wanted to live in a world free of racism and sexism where she would be judged on her own considerable merits. She wanted this so much that sometimes she imagined it to be so. Other times racism was undeniably an obstacle and she had to acknowledge it. Hurston’s Jim Crow memoir is in part an honest reflection of what her life was like, in part a reflection of what she wished it had been. These kinds of competing visions are inextricably intertwined in all memories and in all histories.

Hurston gives her readers a clue about the way her memory functions in the often quoted first passage of her masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when she declares, “women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 621.

²⁹⁰ See Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir*, 188.

everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."²⁹¹ Elsewhere in *Dust Tracks* she acknowledges this same tension between dreams and reality, memory and willful forgetting. As a child she concocted a story about a neighbor who, she claimed, turned into an alligator at night. Even after the neighbor died, an ordinary and lonely death, she refused to abandon her story, claiming, "My phantasies were still fighting against the facts."²⁹² Perhaps the same could be said about her strong belief in meritocracy even in the midst of Jim Crow. Her ideals may not have meshed with the reality she'd been handed, but she clung to the ideals nonetheless.

An exchange with her father on the subject of Christmas presents reveals one of Hurston's Jim Crow coping-mechanisms. As a child, she recalls being fascinated with the idea of traveling to the horizon. Unable to convince a friend to accompany her on the journey, she realized that she would have to go alone. However, she was reluctant to walk so far by herself. One year when her father asked her what she wanted for Christmas, she seized on the opportunity to secure a means of transportation for her trip, answering:

"I want a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles," I told Papa happily.

"You what?" Papa gasped. "What dat you said?"

"I said, I want a black saddle horse, with..."

"A saddle horse?" Papa exploded. "It's a sin and a shame! Lemme tell you something right now, my young lady; you ain't white. Riding horse! Always trying to wear the big hat! I don't know how you got in this family nohow. You ain't like none of de rest of my young'uns..."²⁹³

In this exchange, Hurston's father equates her grandiose Christmas wish with desiring to be white. In a footnote, Hurston interprets the expression "you ain't white" to mean "Don't be too ambitious. You are a Negro and they are not meant to have so

²⁹¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 9.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 614.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 584-85.

much.”²⁹⁴ Her father, no doubt, expected her to request a doll, or a new dress, and her grand desire struck him as presumptive and undeserved the way white people assumed for themselves a disproportionate share of the south’s material goods. His choice to scold her by making reference to the Jim Crow system shows that he was deeply aware of and impacted by injustices of this kind. It also reveals his fear that young Zora was expecting much more than her life as a black woman was likely to deliver. Elsewhere, Hurston’s grandmother makes a similar observation when she tells her granddaughter, “They’s gowine to lynch you, yet...Youse too brazen to live long.”²⁹⁵ Hurston, however, responds to these warnings that she should learn to stay in her place by simply ignoring them. Although her father scolded her for even dreaming about owning a horse, Hurston simply invented one. She recalls, “Since Papa did not buy me a saddle horse, I made me one up. No one around me knew how often I rode my prancing horse, nor the things I saw in far places.” When real life didn’t suit her, she retreated to her imagination. She remembers, “I was driven inward. I lived an exciting life unseen.”²⁹⁶ These fantasies, this willful and imaginative ignoring of Jim Crow racism and inequalities, comprised Hurston’s Jim Crow reality, the inside of her historical moment.

Dust Tracks is part dream, part reality, part wishful thinking, part cool assessment of the facts. Hurston does not feel compelled to reconcile these contradictions. In recreating the chaos and the different ideas that she entertained at different times or sometimes simultaneously in different degrees, Hurston allows her readers to more effectively re-feel her Jim Crow experience. She gives her readers a hint for how to interpret her contradictions. Recalling the passionate words spoken in past love affairs

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 584.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 589.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 585.

she claimed, "I was sincere the moment in which I said the things. It is strictly a matter of time...No two moments are any more alike than two snowflakes...the great difficulty lies in trying to transpose last night's moment to a day that has no knowledge of it."²⁹⁷ Felt experience is filled with ambivalence, with fantasies, and out and out contradictions. Pierre Walker has argued that *Dust Tracks* "portrays an individual persona that resists reduction to a coherent, consistent unity and instead portrays a person of many moods who is in tension with the world in which she moves."²⁹⁸ Far from intending to criticize the text, Walker regards Hurston's autobiography as a brilliant description of a post-enlightenment self, which is full of contradictions.

Sometimes Hurston alludes to her complexity of feelings about the racism of her day only indirectly. She, unlike Wright in his depiction of his younger self, is a master of irony. Hurston adeptly uses both irony and the black vernacular tradition. *Dust Tracks* is full of layered meanings, and the naïve tone that she assumes at times cannot be taken strictly at face value. However, due to Hurston's deep ambivalence, when she employs irony she half believes the surface meaning even as she teases her true audience, ordering them to dig deeper. She straddles meanings and appears at least partially to embrace both levels of irony. Perhaps one level of irony, the surface meaning, can be said to represent what Hurston wishes were true, while the second layer reveals what she fears to be true.

As a child she formed an unlikely friendship with a "grey-haired white man" who used to take her fishing and give her advice, telling her, "don't be a nigger... Niggers lie and lie!" Despite the obvious racial subtext behind this peculiar friendship between a young black girl and a much older white man in Jim Crow Florida, Hurston claims that

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 752.

²⁹⁸ Pierre A. Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Post-Modern Self in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," *African American Review*, 32.3 (1998): 387-399.

“The word Nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race.” In a deceptively naïve tone she observes, “I knew without being told that he was not talking about my race when he advised me not to be a nigger. He was talking about class rather than race. He frequently gave money to Negro schools.”²⁹⁹

Rather than directly questioning her friend’s loaded word choice in dispensing advice or wondering why a discussion of social class, if that’s indeed what occurred, should take place using such racialized terminology, Hurston claims on the surface to accept her companion’s good intentions and to listen to his advice. However, her flippant observation that his motivations cannot be impugned because “He frequently gave money to Negro schools” adds another dimension to the interchange. Her defense of the white man is too easy, too ill considered to be taken at face value. Hurston is alluding here to the absurd claim often made by unreflective whites that they are not racists because they, for example, “have a black friend.” Hurston is telling her reader that she might have gone with the flow, gone fishing with the older white man, and listened to his advice, but she was not duped. She understood the power differential between them, the peculiarity of their friendship, and the dubious credentials many whites used to show that they were not racists even as they managed to thrive in a racist society. Whatever her friend’s good intentions, they may have been accompanied by a condescension and a tokenism that Hurston shrewdly recognized even as a small child.

Similarly, in the last passage of the text as it originally appeared in 1942, Hurston brilliantly and ironically conveys a range of emotions about race and racism. She writes:

I have no race prejudice of any kind. My kinfolks, and my “skinfoles” are dearly loved. My own circumference of everyday life is there. But I see their same virtues and vices everywhere I look. So I give you all my right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you. In my

²⁹⁹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 587.

eyesight, you lose nothing by not looking just like me. I will remember you all in my good thoughts, and I ask you kindly to do the same thing for me. Not only just for me. You who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust. And you who walk in humble places, think kindly too, of others. There has been no proof in the world so far that you would be less arrogant if you held the lever of power in your hands. Let us all be kissing-friends. Consider that with tolerable patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue.³⁰⁰

On one level she is preaching a gospel of racial reconciliation, urging whites who hold the “zig-zag lightning of power” to rule kindly and compassionately. She urges African-Americans “who walk in humble places” to be patient if not tolerant of those in control, arguing that human nature is fundamentally the same, and if power relations had been reversed African-Americans might not have been any less tyrannical than whites. Daringly she assumes for a moment that this is the case, and assures white America that they “lost nothing by not looking just like [her].”³⁰¹ By ironically assuming the posture of African-American political and social dominance, she highlights the absurdity of white racial ideas while establishing herself as an authority figure, a standard worth emulating. Her hope for a future “noble world” is an ostensibly optimistic one that is marred by her seemingly offhanded time table for racial reconciliation of “a few hundred generations or so,” a time so distant that it exists only in her imagination and does not have a concrete foundation in the world as she knew it. Finally, she ends the passage with what on one level appears to be an appeal for interracial harmony, a metaphorical integrated barbecue perhaps in heaven. However, her choice of the term “godly demons” coupled with her reference to another world, cause Robert Hemenway to wonder if, behind a mask of

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 769.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 769.

colloquial good humor and charm, “Zora is really telling her readers, ‘I’ll see you in Hell.’”³⁰²

Besides revealing a variety of contradictory and layered sentiments about race relations and the possibility of future interracial understanding, this passage also reveals another significant way her Jim Crow experiences differed from Wright’s. Her declaration of her love for “kinfolks” and “skinfolks” reveals a deep sense of belonging to and love for the black community, which always eluded Wright. It is ironic that Wright, who fashioned himself a racial spokesperson, should find himself so alienated from the community he attempted to defend from white racism, while Hurston who actively resisted the role of spokesperson or representative black woman felt so at home with other African-Americans.

As many Hurston critics have noted, the tone of *Dust Tracks* is similar to that of a folktale. This stylistic choice roots this autobiography within the black vernacular tradition as well as within the literary tradition of autobiography. Hurston begins *Dust Tracks* by recounting the lore of the founding of the all-black town, Eatonville, where she grew up and then conveying the story of her birth as it was told to her. She claims, “Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.”³⁰³ Lynn Domina observes that, “Hurston does not confine the life she writes in her autobiography to the lifetime of her corporeal self but rather contextualizes—and extends—it temporally within the history of her community.”³⁰⁴ She is writing herself into the folklore of the community, picking her

³⁰² Hemenway, 286.

³⁰³ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 561.

³⁰⁴ Lynne Domina, “Protection in my mouf: Self, Voice, and Community In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Mules and Men*,” *African American Review* (1997): 197.

story up where the local oral histories and legends leave off. Like folktales, which are frequently less straightforward than they first appear, *Dust Tracks* contains layers of meaning as represented in Hurston's usage of irony. *Dust Tracks* also contains fantastic elements common in some folktales. Hurston claims to have had a series of visions, "like clearcut stereopticon slides" that revealed to her what her future would hold.³⁰⁵ In addition to fashioning her own origins as something of a legend, Hurston recounts other folktales, stories, and songs throughout the text, interspersing them into her life narrative often without comment or transition as if they too are part of her life story. While folklore may not have been a resource for living in *Black Boy*, Hurston's autobiography is rooted in folk expression.

In Chapter 5, "Figure and Fancy," Hurston lovingly describes "Joe Clark's store [which] was the heart and spring of the town" of Eatonville, Florida.³⁰⁶ Town residents sat on the porch swapping jokes and tall tales and fostering a good-natured sense of community that Zora found irresistible. It was here that Zora first heard about Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox. She learned about word play and innuendo. She felt a sense of community and warmth. She recalls lingering at the store, taking it all in until calls of "Zora-a-a! If you don't come here, you better!" would drive her reluctantly home.³⁰⁷ She recalls, "Life took on a bigger perimeter by expanding on these things. I picked up glints and gleams out of what I heard and stored it away to turn it to my own uses."³⁰⁸

These formative experiences shaped the kind of language she would speak, the kind of prose she would craft, and the trajectory her life would take. After working at a

³⁰⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 596.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 599.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 602.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 605.

variety of odd jobs, traveling across the south as a lady's maid to a vaudeville performer, attending school at Morgan College and at Howard, Hurston found herself at Barnard College studying with renowned anthropologist Franz Boas. After studying with Boas, Hurston embarked on what was to be her parallel vocation alongside her writing, that of anthropologist. Her first mission to the south to collect folktales was her least successful, she recalls:

The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was all right. But, I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folks songs?" The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads.³⁰⁹

Hurston quickly remedied the situation by returning to her folk roots. She became the truest kind of participant observer, traveling throughout the south, living among black communities, collecting (and probably dispensing) vast amounts of folklore and folk wisdom.

As Henry Louis Gates observes, throughout *Dust Tracks* Hurston straddles "the linguistic rituals of the dominant culture and those of the black vernacular tradition."³¹⁰ Unlike Wright, who writes in standard English throughout *Black Boy*, Hurston interjects her prose, her "Barnardese" as she would have it, with folk expressions. She moves easily between them. She inserts sly colloquialisms throughout, telling her reader, for example, at one point, that she had "friended with Big Sweet."³¹¹ Playing the role of front porch storyteller, she anthropomorphizes the trees in her yard as a child, writing, "There was another tree that used to creep up close to the house around sundown and threaten me. It used to put on a skull-head with a crown on it every day at sundown and make motions at

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 687.

³¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates, "'A Negro Way of Saying,'" review of *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Moses: Man of the Mountain*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *New York Times Book Review*, April 21, 1985: 43.

³¹¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, , 696.

me.”³¹² The musicality of her language choices, the indirection, the extended fantasies (such as her detailed description of the adventures of Miss Corn-Cob and Mr. Sweet Smell--a corn husk and a bar of soap—that she played with as a child) all figure her as a storyteller in the tradition of Joe Clark’s porch and show how rooted she was in that community. However, when she sits down to write *Dust Tracks* she is also an outsider, writing about a world that she is no longer completely a part of.

Will Brantley observes, “Throughout *Dust Tracks*...Hurston identifies the presence of a reader whose range of cultural experience is clearly not her own.”³¹³ She includes footnotes that interpret folk expressions for those unfamiliar with them. Sometimes she inserts herself as an editorial presence when conveying folktales, remarking for example what “the usual rejoinder was” to a certain exchange.³¹⁴ She also occasionally uses quotation marks to indicate words outside standard English like “ruint” or “bigged.”³¹⁵ Not only does Hurston use these techniques to translate the world of Joe Clarke’s front porch to a readership unfamiliar with it, but her wide-ranging cultural fluency and her ability to effortlessly shift back and forth reveals the complexity of Hurston’s recollections of her Jim Crow experience.

Much like Wright, Hurston felt conflicted between her conception of herself as a unique individual and as group member. Robert Hemenway observes that, “Zora seems to be both an advocate for the universal, demonstrating that this black woman does not look at the world in racial terms, and a celebrant of a unique upbringing in an all-black

³¹² Ibid., 605.

³¹³ Brantley, 215.

³¹⁴ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 601.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 600.

village.”³¹⁶ It is striking that both Hurston and Wright felt torn between their individual selves and their group identities. It is likely that other African-American southerners felt similarly conflicted. Both alternatively fought against and embraced the idea that black autobiographers spoke not only for themselves but also for the community. However, in spite of this similarity, the way each describes their community of origin remains strikingly different.

Both Wright and Hurston’s Jim Crow memories are written from another place, geographically, educationally, and emotionally. Wright wrote about growing up in Mississippi while living in New York City, having escaped from the south he detested, and having managed not only to educate himself but to become a famous writer. Looking at his past from that vantage point, he felt only bitterness. Hurston wrote from a similarly distant place. Geographically, she wrote *Dust Tracks* in the California home of her wealthy friend Katharine Edson Mereson. She was at that point college educated, a published writer, and a well-traveled anthropologist. However, when she surveyed her Jim Crow experience she did so with a much wider range of emotions than Wright.

While Wright wrote about a distant world he did not plan to return to, Hurston wrote about a southern community she loved deeply and felt very much a part of still. They recount some similar experiences of poverty, family difficulties, and the overpowering desire to get an education. However, Hurston recounts many experiences Wright does not such as the childhood games she played, a crush she had on a teacher, and school parties. Wright’s indictment of his environment was so pervasive it precluded many positive recollections. Hurston, on the other hand, recalled moments of joy in her childhood and a fondness for her community of origin. Her depiction of black community

³¹⁶ Hemenway, 276.

life in the Jim Crow south is characterized by joy, storytelling, social gatherings, a world that thrived in spite of racism. Wright, however, described a community pathologically damaged by Jim Crow. Which depiction, if either, adequately describes life in the Jim Crow south?

Reconciling Depictions of Jim Crow and the Black Community in *Black Boy* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*

For Wright, Jim Crow reality was unremittingly bleak. He paints a picture of a cruel and ugly south, where the slightest false move could have deadly consequences. He gives voice to the anger and bitterness he felt about Jim Crow racism and the devastating impact he believed the southern caste system had on the psychological health of the black community. He mobilizes the anger, dread, and fear he felt to paint this compelling and grim memoir of his childhood. However, these emotions have little in common with Zora Neale Hurston's feelings about the same historical moment. On occasion, *Dust Tracks* does reveal her searing awareness of southern racism, but this awareness is by no means the focus of her autobiography. For her, her childhood in the Jim Crow south was filled with a wider range of emotions than for Wright. Her memories are filled not only with adversity but also with adventure, not only with sorrow but also with joy. Her greatest tragedy as a child was the death of her mother, an event far more traumatic in her personal development than any encounters with white racism. Her Jim Crow memories are not dominated by memories of racism and white hostility. She deliberately places the issue of racism on the periphery of both the hardships and triumphs she recounts.

As children, both Wright and Hurston endeavor to leave the south. For Wright his very survival depends on such an escape. When he is preparing to leave home he tells his sickly mother who begs him not to leave, “I’ve got to go, mama. I can’t live this way.”³¹⁷ For Hurston as a child, the thought of leaving home is initially a pleasant, meandering daydream, a desire to see what the rest of the world is like rather than to flee from the one she knew. As a small child she recalled sitting on the gate post in front of her home, watching white travelers going by and inquiring of them, “Don’t you want me to go a piece of the way with you?”³¹⁸ Thus Hurston actively flagged down the same kind of people Wright was so eager to flee. Biographical information reveals that Wright steadily moved geographically away from the Arkansas and Mississippi life he describes in *Black Boy*, moving to Memphis, then Chicago, New York, and finally to Paris. Hurston, on the other hand, left the south, experienced life in the black metropolis of Harlem, but returned to Florida regularly, ultimately remaining there permanently. How could the same southern geography, governed by the same segregated social order, inspire horror in Wright and love in Hurston? Why are the inhabitants of the Jim Crow universe, specifically the black community, portrayed as pathological by Wright and vibrant and loveable by Hurston? Whose description is correct? Is either? Are both?

There are several ways we can attempt to explain these contrary depictions of life in the Jim Crow south. We could claim that both (or either) memoirists are lying or exaggerating. We could also contend that Wright and Hurston simply had very different life experiences, which each describes accurately. We could also argue that the responses

³¹⁷ Wright, *Black Boy*, 206.

³¹⁸ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 588.

of each were different, but logical outgrowths of life in the Jim Crow south. Or we could assert that elements of all three of these explanations are true.

Some critics of both *Black Boy* and *Dust Tracks* have accused the authors of lying or exaggerating in their memoirs. Unsurprisingly many of Wright's readers have been shocked by what Robert Stepto describes as the "death-like chill of Wright's (albeit rhetorical) vision of Negro America."³¹⁹ Yishinobu Hakutani summarizes the feelings of those skeptical of *Black Boy's* veracity by saying, "they feel that the world, bad as it is, cannot be so bad as Wright says it is."³²⁰ In his 1945 review of *Black Boy*, Du Bois argues that the book is "patently and terribly overdrawn."³²¹ Wright's harsh depiction of the black community as well as his own sense of detachment from that community runs counter to a tendency in much African American literature as well as in African American historiography to depict the black community as a bastion against the hostile, white world. Unable to recognize the world Wright describes, some critics, including W.E.B. Du Bois, have suggested that the book should be read as "creative writing rather than simply a record of life."³²²

Skeptics of Wright's veracity have asserted several claims to back up their positions. Many critics, including Timothy Dow Adams, have noted that in *Black Boy* Wright frequently uses "dialogue marked with quotation marks," suggesting a high degree of fiction in the story and encouraging readers to receive the text as a novel rather

³¹⁹ Robert Stepto, "Literacy and Ascent: *Black Boy*," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 252.

³²⁰ Yishinobu Hakutani, "Creation of the Self In Richard Wright's *Black Boy*," *Black American Literature Forum*, 10.2 (1985): 70.

³²¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Richard Wright Looks Back," review of *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 4 March 1945, 2.

³²² W.E.B. DuBois, "Richard Wright Looks Back," *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, March 4, 1945, 2.

than as a traditional autobiography.³²³ Others have pointed to what they regard as falsehoods or exaggerations in the text. Wright biographer, Michel Fabre has identified many incidents in *Black Boy* that he regards as exaggerated or as partially untrue. However, the questions that Fabre and other Wright scholars have raised about the biographical truthfulness of *Black Boy* are generally questions of emphasis or allegations of lies of omission rather than direct falsifications.

For example, Fabre corroborates that Wright grew up in poverty but faults Wright for not mentioning that his mother had once worked as a school teacher and that his mother's family, the Wilsons, had been a prominent family in Natchez before their financial ruin and relocation to Jackson.³²⁴ Although Fabre suggests that Wright omits these details in order to emphasize his proletarian roots, it is equally plausible that the fact that his family had once enjoyed happier economic times was scant consolation while growing up hungry and poor in Jackson. Fabre also claims that while an adolescent Wright worked for a kind white family, the Wall family. Wright's biographer suggests that Wright omitted this information because it would complicate his portrait of white oppression.³²⁵ However it is unclear how Fabre was able to verify objectively that the family members were indeed "liberal and generous employers" or if what passed for liberal in Mississippi would have been enough to win the admiration of the introspective and fiercely proud Richard Wright. Most other examples of so-called discrepancies between the text and Wright's life are of a similar ilk. Most of Wright's descriptions of

³²³ Timothy Dow Adams, " 'I Do Believe Him Though I Know He Lies': Lying as Genre and Metaphor in *Black Boy*, in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, 302.

³²⁴ Fabre, 5.

³²⁵ Fabre, 46.

his childhood in *Black Boy* have been embraced as true by his biographers and the large number of historians who have used the text as a resource.

Hurston too faced detractors of her autobiographical efforts. While many of Wright's critics focused their scorn on his harsh portrayal of the black community, some of Hurston's critics seethed over her unwillingness to tackle racism head-on. After reading *Dust Tracks*, Arna Bontemps declared, "Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America—she ignores them."³²⁶ Robert Hemenway more mildly describes *Dust Tracks* as a "discomfiting book [that] has probably harmed Hurston's reputation."³²⁷ Other critics of *Dust Tracks* have focused on its veracity in other areas.

It is now a well-known fact that Hurston lied about her age. She shaved as much as a decade off her age not only when writing *Dust Tracks* but throughout her life. The fact that she had been lying about her age for twenty-five years when she sat down to write her autobiography posed, as her biographer Valerie Boyd put it mildly, a "logistical problem."³²⁸ She solves the problem by being evasive and for the most part allowing her readers to infer what they will about her chronological age. However, since Hurston lied about age throughout her life, it is fitting that she would do so in her memoir as well. Her life experiences, her Jim Crow reality, were colored by the need to evade, dissemble, and fib to perpetuate her story. Her autobiography should and does reflect that even on a very rudimentary level Hurston spent her life fighting the facts and forging an identity that suited her. In *Dust Tracks* Hurston also claims that she was born in the all-black town of Eatonville. However, a recently uncovered family Bible lists her birthplace as Notasulga,

³²⁶ Arna Bontemps, "From Eatonville, Florida to Harlem," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 22, 1942.

³²⁷ Hemenway, 276.

³²⁸ Boyd, 354.

Alabama. Since none of the older Hurston children were born in Notasulga, Boyd speculates that Hurston may have lied about her birthplace to keep up her lie about her age. She may also have fibbed because she wished she had been born in the all-black town of Eatonville, which she adored.

In a reassessment of *Dust Tracks* written twenty years after Robert Hemenway's pioneering literary biography of Hurston, Pam Bordelon has pointed out other ways that Hurston's version of her life differs from autobiographical data. For example, Bordelon argues that Hurston's stepmother was not "the shrew...that Hurston describes in *Dust Tracks*."³²⁹ However, such an evaluation, based on testimony from Hurston's niece, is subjective and can hardly be used to indict Hurston's truthfulness. Bordelon also claims that Hurston's father never divorced her stepmother as Hurston claimed in *Dust Tracks*. Hurston's assertion that the divorce took place may be a misunderstanding, an example of wishful thinking, or a fabrication. However, most of the falsehoods that Bordelon points out in *Dust Tracks* are lies of omission. She claims, for example, that Hurston saw her siblings more frequently than she acknowledges and that she worked for the Works Progress Administration even though she doesn't say so in *Dust Tracks*. Nonetheless, overall Valerie Boyd contends that "Zora does not tell many (if any) out-and-out lies about her life."³³⁰

Thus it appears that the events recounted in *Black Boy* and *Dust Tracks* are both literally verifiable to a very large degree. Both authors declared their intention to write autobiography, and the vast majority of people, places, and events mentioned in the text are externally verifiable. Uneasiness about the textual descriptions of each of these lives

³²⁹ Pam Bordelon, "New Tracks on *Dust Tracks*: Toward a Reassessment of the Life of Zora Neale Hurston," *African American Review* (1997): 5-21.

³³⁰ Bordelon, 354.

and Jim Crow reality from their individual perspectives has been centered around questions of emphasis and omission. Some critics have been skeptical of these texts simply because they don't say what they would like to hear. For some a more palatable rendering of Jim Crow history may have been something of a combination of *Black Boy* and *Dust Tracks*, Wright's indictment of racism coupled with Hurston's celebration of black folk culture. However, such a synthesis does not exist. What do we then make of these two very different texts as they are?

What about the few deliberate falsehoods contained in each of these texts as well what we may suspect to be exaggerations? Do they diminish the value of these texts as historical resources? We know, after all, that autobiographers (Wright and Hurston included) sometimes lie and sometimes exaggerate, deliberately or inadvertently. After all, memories are faulty and memories change. However, misrepresentation, conscious and otherwise, is part of historical reality. It is also part of historical memory, for these memoirists are attempting not only to describe what their past was like but struggling to determine how it will be remembered in the future. What Wright and Hurston do when they embellish or emphasize one aspect of their lives or their personalities at the expense of another is emblematic of what all people do. Misrepresentations, false impressions, bias, and mis-remembering are invariable components of human perception.

Historical reality, specifically the inside of a historical moment, can be comprised of both lying and truth telling, remembering, forgetting, and perhaps reinventing. When trying to ascertain "what really happened" in a historical moment, this is a tangle we must try to unravel. However, when determining what the past felt like and looked like from

the perspective of a historical agent, we must leave this muddle intact, because human perception encompasses all of these.

Wright and Hurston's fibs and omission, their emphases and exaggerations reveal a great deal about themselves and their world. Perhaps the evils of Jim Crow were so overpowering for Wright that he became incapable of experiencing joy or felt that the good things in life were insignificant by comparison. Perhaps Hurston felt that over-emphasis of the "race problem" overshadowed the good things in life or that being labeled a member of an oppressed race diminished her individuality. Perhaps she both lived her life and wrote a memoir to counter that tendency. Wright's and Hurston's emphases and perhaps their exaggerations may reveal what they were afraid was true (in the case of Wright) or what they wished could be so (in the case of Hurston). Their representations of the past also dictate the way they wanted themselves and the past to be remembered. Wright figured himself as a protestor and wanted to create a grim portrait of what he was fighting against. Hurston figured herself an artist and a free spirit who wanted to capture the source of her inspiration.

If we look at the raw material, the biographical facts that each autobiographer had to work with, how much did they have in common? Can their life stories really be so different? After all they are both African-Americans who grew up in the first half of the twentieth century, who went on to become published writers, and thus who are part of a very small subset of individuals. In more particular details too Hurston and Wright had somewhat similar childhoods. Both grew up in the rural south. Both were close to their mothers but had difficulties getting along with other family members, including their fathers. Both had to cope with the loss of their mothers. Hurston's died when she was still

a child. Wright's mother came in and out of prominence in his life due to the ravages of a debilitating illness. Both struggled hard to get an education and read voraciously. Both had experiences working as domestic help in white homes. Both traveled north where they began writing careers. The racial realities of the Jim Crow south formed the backdrop for both of their childhoods. Temperamentally too they share some similarities. Both were intelligent, independent, outspoken, creative, and periodically misunderstood as children. However, as we have seen, these parallel experiences did not translate into similar Jim Crow autobiographies.

In what ways were their life experiences externally different? After all, in spite of their similarities there are invariably myriad differences when comparing the backgrounds of any two individuals. Wright grew up in Arkansas and Mississippi, Hurston in Florida. Even more significantly, Hurston's early childhood was spent in the all black town of Eatonville, and she was no doubt less exposed to the cruelties of white racism while very young. They are of different genders. Hurston was seventeen years older than Wright. (Although, she would have claimed only ten of those years.) They had much different political ideas and different theories about the artist's role in the world. As established writers, each was critical of the other's work. Wright claimed, for example, that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was addressed to a white audience whose "chauvinistic tastes [Hurston] knows how to satisfy."³³¹ When reviewing *Uncle Tom's Children*, Hurston claimed that "not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to

³³¹ Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses*, 5 October 1937, 22-25.

pass in the entire novel.”³³² These statements may well summarize how each may have felt about the other’s autobiographical efforts as well.

Do these obvious differences and personal peculiarities alone explain the differences between the depictions of Jim Crow in each memoir? Certainly they must explain some of the differences between the texts. Hurston, a woman and a Floridian, must have had many different experiences than a male Mississippian. However, why didn’t the similarities between Hurston and Wright’s experiences result in greater agreement about what life was like in the southern United States in the first half of the twentieth century? After all, Wright and Hurston were reacting to very similar stimuli. Each attended segregated schools, strode past water fountains and restrooms labeled “white” or “colored,” and otherwise suffered the deprivations of second class citizenship in the south. Some of the harshness of southern life was no doubt ameliorated for Hurston while she was still living in Eatonville, but what about when she left her all black town to attend boarding school? What about after her mother’s death when she wandered around the south working odd jobs, including working as a maid in the homes of white families? Just as Hurston must have experienced some of the hardships that Wright wrote about so earnestly, Wright certainly must have had more exposure to more positive aspects of black community life. His brief passage in the text where he recounts local folklore suggests, for example, that he must have at least heard some of the same stories and songs that meant so much to Hurston. However, in spite of their commonalties their depictions of that world remain quite different.

³³² Zora Neale Hurston, review of *Uncle Tom’s Children* by Richard Wright, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 April, 1938.

They are different because their Jim Crow experiences were filtered through their own perceptions, which were impacted by their personalities, their politics, their socioeconomic situations and a whole host of other factors. Furthermore, their Jim Crow memories were influenced, colored, even changed in response to the people that they were when they sat down to write their memoirs. Even if the outside of the historical moments they participated in had strikingly similar characteristics, their inward participation, the thoughts and feelings that constituted the inside of their historical realities were strikingly and understandably different.

That being said, are we to infer that by reading Richard Wright or Zora Neale Hurston and attempting to re-think their thoughts and re-feel their emotions we gain insights only into how these two individuals experienced life in the Jim Crow south? What about the countless others who participated in and created the same historical reality but who didn't leave behind complex literary memoirs describing the world from their points of view? What kinds of insights do the experiences of Wright and Hurston give us about them?

To some extent, *Black Boy* is only the story of Richard Wright, his experiences, his perceptions of the social world he lived in. The same is true, of course, for *Dust Tracks* and Zora Neale Hurston. However, we can assume that some of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions were similar to how other people thought and felt. Their readers, in an attempt to live the experiences of Hurston and Wright vicariously, must mobilize their own emotions to understand how Jim Crow felt. If a reader in search of historical insights who reads *Dust Tracks* and *Black Boy* from the vantage point of another time and place is able to re-feel Wright and Hurston's emotions, their

contemporaries who were directly responding to the same social reality must have felt similar things even more acutely. These literary memoirs, like all literature, are simultaneously particular and universal. They convey not only Wright and Hurston's particular life stories and their recollections of their lives but also universal insights about the human experience. *Black Boy* can be read as Wright's own life story, as a story of all "black boys" living in the Jim Crow south, and also more broadly as a story of human suffering.

However, Hurston's Jim Crow experience complicates Wright's version, indicating that his experience cannot be read simply as "the Jim Crow experience." There were, after all, many Jim Crow experiences. However, through his literary rendering of great anger Wright does give us insights into how Jim Crow might have been perceived and experienced from the perspective of overwhelming anger and fear, emotions others certainly felt. In contrast, Hurston's memoir might be read as, for example, a study of anger denied. Others, like Hurston, must have chosen to de-emphasize white oppression, to ignore its impact whenever possible, and to go on about the business of living. Some, no doubt, experienced Jim Crow from a combination of these perspectives. Some reacted in ways not described by either Wright or Hurston.

Hurston, in her succinct and eloquent way acknowledges the multi-perspectival nature of social reality noting, "Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle. So every man's spice-box seasons his own food."³³³ Thus Hurston doesn't claim to speak for anyone beside herself when writing her Jim Crow memoir. We can assume, given the power of literature to universalize

³³³Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 599.

human experiences, that much of what she said inadvertently resonates with other people or speaks to aspects of the experiential nature of Jim Crow from the shared perspectives of some of her contemporaries. Hurston and Wright's experiences are to some extent emblematic of the felt experience of Jim Crow. They are also, on another level, only the experiences of Wright and Hurston.

We must keep in mind that these opposite depictions of Jim Crow are not only responses to the social world of Jim Crow, they are also constitutive of it. Wright and Hurston's contrary and sometimes contradictory thoughts and feelings about Jim Crow comprise the historical reality of the era. As we recall from Part I of this dissertation, historical reality is, by its nature, perspectival. Although very different accounts of the same historical time period, Wright and Hurston's Jim Crow memoirs are both authentic. They are both true. We must understand and re-experience both if we are to understand Jim Crow reality. Both are pieces of a rich, complex whole.

Both Wright and Hurston's Jim Crow perspectives are influenced by their race, by their status as members of a socioeconomically and politically oppressed group. Wright in particular puts his racial identification front and center by identifying himself as a "black boy." In a peculiar way, her racial identification is centermost in Hurston's Jim Crow memories too due not only to her celebration of the black community and her identification with other African-Americans but also to her frequent disavowals of the importance of race. Race is central at times in her narrative due to its glaring absence. How did white southerners, who were not members of an oppressed group, perceive and create Jim Crow reality? What impact did their racial identification have on their descriptions of life in the Jim Crow south? Were white perceptions of Jim Crow reality as

divergent as African-American descriptions of the era as represented by Wright and Hurston? These are questions we will examine in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

WHITE PERSPECTIVES: THE JIM CROW HISTORICAL MEMORIES OF WILLIAM ALEXANDER PERCY, LILLIAN SMITH, AND WILLIE MORRIS

In *North Toward Home* (1967), white Mississippian Willie Morris recounts having dinner with several civil rights activists in New York City in 1964. Morris, who had recently moved to New York to take a position at the prestigious *Harper's* magazine, had made a name for himself as a truly reconstructed southerner who was willing to acknowledge the brutality of the system of racial oppression in his native state. During the meal, one of his companions, a young African American woman from Mississippi, inexplicably started to sob and had to leave the table. Morris, who had overcome the racist indoctrination of his childhood to become a supporter of black civil rights, was shocked to learn that he was the source of her distress. Her friend explained, "you're the first Mississippi white person she was with socially. You made her nervous as hell."³³⁴

After that incident, Morris has a revelation. He realizes that his Mississippi was quite simply a different Mississippi from the place she knew. She had never experienced the tranquil Mississippi of his childhood, and he, despite his impeccable white liberal credentials, had never really visited her Mississippi. Nor could he except via an act of empathetic imagination. Horrified, he finally understands,

The Mississippi these young people talked of was a different place from the one I had known, the things they said were not in context with mine; it was as if we were talking of another world—one that *looked* the same, that had the same place names, the same roads and rivers and landmarks, but beyond that the reality was awry, removed from my private reality of it.³³⁵

³³⁴Willie Morris, *North Toward Home* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), 379.

³³⁵Ibid., 380.

If the place names and the landmarks that the civil rights worker discussed had not been so familiar, Morris, no doubt, would have denied that they were talking about the same geographical space. He could not transform his neighbors into the virulent defenders of white supremacy that his dinner companions both hated and feared. Now in his early thirties, Morris was more than a dozen years removed from a time when he actually resided in the state. He must have asked himself whether things had changed that much since his childhood. He must have wondered whether his Mississippi had devolved into such a loathsome place in the time that had elapsed since he left home. One can imagine the frenzied thoughts and explanations he must have considered as he tried to reconcile these competing Mississippis. Racial tensions were no doubt heightened in response to the influx of civil rights workers into the region... However, he had visited the region in the time since he left home and he still found it impossible to reconcile what he was hearing with what he sentimentally knew and felt about the place where he grew up. He still had friends and relatives in the region. He may have wondered, for example, how would these young Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteers view his mother? It was true that she had loved and nurtured him even while doing her part to make sure that colored people stayed in their place. Would these SNCC workers view her as yet another symbol of the solid and intractable south? Could the civil rights workers and the black woman from Mississippi understand his version of the state any more than he could theirs? How could he reconcile these competing versions of Mississippi? How could he meld the sentimental Mississippi of his childhood memories with this version of an unremittingly hostile Mississippi?

Morris' epiphany has implications beyond his specific realization that his felt experience of life in Mississippi was much different from the felt experiences of the region's African Americans and of the civil rights workers. Every place, every time, every historical event is understood, interpreted, and experienced from any number of personal perspectives. We must remember that Morris' thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about Mississippi are constitutive of the historical reality of Jim Crow as are the thoughts and feelings of the young black woman who had been so deeply traumatized by her Mississippi that she had unwittingly transformed Morris into a symbol of all that she hated and feared. Both versions of Mississippi are authentic ones, and both constitute the historical reality of Jim Crow.

As we saw from an examination of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, there is no definitive black Jim Crow experience. Wright's Mississippi bears a striking resemblance to the Mississippi described by the SNCC activists, but Hurston's south, while not as idyllic as Morris', is hardly as bleak as Wright's. It should be no surprise then that white southerners too experienced, felt, and remembered Jim Crow in a wide variety of ways. The student of history must endeavor to understand, to rethink and re-feel, these various Jim Crows if she is to come to a deeper understanding of the time period. These complex and frequently contradictory Jim Crow worldviews are revealingly described in a number of literary memoirs.

This chapter will examine Jim Crow as it was experienced and interpreted not only by Willie Morris but also by Lillian Smith and William Alexander Percy. Smith was a more outspoken critic of the southern caste system than was Morris. Her memoir *Killers of the Dream* (1949; 1961) was written with the expressed purpose of critiquing

racism; while *North Towards Home* was written for less polemical reasons. In the years since the publication of *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941), Percy has unwittingly been transformed into a representative example of a southern reactionary. This despite the fact that his very profound sense of *noblesse oblige* towards the black population made him suspect in the eyes of some of his white contemporaries.

In these three memoirs written by white southerners, common themes emerge. All three write, at least in passing, about what each regards as the excesses of southern religion. These three memoirs all contain references to interracial sexual relationships. Significantly, all three memoirists root their own personal stories in the larger narrative of southern history. (However, the southern histories they tell are frequently at odds.) All three have fond recollections of African American childhood playmates. In addition, Morris, Smith, and Percy all had early significant relationships with African American adults while they were children. Smith and Percy had loving relationships with “mammy” figures. Shortly after his birth, a young black doctor saved Morris’ life even though he had to enter the Morris home by the back door to do so. Finally, all three loved the South and have fond memories of growing up in the region. However, each has a certain degree of anxiety about the Jim Crow system.

These intersections, this commonality of experience, indicates, much like Morris’ surprised recognition of the place names described by the SNCC workers, that these three memoirists are indeed talking about the same social reality at roughly the same historical moment.³³⁶ However, the significance that these details hold, the way that they are interpreted intellectually and emotionally, is different in each account.

³³⁶ Morris (1934-1999) was significantly younger than both Smith (1897-1966) and Percy (1885-1942). This age difference might account for some of the differences in their depiction of life in the Jim Crow

Willie Morris, *North Toward Home*

Morris' memoir is unique because he demonstrates how his perceptions and understanding of Jim Crow evolve throughout his life. He begins his account by describing his childhood acquiescence in the unreflective racism of his community and ends the book after having traveled many miles both geographically and ideologically from his roots. In contrast, Percy defends the southern way of life throughout his autobiography, and Smith recalls childhood events from the perspective of a mature narrator who does not approve of the way that she was socialized into a racist society.

North Toward Home is divided into three sections, each taking a geographical name. As he moves geographically further away from Mississippi, Morris' understanding of the region and of his own ethical and political sensibilities changes. The first section, "Mississippi," is an account of his childhood in a small town in the Yazoo Delta. The mature narrator lingers on the fringes of Morris' depiction of his childhood, ready to interject himself. On occasion the mature voice gingerly adds a bit of perspective to the experiences of his younger self. However, the older Morris is often deliberately mute. Unflinchingly, Morris describes his childhood as he experienced it, often resisting the temptation to apologize or to temper the racial insensitivity of his younger self. For example, when describing the euphoria of being "saved" at a religious revival meeting (a ritual that Morris participated in on more than one occasion), he remarks that afterwards, "I would be tempted to embrace the first person I saw in the street, white or nigger."³³⁷

south. Additionally, both Percy and Morris grew up in Mississippi, while Smith writes about Florida and Georgia. Again, this no doubt accounts for some difference in their depictions. However, each came of age before the civil rights movement. Morris, Smith, and Percy all grew up during an era when African Americans were socially segregated and systematically disenfranchised throughout most of the south. It is on this basis that their Jim Crow recollections are worthy of comparison, regardless of the differences in age and geography.

³³⁷ Morris, *North Toward Home*, 39.

Morris' use of the racial epithet without ensconcing it in quotation marks or inserting a parenthetical disclaimer represents a deliberate choice, which was probably not an easy one to make for the sophisticated New York editor who wrote *North Toward Home*. At this moment in history in particular, one could gauge—to a relative degree of accuracy—the political sensibilities of individuals according to the labels they used to describe the black population. Why did he consciously choose to use this despised and loaded term instead of his unfailingly polite (in the context of the time) usage of the word “Negro” (with a capital “N”) in the rest of the text? By demonstrating how unfeelingly he dismissed and labeled the black inhabitants of his childhood world, Morris gives the reader an important insight into his felt reality. That is the word his younger self would have used. In deliberately employing it in his memoir, he is claiming this word and all that it evokes. He does this knowing that he is implicating his childhood self as a southern racist. Throughout the text, Morris takes his portion of the culpability for Jim Crow racism straight up and is slow to make excuses for his behavior.

Later on, the mature Morris makes his attitude toward his black neighbors more explicit when he recalls his impervious childhood sense that “the Negroes in the town were *there*: they were ours to do with what we wished.”³³⁸ Lillian Smith expresses a similar sentiment when she remarks that although her childhood was permeated with religion and a constant fear of hell and sin, she soon learned that abusing African Americans was not sinful. She recalls, “You know you will not go to hell if you push little colored kids into sandspurs (or later out of jobs) though you may go there if you steal a nickel or do ‘bad’ things or even think of them.”³³⁹ As it turns out, Morris’

³³⁸ Ibid. 78.

³³⁹ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton and Norton, 1994), 91-92.

childhood feelings about Jim Crow race rules and his perceptions of the black community were more complicated than the intermingled contempt and dismissal implicit in his nonchalant usage of the word “nigger.”

During his Mississippi childhood, Morris found the black community mysterious and alluring, but the adults in his life stopped him from interacting with African Americans in any context that even approximated social equality. When he was a child his mother forbade him from playing with black children, and as a teenager the local police consistently broke up the casual interracial football games that the local teenagers would organize.³⁴⁰ However, these attempts to enforce social segregation only heightened the mystery and appeal that the black community held for Morris. Early in the text he refers to, “that damp adventure and pulsing of blood of walking through niggertown alone.”³⁴¹ Morris and his friends found the racial “other” so intriguing that at about the age of thirteen he recalls that he and his friends “ ‘went Negro’ ... trying to broaden our accents to sound like Negroes... We consciously walked like young Negroes, mocking their swinging gait...”³⁴² The mature narrator doesn’t interject himself to comment on the significance of his attempt to emulate what he saw as distinctly black behavior. From his brief description, it is impossible to know to what extent their actions stemmed from admiration and how much came from a cruel desire to mock people who were so little valued by the white community. However, it seems likely that both impulses were represented in their childish game of imitation.

Morris gives his readers a sense of his ambivalence about blackness when he describes watching baseball games with his father at the black high school. He recalls,

³⁴⁰ Morris, *North Toward Home*, 17-18, 82.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 81.

“There was no condescension on our part, though the condescension might come later, if someone had asked where we had been. I would say, ‘Oh, we been to see the nigger game...’”³⁴³ His internal impulse to watch the black team play baseball out of curiosity or even out of support for the athletes became transformed externally (once Morris was asked to account for it) into disdain. He demonstrates a willingness to let societal expectations shape or modify his inner thoughts as well as determine the value of his experiences.

Morris’ feelings of interest in or respect for African Americans are fleeting. Unable to find a socially acceptable way to channel the natural feelings of camaraderie that sprang from living in such close proximity, he denies them. In one of the darkest passages in the text, he describes a capability towards violence that even his childhood self finds shameful. He recalls:

One summer morning when I was twelve, I sighted a little Negro boy walking with...his older sister...The little boy could not have been more than about three...

Just as he got in front of me, lurking... in the bushes, I jumped out and pounced upon him. I slapped him across the face, kicked him with my knee, and with a shove sent him sprawling on the concrete.³⁴⁴

When presenting this incident of childhood cruelty, Morris again resists the temptation to interpret his actions, to provide broad sociological explanations for why he unfeelingly harmed that African American toddler. In presenting the incident this way, he captures the felt experience of his Mississippi childhood. As a boy he acted on impulses he did not understand. After this incident he was left with intermingled feelings of exhilaration and shame, which were inexplicable to his childhood self.

³⁴³ Ibid., 81.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 77.

The voice of the mature narrator does interject itself to comment that his “conduct with Negroes...was a relationship of contrasts” (a statement made obvious by his evidence in the text). However he does not try to explain the root of his profound ambivalence.³⁴⁵ By presenting but not explaining his behavior, Morris captures how his childhood self felt. He experienced great swings of emotion about the southern racial system, which his erratic behavior was a response to. However, as a child he was not self aware enough to probe the causes for his actions or to reflect deeply on southern race relations. Rather he responded to the world as he found it. He had inherited a sense of racial privilege and entitlement, which justified all his behavior. He didn’t pursue the matter any further until he achieved geographical and emotional distance from his home.

Although race relations (and Morris’ accompanying implicit confessions of racism) is an important theme in the book, the memoir is not about race relations strictly speaking. Morris writes about his family, his love of baseball, his dating experiences, and his beloved dog among other things. The issue of race surfaces frequently because, after all, state sanctioned racism is the defining characteristic of Jim Crow. A sensitive memoirist trying to capture the spirit of his time could simply not avoid the subject. However, it comes into focus fleetingly and is lost again among fond recollections of Morris’ grandfather or of his love of the Mississippi landscape. In his childhood memories, all of these impressions are intermingled. While hatred of whites is the central focus of *Black Boy* memoir, race relations is not always central in *North Toward Home*. Morris bravely acknowledges that he too can be implicated for southern racism, but he does not pretend that this awareness haunted him a child. Nor does his future

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

enlightenment about racial issues dampen his other childhood memories or the love he feels for the state of Mississippi.

While Smith, as we shall see, endeavors to analyze the roots of southern racism, Morris first accepts Jim Crow values and later rejects them without an explicit critique. If *North Toward Home* were a work of fiction, it would likely include foreshadowing of Morris's racial conversion. Perhaps a dramatic sequence of actions would result in an epiphany for the protagonist accompanied by lyrical passages about the brotherhood of all humankind. Maybe a dream sequence would reveal that the narrator was subconsciously tortured by his southern racism and all that it entailed. There are any number of ways that an author of fiction could reveal the intellectual shift that took place in the Morris character.

However, because this is a memoir, because Morris is using literary art to capture his felt experience, he doesn't resort to such blatant fictional techniques--however satisfying they might be to a reader in search of dramatic structure and a plausible explanation for Jim Crow cruelties. A reader of his memoir in search of foreshadowing might note that as a child Morris had ambivalent feelings about African Americans. However, his pronounced tendency was to view the region's black inhabitants with amusement or scorn. His childish attitudes do not portend a racial awakening in the future. One might also note that Morris opens *North Toward Home* with a series of descriptions of his southern ancestors. His most revered ancestor was an uncle by marriage, Henry S. Foote, who defeated Jefferson Davis in a gubernatorial election before the Civil War and who steadfastly opposed secession. Is Morris subtly claiming a heritage of southern moderation? This may partially be the case; however, as a child,

Morris generally did not take the southern past seriously. In fact, he enjoyed tormenting his elderly great aunts by convincing them that the Yankees were returning. For the most part, the southern past doesn't serve as a source of inspiration but rather as raw material for practical jokes.

Morris unflinchingly acknowledges that at the age of seventeen he wanted to be a Mississippi planter, a fantasy made more concrete because his girlfriend—a blond majorette from his high school—was the daughter of a prominent local planter. Morris recalls:

I had my heart set... on entering Mississippi's educated landed gentry—by taking a degree at Ole Miss, as all my friends planned to do, and by returning to that plantation with my majorette, to preside there on the banks of the Yazoo over boll weevils big enough to wear dog tags [and] pre-Earl Warren darkies... I knew Mississippi and I loved what I saw.³⁴⁶

Morris ultimately abandons this daydream, instead leaving his native state to enroll at the University of Texas. In abandoning his earlier vision of himself he doesn't recall being propelled by intellectual curiosity or a desire to see a broader world. His father advised him to leave Mississippi in search of greater opportunity. However, it is unclear whether his father's advice alone was sufficient to transform his vision of his future life. Even in retrospect Morris isn't sure what made him leave Mississippi. He muses, "In trying to recapture a turning point in one's life at such an age, it is almost impossible to ascribe tangible motives to some great change in one's direction, to isolate a thought, or a decision."³⁴⁷ Whatever his motivations, his decision to enroll in the University of Texas was a fateful one.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 140-41.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 143.

The second section of *North Toward Home* is “Texas.” Morris describes his college days, which were characterized by his growing “acceptance of ideas themselves as something worth living by.”³⁴⁸ Morris’ intellectual awakening is swift, and the change he goes through is irrevocable. As editor of the university’s student newspaper, Morris gained the reputation as something of a social progressive for his willingness to challenge the administration and the social conservatism of the 1950’s. Shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, he daringly proclaimed that the University of Texas was ready for integration.³⁴⁹

After graduation, he studied at Oxford on a Rhodes Fellowship. Afterwards, he returned to Texas to write for and later edit the *Texas Observer*, a newspaper that had been founded in 1954 as an alternative to the mainstream press in Texas. While with the newspaper, Morris’ editorials championed the cause of the poor and racial and ethnic minorities. He also published an expose about the John Birch Society and provided relentless critiques of Texas politicians. This second section of *North Toward Home* demonstrates that Morris had indeed become (to use his language) a “converted southern boy.”³⁵⁰ In defiance of reader expectations, Morris isn’t explicit about the moment of his conversion. Fred Hobson observes that Morris never delivers “one great moment of awakening, a time when the magnitude of all those sins became clear.”³⁵¹ He does not offer the reader an altar call scene like the one he describes as a child when he went to the front of the church to repent of his sins and to be saved.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 150.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 177.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 378.

³⁵¹ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 92.

During the summer of 1955, right before the start of his senior year at the University of Texas, Morris returns briefly to Mississippi. He describes an event during that trip to demonstrate how his old childhood sensibilities collided with the new political and ethical beliefs he had adopted since leaving home. Morris arrived home to Yazoo City to find his neighbors embroiled in the fallout from the 1954 Supreme Court decision, which had declared segregated schools unconstitutional. Backed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, more than fifty of the town's black residents had signed a petition calling for the integration of the local schools. Infuriated, the white community began to organize in opposition.

One night Morris attended a meeting, which had been called to discuss strategies for preventing the integration of the local schools. So many of the town's residents turned out for the inaugural meeting of the White Citizen's Council that Morris was forced to park several blocks away. When he arrived at the meeting, tensions were high. The "pent-up hysteria" in the room made Morris uneasy.³⁵² As the meeting progressed, Morris' former neighbors made the decision to retaliate against the African Americans who had signed the petition by firing them from their jobs, refusing to sell them groceries, and evicting them from rental property. Some of those assembled preferred to resort to violence, and Morris heard the sounds of racial epithets and rebel yells. However, the majority of the crowd, the "respectable" members of society, overruled overt violence, preferring other forms of coercion instead. At one point in the proceedings, a man who owned a house across the street from the Morris home stood up and spoke. He expressed his approval for the spirit of the plans formulated that evening but expressed doubts about the constitutionality of those measures. However, the crowd was not in the mood for a

³⁵²Morris, *North Toward Home*, 178.

lesson about the U.S. Constitution that night, and Morris' neighbor was silenced. As Fred Hobson observes, if Morris had a single racial epiphany at all, he had it at that moment:

I sat there, quiet as could be. For a brief moment I was tempted to stand up and support my neighbor, but I lacked the elemental courage to go against that mob. For it *was* a mob, and I was not the same person I had been three years before. In the pit of my stomach, I felt a strange and terrible disgust. I looked back and saw my father, sitting still and gazing straight ahead; on the stage my friends' fathers nodded their heads and talked among themselves. I felt an urge to get out of there. *Who were these people?* I asked myself. What was I doing there? Was this the place I had grown up in and never wanted to leave? I knew in that instant, in the middle of a mob in our school auditorium, that a mere three years in Texas had taken me irrevocably, even without my recognizing it, from home.³⁵³

In that moment Morris faces the fact that he has changed. However, what brought about that change seems to be as unclear to him as it is to the reader. This was the nature of Morris' racial awakening, as he experienced it. He didn't have a single moment of revelation. Instead he had slowly, imperceptibly come to a new understanding of the world around him. To re-feel Morris' Jim Crow experience is to accompany him in the transformation from a child oblivious to racial injustices to a young man, newly sensitized but unable as yet to speak his newfound beliefs in the setting of his childhood world.

Although Morris' time in Texas had been fruitful professionally as well as intellectually, he never became as emotionally attached to the state as he had to Mississippi. However, he found that he was literally and figuratively unable to return home. In 1963, his burgeoning career as a talented young editor brought him to New York City. "New York," the last section of *North Toward Home*, recalls his experiences in the big city. The move had a tremendous impact on his career. He landed a coveted job at *Harper's*, becoming the youngest ever editor-in-chief of the magazine in 1967, the

³⁵³ Ibid., 179-180.

same year his memoir appeared. Morris discovered that his socialization into the ways of Jim Crow experiences had marked him, and he filtered all subsequent experiences through his conception of himself as a “converted southern boy.”

He found it difficult to conceive of himself both as a southerner and as a liberal on racial issues. In the world he had come from these two qualities seldom existed side by side and seemed in opposition. His decision to move to New York was one attempt to respond to this tension. He attempted to escape from these contradictions but found he could not. Morris figured himself as an exile, forever haunted by his past:

Mississippi may have been the only state in the Union (or certainly one of a half dozen in the South) which had produced a genuine set of exiles...alienated from home but forever drawn back to it, seeking some form of personal liberty elsewhere yet obsessed with the texture and complexity of the place from which they had departed...³⁵⁴

However, geographical distance from the South did not free Morris from the complicated feelings he had about the region. His choice of the title *North Toward Home* is far too optimistic. It is clear, even as he is writing his memoir that Morris hasn't managed to convince himself that he has found a new home. Biographical information about him reveals that Morris eventually made his peace with Mississippi after the Civil Rights Movement ended. In 1980 he returned to that state as writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi and lived in Mississippi for the rest of his life. The last chapter of the second volume of his autobiography, *New York Days* (1993) is aptly titled, “South Toward Home.”

While residing in New York, Morris continually had trouble resolving his complex and contradictory feelings about his native state. Morris records a conversation he had with historian C. Vann Woodward, another transplanted southerner, in which

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 320.

Woodward reveals that the racist indoctrination of his childhood continues to influence him in spite of himself. Woodward had participated in a civil rights march in Montgomery led by Martin Luther King, Jr. He sheepishly confesses, "I looked over to the side of the road, and I saw the red-necks lined up, hate all over their faces, distrust and misunderstanding in their eyes. And I'll have to admit something. A little part of me was there with them."³⁵⁵ Morris doesn't record his response to Woodward's confession or that of the southern novelist William Styron who was also present. However, it is clear that at least in some small measure Woodward speaks for all three of them.

Morris captures the felt experience of a southern liberal who cannot reject his fond childhood memories of Mississippi, his love for his family, and his sentimental attachment to his hometown. However, these memories are tainted by his awareness of the racial injustices of the region. For Morris these complex emotions about Mississippi are intermingled. To re-feel Morris' Jim Crow experience is to feel his ambivalence and his anxiety about his identity as a white southerner. At one point, he goes so far as to deny his southern roots in an attempt to escape his internal dilemma. One day when a New York editor asked him where he was from, he shocked himself by answering, Northern California.³⁵⁶

The virulence of northern racism does not escape Morris. However, as a southerner he feels a particular duty to speak out against racism. Again and again the issue resurfaces long after he has left the South. One day while riding the subway, Morris accidentally bumped into a black man. Their exchange was colored by their initial

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 399.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 363.

perceptions of each other, which were the outgrowth of their respective Jim Crow experiences:

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t have anything to hold on to. This is a hell of a way to live.”

“It beats them hills, don’t it?” the man said, in a strong Negro Southern accent.

“What hills?” I asked.

“Them hills you come from with that cracker accent.”

“If I wasn’t a liberal I’d hit you for that,” I said...

“Hell, ain’t *nobody* liberal,” the man said. “Who’s liberal?”

“Well, I’m not from the hills, I’m from Mississippi.”

“The *mud* then. Don’t this beat the mud?”

“The mud’s dried.”

“Wait till spring,” he said. “Then it’ll be mud again.”

We stared wordlessly at each other, two sons of the South...Finally, at the next stop, ashamed and a little guilty, I clawed my way out...³⁵⁷

In this impasse on the subway, Morris succinctly reveals the extent to which his Jim Crow reality had differed from that of the black man he encountered. Although they were both “sons of the South” as Morris observed, their inside perceptions of the Jim Crow South and thus of one another as southerners differed drastically. The black man on the subway was likely accustomed to being mistreated by southern white men, while Morris grew up expecting “that Negro adults, even Negro adults I encountered alone and had never seen before, would treat me with generosity and affection.”³⁵⁸ The Jim Crow experiences of one man primed him to expect hostility, while the other man’s experiences led him to expect deference.

When the African American man heard Morris’ southern accent, his reflexive response was one of hostility. He called Morris a “cracker” because his accent probably

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 348.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 78.

brought back memories of countless unpleasant encounters with other white southerners. He viewed Morris with suspicion and as guilty by association from the first syllable of the conversation. Morris, however, instead of playing the part of the sensitive white liberal he fancied himself, returned the man's hostility in kind. In the heat of the moment he seemed to forget that the man he was speaking with had likely suffered from Jim Crow injustices of the kind that Morris himself had meted out. Morris may temporarily have forgotten that in some respects the man's hostility may have been justified. Instead of empathizing with the man and feeling the weight of their collective history, Morris actually used his "liberalism" as a weapon. He is simultaneously using his politics as an excuse for not striking the man and at the same time letting him know that Morris believed he deserved to be struck. There is also an undertone of pride in Morris' announcement that he is a "liberal;" it is as if he hopes to shame the black man for not immediately recognizing Morris as a man of enlightened sensibilities. Morris' instinctively defensive and hostile reaction in this encounter seems to validate the black man's suspicion that there is no such thing as a "liberal." It no wonder then that Morris walks away from the encounter feeling "ashamed and a little guilty."

Just as Morris couldn't traverse the distance between himself and the man on the subway, so he found himself reluctant to correspond with his fellow Mississippian Richard Wright. Morris met Wright in Paris in 1957, but when Wright expressed interest in corresponding, Morris could not bring himself to write. Analyzing his hesitation he claims, "Partly my reluctance had been due to a lack of self-confidence, that a 'liberated' small-town Mississippi boy has anything unusual to offer this 'liberated' Southern Negro writer of an older generation. But also I think it was due to my feeling that Wright, in

many ways so admirable a man, was so different from me in temperament and loyalty and experience that we had almost nothing in common.”³⁵⁹ As peculiar as his explanation sounds for the fact that (at the beginning of his career) he refused to correspond with an internationally famous writer, it may be an accurate one. Morris sensed that the gulf between himself and Wright, specifically their different historical understandings of Jim Crow, could not be traversed. To try to bridge the gap would have been too painful for Morris.

Morris could never succeed in reconciling his Mississippi with that of the SNCC workers, his Mississippi with Wright’s Mississippi. What he sentimentally felt and what he intellectually knew continued to coexist uneasily. Forgetting himself when he met a SNCC worker from Texas one day, his parting words were, “Think of me next time you’re in Yazoo.” Unflinchingly she replied, “Think of it yourself, you son-of-a-bitch...It’s your hometown not mine.”³⁶⁰ As it turns out, Morris was not the only white southerner who felt conflicted about violating the region’s racial mores. The stakes for speaking out were high. Lillian Smith, one of the most outspoken critics of southern racism, also felt the tension between what her conscience dictated and what the southern social order demanded.

Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*

When reading *North Toward Home*, the reader has the impression that the issue of race keeps rearing itself almost against the author’s will. When reflecting on his past while living in New York, Morris somewhat plaintively observes, “And always there

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 383-384.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 381.

were the Negroes, the white Southerner's awareness of them... *Always the Negroes*..."³⁶¹

The burden of guilt and responsibility that Morris feels is sometimes too much for him. He would, if he could, rescue his childhood memories from the complicated southern racial system. Indeed he tries to do so in two subsequent memoirs, *Good Old Boy* (1971) and *My Dog Skip* (1995), where he idealizes his childhood, removing much of his implicit critique of southern racism. These later ventures into autobiographical writing are aimed at a younger audience, which might explain Morris' decision to steer clear of the painful and complicated issue of Jim Crow racism. However, these other memoirs might also represent a conscious and willful forgetting, Morris' attempt to rescue his version of Mississippi from that of the SNCC workers.

In contrast, in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, racism isn't just one theme that runs through her memoir. It is *the* theme. While the issue of race creeps into Morris' recollections almost in spite of himself, the opposite is true in Smith's case. She set out to write a book about race, and some autobiographical material crept in. The end result is a unique kind of life writing. Smith doesn't adhere to a strict chronology. She doesn't cover the typical autobiographical bases. The reader isn't presented with anecdotes about high school and college or stories about ambitions realized or thwarted. Smith only reveals autobiographical information concerning the way that she (and by extension other southerners) were socialized into a society that she believes is dysfunctional. Unlike Morris, Smith does not try to capture the sensibility of her childhood self. The voice of the mature narrator is the dominant one, and she filters her childhood experiences through an adult perspective.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 376-377.

Smith also endeavors to tell the biography of her region. She embeds her own life story within southern history, which she tells in bits and pieces in several chapters. She utilizes both sweeping narratives and parables to describe the southern past. Smith saw her rendering of southern history as an alternative to the nostalgic version of the southern past presented by her contemporaries, the Agrarians and Fugitive poets. Smith also analyzes the toll that racism had taken on many of the region's inhabitants, particularly on white women. According to Will Brantley, "Smith assumes Freud's role as psychoanalyst, as therapist, she isolates the sources of the South's psychosis in order to offer, if at times obliquely, a way of healing."³⁶² Smith interjects her own life story only by way of example, as a case study of the impact that Jim Crow mores had on all of the region's white inhabitants.

Smith is not coy about her motives in writing *Killers of the Dream*. She wants to indict southern pathology and to convince the region's inhabitants to mend their ways. Some readers of *Killers of the Dream* might view Smith's observations with suspicion because of her highly politicized agenda. Even to a greater extent than Wright, Smith makes it clear that she is writing a polemic. However, we must keep in mind that all memoirists are, whether or not they are consciously aware of this, waging a war for the historical memory of their readers. In a certain sense, Smith does her readers a favor by explicitly stating her motivations. Her interpretations of her culture and of her childhood are indelibly imprinted with her political position, and she is self aware enough to acknowledge this.

³⁶² Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 51.

Interestingly Smith does not appeal to white southerners, asking them to reform on purely altruistic grounds. She urges them to abandon the Jim Crow system because of the damage it does to the white as well as the black community. Fred Hobson has observed that “To a black reader of *Killers of the Dream*—as, indeed, with most white conversion narratives—the author’s thinking might have seemed somewhat self indulgent. That is, attaining psychic wholeness for whites sometimes seemed for Smith to be at least as important as attaining equal rights for blacks.”³⁶³ At one point Smith stunningly declares that southern women, “dimly realized” that the southern way of life “had injured themselves and their children as much as it had injured the Negro.”³⁶⁴

Like Wright, Smith puts her own personal experiences at the center of her understanding of Jim Crow, extrapolating from her own life story that southern racism had psychologically injured the white community. Wright also believed that both whites and blacks were damaged by the institutionalization of southern racism, but his sympathy is clearly with the victims of white oppression. Smith’s perspective is unusual due to her surprising assertion that whites and blacks had been equally victimized, and her Jim Crow memories must be understood accordingly. According to Smith, “what cruelly shapes and cripples the personality of one is as cruelly shaping and crippling the personality of the other.”³⁶⁵

Smith’s strong statements equating white and black suffering may, in part, represent a rhetorical strategy, a compelling argument to convince her white readers to mend their ways for their own good. However, this position also stems from Smith’s own Jim Crow experiences, the inside of her historical moment. Although she tries to

³⁶³ Hobson, 33.

³⁶⁴ Smith, 146-147.

³⁶⁵ Smith, *Killers*, 39.

imagine what impact Jim Crow must have had on African Americans, she cannot concretely know how the social reality of Jim Crow appeared from black perspectives. She does, however, know what toll Jim Crow took on her own development. She also knows—though less concretely—the strain that living under and maintaining the Jim Crow social order has had on her friends and family in the white community. In Smith's opinion, the impact has been devastating.

Although most of Smith's moral outrage is directed at state sanctioned southern racism, she is also critical of fundamentalist Christianity. The brand of religion that she was taught as a child placed an enormous emphasis on sin, particularly on sexual sins. Thus Smith and other children from her community learned that masturbation was a vile, if not unpardonable sin. However, mistreating African Americans, if at all sinful, was not a very serious infraction. According to Smith this skewed version of Christianity, which taught but did not practice the doctrine of loving one's neighbor, produced a generation of southern hypocrites. In her estimation, the separation of doctrine from practice caused the southern mind to "split." In her analysis the split was "hardly more than a crack at first, but we began in those early years a two-leveled existence which we have since managed quite smoothly."³⁶⁶

Smith singles out white women as among Jim Crow's most put upon victims. According to Smith, the relationships between white men and black women and white children and black mammy figures devalued white women, leaving them powerless and isolated. She extends sympathy to white women who, in her analysis, were figuratively put on figurative pedestals but stripped of actual power. She claims "all a women can

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

expect from lingering on exalted heights is a hard chill afterwards.”³⁶⁷ A number of questions, if not outright objections can be raised, to Smith’s depiction of white women as victims. Although there is almost certainly more than a kernel of truth in her observations, her overwhelming sympathy for the white woman also strips her of some of culpability for creating and maintaining the Jim Crow system.

Smith’s analysis also seems directed primarily at middle or upper class women with enough resources to pay a black woman to care for her children. Smith believed that, “Of all the humiliating experiences which southern white women have endured, the least easy to accept, I think, was that of a mother who had no choice but to take the husk of a love which her son in his earliest years had given to another woman.” This scenario was clearly not applicable to white women who worked, for example, in textile mills or as tenant farmers. Many of these women lacked the resources to provide many basic necessities for their children, and certainly weren’t in the economic position to hire nurses to care for them.

Regardless of the potential objections that can be raised to her analyses, Smith’s discussion of white victimization under Jim Crow is very revealing. When reading a memoir as a historical resource, we are generally not looking for a historical or sociological overview of a historical moment. Smith provides these things—albeit in a personal rather than a scholarly fashion. One could certainly read *Killers of the Dream* for the express purpose of evaluating her arguments on their merits. However, in general, the historical study of memoirs reveals how an author experienced, perceived, and remembered her historical moment. With this in mind, our primary question is not

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 143.

whether or not we agree with Smith. Rather we are interested in how she felt and what that tells us about Jim Crow reality from her perspective.

Lillian Smith was such an outspoken critic of southern segregation and racism that she was viewed with suspicion by many of the other so-called liberals of her day. When she began speaking out on issues of race in the 1930's southern "liberalism" was frequently defined merely as speaking out against racial violence or demanding that separate accommodations be actually brought up to the equality dictated by the "separate but equal" formula of the era. In contrast, Smith called for an immediate end to southern segregation. As a result of her uncompromising principles, she was ostracized by many members of the white community as well as by the literary establishment. She frequently complained that despite having written the best selling novel *Strange Fruit* (1944), she had garnered little interest or respect for her subsequent efforts.

When reading *Killers of the Dream* for historical insights and attempting to re-feel the past moment from Smith's perspective, one should keep in mind that she represents a political extreme for her day. That being said, her emphasis on the impact of Jim Crow on whites and her sometimes stereotypical depictions of black southerners might seem surprising to contemporary readers of the text. It is important to remember that in her case Jim Crow racism and her decision to speak out against it did take an enormous toll. Perhaps the extent of her own personal suffering explains her position that whites and blacks suffered equally under it. It is also significant that her unconventional decision to speak out against racism did not free her from maintaining many beliefs that indicate an unconscious racism on her part. Her complex and sometimes contradictory viewpoints are an outgrowth of her peculiar environment and represent one potential way white

southerners could have responded to Jim Crow. In our attempts to understand Jim Crow, it is too simplistic to label some southerners, like Smith, as racial “liberals” and others, like Percy, as “conservatives.” To accurately re-feel this past moment from these various perspectives, we must delve deeper and develop an understanding that embraces the true complexity of these individual points of view.

Although the primary goal of *Killers of the Dream* is to champion the cause of equality of African Americans, Smith’s descriptions of black people are frequently one dimensional and stereotypical. Unwittingly Smith makes a case for racial difference not completely unlike that advanced by proponents of the southern caste system. Thus at times Smith appears caught between what her conscience dictates and what her culture has taught her to believe. When describing the enslaved population she declares:

From all that we know of them they seem to have had, even as some do now, a marvelous love of life and play, a physical grace and rhythm and a psychosexual vigor that must have made the white race by contrast seemed washed-out and drained of much that is good and life-giving.³⁶⁸

Her sweeping generalizations about blacks on the plantation setting as well as during the Jim Crow era don’t end there. She claims that black children had “an exuberance, and a lack of sadism and guilt that no Anglo-Saxon group, to my knowledge, has ever shown.” Furthermore, she argues, “Throughout the ordeal of slavery they remained people of easy dignity, kindly, humorous... They developed severe faults, of course, during those centuries. Easy lying, deceit, flattery...”³⁶⁹ After Emancipation, Smith tells us that the mammy figure maintained a “biologically rooted humor.”³⁷⁰ As we shall see, Smith’s

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 117.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 118.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 129.

depiction of black southerners is quite similar to that of William Alexander Percy, an avowed southern conservative.

No doubt Smith intended her descriptions of African Americans to be positive and to elicit white sympathy for what she describes as a cheerful and long-suffering group of people. She also, if inadvertently, describes African Americans as somewhat simpleminded. Smith recalls knowing many “strong old women—the children of slaves,” whom she claims to have known intimately enough to be able to declare that they did not suffer “from that sickness of the soul we call ambivalence.”³⁷¹ It seems that Smith could not believe that these elderly figures she remembered from her childhood could have the some kind of complicated and sometimes contradictory thoughts and emotions that she had. If she could feel conflicted between love of her region and her criticisms of it, couldn’t these black women have felt similarly torn?

When wondering about how blacks might have dealt with Jim Crow cruelty, again we get insight into Smith’s perceptions of the world of Jim Crow and its inhabitants. She speculates, “I think maybe they drew a little circle around their small personal lives and tried not to look beyond... They lived in these small lives with work and raising their families and their hope of heaven and a struggle for education, and dancing and razor fights and dreams and laughter...”³⁷² In retrospect, and in light of Wright and Hurston’s memoirs, it seems that Smith suffered from a lack of empathetic imagination about felt experience from African American perspectives. By developing an understanding of the way that Smith misperceived her social reality, we can come to a deeper understanding of the behavior of other southern whites who held similar misperceptions.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 119.

³⁷² Ibid., 69.

From Smith's perspective, segregation, black disenfranchisement, and racial violence were wrong. However, she implicitly makes clear that she also believes there are inherent racial differences between whites and blacks. In her estimation many of these differences, such as mammy's "biologically rooted humor," are admirable, but there are differences nonetheless. To re-feel the inside of her historical moment and to view the social reality of Jim Crow from her perspective is to feel intermingled pity and condescension for the black population. Given that perspective, is it any wonder that Smith reserves much of her sympathy for the white population? In her estimation the white population is, after all, haunted by "ambivalence." This being the case, she might surmise that whites might actually suffer more than the blacks at whom racial violence and segregation were actually directed.

Like Morris, Smith views Jim Crow through a complicated set of contradictory thoughts, feelings, and loyalties. She loves her family and her community, and she hates racism. However, her family and her community are part of the racist social order that she despises. Can she find a way to despise racism but not her family and her community? This might explain why Smith makes the unsubstantiated and rather bizarre claim that "There are only two or three million of these racists—the other segregationists are simply conformists..."³⁷³ This is a distinction that Wright may not have been able to appreciate, but for Smith it is crucial. She is scornful of southern conformists but spares this group from the wrath she reserves for the actual racists. She chooses to believe, "Our mothers and fathers would have weakened, I think, had not religion and southern tradition kept them hard at the teaching."³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Ibid., 18.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

Smith uses her skills as a creative writer to distill the essence of her childhood experiences into a few revealing episodes, arguing that these and other memories are “never quite facts but sometimes closer to the ‘truth’ than any fact.”³⁷⁵ The episodes she recalls from her childhood are full of contradictory and confusing messages, which even as an adult she seems incapable of completely untangling. She remains perpetually mystified that:

...the mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their ‘place.’ The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that ‘all men are brothers,’ trained me in the steel-rigid decorums that I must demand of every colored male.
³⁷⁶

She expresses this same sort of puzzlement over the contradictory lessons that she learned as a child while interacting with other adults: “you knew your father’s friends did use the sweat box or stocks or whipping as punishment for the convicts leased out to them and these same friends gave you and your little sister candy and dimes.”³⁷⁷ Like Morris, Smith has so much difficulty reconciling these southern contradictions that at times she would prefer not to even try. She mourns, “There is too much that made me love the place where I was born, that makes me even now want to remember only the good things...”³⁷⁸ She has bravely chosen to speak out against racism at a high personal price.

For many years, Smith ran a progressive girls’ summer camp in the hills of Georgia. She recalls a conversation she had with one camper who had taken Smith’s lessons about racial tolerance to heart. In anguish she accuses Smith, saying, “You’ve

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 71.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 71.

unfitted us for the South. And, yet this is where we must live.”³⁷⁹ Smith expresses sympathy for the impossible position of the white, southern liberal.

As a child, Smith seemed to vacillate between guilt and an unthinking acquiescence in the dictates of the southern social order. Like Morris, Smith too was profoundly affected by evangelical Christianity as a child. Her religious training seems to have both heightened and confused her childhood feelings of guilt, which stemmed from not only from questions about Jim Crow racism but also out of anxiety about sexual behavior. Smith remembers attending revival meetings. A traveling preacher would prey upon the emotions of the audience, warning them about hell and damnation while luring them to the altar with carefully selected hymns. Smith repeatedly found the altar call irresistible:

I went up to the altar and stayed until the revivalist pried me off my knees, I was never convinced that my kneeling had effected a change in either my present or my future life. But sometimes, wanting it so badly, I lied and stood up with the rest when the evangelist asked all who were sure they would go to heaven to arise and be counted. My younger sister, more certain of her place in the family, was naturally more certain of her place in heaven, and rarely went to the altar. I remember how I admired her restraint.³⁸⁰

In this passage, Smith capitalizes on the connections she has previously made between religion and racism, between segregation and sex. She is aware that although she is particularly haunted by the complexity and contradictions surrounding these issues, not all southerners share her pain and confusion equally. She is tormented by the haunting fear that she has not been saved, and may indeed not be redeemable. Her sister, however, is not haunted by these fears and is able to resist the emotive release of the altar call.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 54.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 110.

Smith knows that her perceptions of Jim Crow, the inside of her historical moment, are different even from those of her sister, with whom she shared so much.

The mature narrator doesn't claim that she was riddled with guilt every moment of her childhood. She describes her Jim Crow experiences as two-leveled. Some moments she was riddled with anxiety and guilt, and at other times she navigated her cultural terrain without thinking, as if she were on autopilot. Much of the time she unthinkingly bowed to Jim Crow custom. She recalls, "I don't think we noticed the signs. Somehow we seemed always to walk through the right door. People find it hard to question something that has been here since they were born."³⁸¹ Jay Watson claims that Smith effectively demonstrates that southern "rituals become progressively internalized, white Southerners can practice segregation without the need for any legitimating ideas at all. They simply live their ideology, to their benefit and detriment at once, without thinking about it at all."³⁸²

The system of segregation left such a deep imprint on Smith that it served as a powerful metaphor in various aspects of her life. The metaphor of segregation was used to characterize the powerful societal taboo against masturbation and other kinds of sexual experimentation. Smith recalls learning, "Now, parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children."³⁸³ Smith's childhood was governed by the metaphor of segregation, and she spent her young life consciously and otherwise seeking

³⁸¹ Ibid., 57.

³⁸² Jay Watson, "Uncovering the Body, Discovering Ideology: Segregation and Sexual Anxiety in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*" *American Quarterly*, 49.3 (1997): 477.

³⁸³ Smith, *Killers*, 87.

socially sanctioned spaces to occupy. Using her skill as a writer, she demonstrated what a powerful controlling idea segregation was. Southern children were programmed to learn which spaces they could occupy. The terror of violating the strictures of segregation was an overwhelming one, and as a result anxiety about segregation spilled out beyond the southern racial situation.

How then if segregation proved to be such a powerful conceptual framework that Smith practiced it without thinking it, even applying the metaphor of segregation to matters that were not race related, was she able to think her way outside of it? Morris, as we saw, was not able to pinpoint a single moment of revelation in his growing criticism of Jim Crow. Watson argues that, "In [Smith's] world doors occasionally open. There are things people can do..." to escape the ideology of their culture.³⁸⁴ Smith identifies a number of events in her childhood that caused her temporarily to question the ethics of Jim Crow. The most powerful incident involved a young girl whom Smith's parents briefly considered adopting.

One day Smith's mother received word from some concerned townswomen that a white child had been found living with a black family. Against this family's wishes, young "Janie" was taken from their custody and brought to live with the Smith family. She remained there for three weeks, sleeping in young Lillian's bed, wearing her clothes, and sitting beside her at meals. Their developing friendship was interrupted when word came from an orphanage that in spite of Janie's light complexion, she had an African American parent. Immediately, Smith's mother decided that Jamie must leave the home.

Lillian was upset and confused at her mother's explanation that Janie had to leave because she was "a little colored girl." Young Lillian felt guilt both because she knew

³⁸⁴ Watson, 480-481.

that Janie was being mistreated and also because in living alongside a black child she had violated a strict social taboo. At the time, Smith felt compelled to believe that her parents were right, remembering, "It was the only way my world could be held together."³⁸⁵ Nonetheless, doubts lingered and multiplied and Smith gradually began to reject Jim Crow and to begin her efforts to change the way that her social reality was constituted.

As with Smith and Morris, Jim Crow race relations were a source of tremendous anxiety for William Alexander Percy. However, while both Smith and Morris interpreted their anxiety and ambivalence as a sign that something was wrong with the social order, Percy took the opposite approach. He believed that institutionalized white supremacy was the only effective way that the south could be governed. He attributed his unease to the fact that times were changing, believing that in many respects southern society had been steadily deteriorating since the end of slavery.

William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*

William Alexander Percy was born in 1885 into a prominent Mississippi family of plantation owners. His charismatic and well connected father, LeRoy Percy, had served as U.S. Senator. Like Morris and Smith, Percy embeds his own life story in the larger story of southern history. His version of the southern past is reminiscent of the Plantation School of thought. His ancestors were unfailingly brave and noble. In his imagination, the antebellum past represented a better era, and things had been fading ever since. He sadly observes, "Our Delta Culture stemmed from an older one and returned to it for sustenance and renewal, but it lacked much that made the older culture charming and

³⁸⁵ Smith, *Killers*, 37-38.

stable.”³⁸⁶ Although Percy owned a plantation at the time he wrote his autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*, and was thus very much a “planter” himself, he subtitled his memoir “Recollections of a Planter’s Son.” In doing so he emphasized not only the importance of family and historical connections to his own sense of himself but also his feeling of inferiority to past generations. It is as if his father and the male Percys that came before him were people of great accomplishment, and he-- even as a mature man-- could think of himself only as their “son” and not as an equal heir to the Percy legacy. In his mind, all the best things—including Percy males—had roots in an earlier era. He self deprecatingly refers to himself as something of a “sissy.”³⁸⁷

Percy assumes the pose of southern aristocrat, keeper of the antebellum legacy, one of the last gentlemen in the midst of a civilization on the decline. In this role, he takes on a series of obligations, particularly to the region’s black inhabitants. However, his idea of *noblesse oblige* is accompanied by an unexpected sense of himself as a victim. In a complicated way, he figures himself both as a patrician protector of the weak and as a victim to the caprices of the powerless members of the community. In a chapter of his memoir entitled “Race Relations” he argues that whites are the unmourned victims of the southern racial system:

A superabundance of sympathy has always been expended on the Negro, neither undeservedly nor helpfully, but no sympathy whatever, as far as I am aware, had even been expended on the white man living among Negroes. Yet he, too, is worthy not only of sympathy but of pity, and for many reasons. To live habitually as a superior among inferiors, be the superiority intellectual or economic, is a temptation to dishonesty and hubris, inevitably deteriorating. To live among a people whom, because of their needs, one must in common decency protect and defend is a sore burden in a world where one’s own troubles are about all any life can shoulder...And, last, to live among a people deceptively but deeply alien and

³⁸⁶William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 7.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 126,

unknowable guarantees heart-aches, unjust expectations, undeserved condemnations. Yet such living is the fate of the white man in the South. He deserves all the sympathy and patience he doesn't get.³⁸⁸

Like Smith, William Alexander Percy analyzes Jim Crow in terms of its impact on white southerners. While Smith concludes that racism and segregation psychologically damaged the whites who maintained these systems of oppression, Percy argues that being forced to live among African Americans is in and of itself at times an unbearable burden. Percy's depiction of life in the segregated South stands in direct contrast to Wright's description of black suffering and victimization. To Percy, white southerners are not oppressors but instead themselves victims of a subtle kind of oppression exercised by the region's black inhabitants.

Percy's surprising analysis differs not only from Wright's, but also stands in direct opposition to the historiographical literature about the time period. Historians have, of course, documented many of the difficulties faced by the southern planter class during the Jim Crow era. Plantation owners had to deal with labor issues, the ravages of the boll weevil, shortages of capital, and fluctuating cotton prices.³⁸⁹ These issues became more acute during the lean years of the Great Depression. However, these concerns pale in the historical literature of the period in contrast to discussions of lynching, debt peonage, and disenfranchisement that impacted the region's black inhabitants.³⁹⁰ In discussions of victimhood during the Jim Crow era, the historical consensus is unambiguously weighted on the side of the African American.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 298.

³⁸⁹ For a discussion of southern agriculture during this period, see Jack Kirby *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

³⁹⁰ See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and Pete Daniels, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990).

In reading *Lanterns on the Levee* for historical insights, what can we hope to extract from an account that seems so distorted in light of the historiographical literature? First of all, we must remember that the historical study of memoirs is not aimed primarily at uncovering “what actually happened” in the past. After all, it seems likely that a historian could get a better feel for what happened on Percy’s plantation by studying plantation records than by reading Percy’s self interested accounts. Instead the historical study of memoirs reveals “how it felt.” No one is better equipped to describe the inside of his historical moment, his thoughts and emotions about Jim Crow, than William Alexander Percy. While reading *Lanterns on the Levee*, we can hope to empathetically reconstruct Alexander’s felt experiences of Jim Crow. Not only are his thoughts and emotions partially constitutive of the historical reality of the time period, his version of Jim Crow also has had an impact on the way the region is remembered. Percy is self consciously engaged in the enterprise of influencing his readers’ collective historical memory not only of Jim Crow but also of the antebellum past. Although he is personally and politically motivated, we cannot conclude that his memories are pure propaganda, that he doesn’t believe what he is saying. Percy represents his world the way he saw it, and he was blinded to data that seemed to point to a different interpretation.

Percy’s memoir is primarily an account of his own life experiences, but occasionally he assumes the role of community spokesperson, a position he believes that he is both entitled and obligated to fill as a southern aristocrat. When describing the economic situation of the Delta he claims:

No class or individual has ever known riches. Some year the crop and price are good and we take a trip or sport an automobile or buy another plantation; most years the crop fails or the bottom drops out of the market and we put on a new

mortgage or increase the old one. Even then no one goes hungry or feels very sorry for himself.³⁹¹

This is the region as Percy wants to perceive it and the way he wants the world to see it. Although he claims to speak for the entire region with the collective “we,” it soon becomes clear that he is really only speaking of southern landowners, those in the position to buy yet “another” plantation when economic times are good. By shifting from the collective “we” to the implication that he is referring only to those who already own plantations, he shows that he could not be speaking for lower class southerners. Percy may indeed have shielded himself from the fact that many poor southerners did sometimes go hungry and as such were probably due a hearty dose of self pity. However, he could not be under the illusion that many members of these classes would ever be in the financial position to own an automobile or travel or own a piece of land of their own, let alone a plantation. This passage doesn’t even convincingly describe Percy’s own financial situation. By his own account, throughout his life, Percy had sufficient funds for education, travel, and to dole out to causes he deemed worthy. Percy may not have been rich by some standards, but for the standards of his region he stood out as prosperous indeed.

The fact that Percy claimed to speak for the entire region only to shift his commentary to refer to landowners alone is not surprising if we look at how Percy defined southern society. Percy is scornful of the poor white community, claiming “the virus of poverty, malnutrition, and interbreeding has done its degenerative work.”³⁹² He presents lower class whites as in every way “inferior to the Negro.” He implicates poor whites for lynchings and for excessive racial hatred, while portraying his class as the

³⁹¹ Percy, *Lanterns*, 24.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 20.

protector of the African American. Scott Romine as observed that although Percy exiles poor whites from his conception of southern community, he demonstrates an “inability to classify the Negro as an enemy.”³⁹³ Percy views patrician whites and blacks as locked into a symbiotic relationship, and he may very well mean to include the black population by association when he speaks of the southern community in collective terms.

His belief in this symbiotic relationship caused Percy to feel a profound sense of duty to the black population. He claimed, “Anybody who was anybody must feel *noblesse oblige*, must concern himself with good government, must fight, however feebly or ineffectually or hopelessly, for the public weal.”³⁹⁴ Because Percy felt only contempt for poor whites and thought that his own class was largely able to fend for itself, most of his charitable instincts were directed at African Americans. He viewed the black population with a complex set of emotions, feeling affection and revulsion, duty and annoyance, admiration and disgust. He is unabashed in his paternalistic racism, declaring:

I would say to the Negro: before demanding to be a white man socially and politically, learn to be a white man morally and intellectually—and to the white man: the black man is our brother, a younger brother, not an adult, not disciplined, but tragic, pitiful and loveable; act as his brother and be patient.³⁹⁵

He completes his depiction of African Americans as having “an obliterating genius for living in the present” and as being “simple and affectionate people whose criminal acts do not seem to convert them into criminal characters.”³⁹⁶ Percy’s black stereotypes bear certain similarities to Smith’s, demonstrating that both had internalized some of the ideas of blackness common in their culture. Smith’s observation that blacks

³⁹³ Scott Romine, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1999), 141.

³⁹⁴ Percy, *Lanterns*, 74.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, 300.

lack “ambivalence” seems to echo Percy’s observation that they live in the present.

Neither seems to believe that the black population can be as emotionally tortured as the white. Smith portrays blacks as loveable but with violent tendencies lurking underneath the surface. For her, razor fights represent escapism from Jim Crow realities. For Percy, who also assumes that blacks are affectionate and violent, black violence reveals their childlike nature.

It is significant that Smith and Percy draw on similar conceptual frameworks to describe the black community. They each had internalized their society’s racist views about African Americans. When interacting with black people, each saw only what their racist indoctrination taught them to see. However, due to their differing political orientations they draw on the same stereotypes to reach different conclusions. Smith describes African Americans as longsuffering, loveable and worthy of compassion and full inclusion into the community. Percy regards them similarly as loveable but also as inferior, in need of protection, and ill equipped for full citizenship.

Interestingly, in spite of his condescending descriptions of the black community, Percy demonstrates elsewhere that he closely identifies with and sometimes envies that community. McKay Jenkins has provocatively argued that “Blackness for Percy... stands for something of which he was somehow incapable, and which somehow he was forbidden from birth, warmth, love, emotional freedom... Percy’s imagining of blacks and joyful innocents speaks volumes about his own tightly wound existence.”³⁹⁷ Percy’s vision of the symbiotic relationships between white and blacks is not just a relationship of employee and employer. He also sees upper class whiteness and peasant blackness as a

³⁹⁷ McKay Jenkins, *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940’s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 88-89.

dichotomy of the intellectual and the emotive. Whites such as himself are duty bound to be the brains of the region, while blacks are given the more pleasurable job of expressing the emotions of the South. Percy, who views himself as stuck in the realm of duty, is envious of blacks who he believes dwell in the realm of feelings, who aren't bound by obligation but free to enjoy life. Percy lives in terror of modernity and is afraid that the old social order, the established racial relationships, are changing. He mourns, "In our brave new world a man of honor is rather like the Negro—there's no place for him to go."³⁹⁸

Needless to say, Richard Wright would not have recognized Percy's world. Reading *Black Boy* and *Lanterns of the Levee* side by side, it is not readily apparent that both authors are talking about the same historical moment and a similar geographical location. There are very few similarities in their depictions of their historical reality. Each responded to the concrete, outside reality of the same historical moment in different ways. Wright rejected the southern social order and fled from the South; Percy defended the southern way of life and devoted his life to attempting to maintain it. Each also generated a complex set of ideas and emotions in order to interpret their social world. These competing sets of ideas and feelings jointly constitute that reality. Furthermore, these different world views continue to battle one another for the way that their historical moment will be interpreted and remembered in the future.

Fear of modernity is one of the overwhelming themes in *Lanterns on the Levee*. Percy strives to defend his social order and to convince his readers to embrace his version of the South, but he does so from the viewpoint that the glory days of the region are already over. The golden era of southern history is located for Percy in the antebellum

³⁹⁸ Percy, *Lanterns*, 72.

past; what is left of that order is being threatened by industrialization, the mechanization of agriculture, and outside interference in southern labor and race relations. He mournfully proclaims, “Behind us a culture lies dying, before us the forces of the unknown world gather for catastrophe.”³⁹⁹ Percy finds that his ideas about duty and honor often conflict with the dictates of the modern world. Nowhere is the tension more acute than in his account of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927.

Inhabitants of the Delta region of Mississippi were accustomed to periodic springtime floods and had installed an extensive network of levees to contain the Mississippi. However, the flood of 1927 defeated those manmade structures and inundated the region. In April of that year, the Mississippi began to overflow its banks and then to break levees throughout Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. The citizens of the region desperately tried to contain the river, reinforcing the levees with sandbags. It was to no avail, the river flooded 27,000 square miles, displacing 700,000 people from their homes. Many towns were covered in ten feet of water.⁴⁰⁰ When it became clear that the floodwaters would reach Greenville, the town Mayor appointed Percy chairman of the local Flood Relief Committee as well as of the local Red Cross.

Percy’s first order of business in his new position was to see to the evacuation of those of the town’s white inhabitants who had not been able to leave in advance of the waters. Many were stranded on the second stories of homes, on trees, or on rooftops. Percy rounded up as many boats as he could and (with the help of local bootleggers and their motorboats) managed to safely evacuate Greenville’s white citizenry. His attention

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰⁰ See Pete Daniel, *Deep 'N As it Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

then turned to the black population. According to Percy, “There were seventy-five hundred of them... They were clammy and hungry, finding shelter anywhere, sleeping on any floor, piled pell-mell in oil mills or squatting miserably on the windy levee.”⁴⁰¹

The dilemma Percy faced was whether to evacuate the black population just as he had done with the whites or to set up a camp for them on the only bit of dry ground in the town, which was on top of the levee. Fearful of disease and concerned about the well being of these people put under his care, Percy decided to evacuate them. However, many local planters raised strong objections to the relocation of their labor supply. They were afraid that once their tenants, sharecroppers, domestic servants, and wage laborers left the area they would not return. Percy, however, remained firm. He recalls, “I insisted I would not be bullied by a few blockhead planters into doing something I knew to be wrong—they were thinking of their pocketbooks: I of the Negroes’ welfare.”⁴⁰² Holding firmly to his position, Percy arranged for boats to come and assist with the evacuation.

However, Percy’s father, the indomitable former Senator, suggested that Percy carefully weigh his decision and bring the matter before the local relief committee once again. Percy took his father’s advice, holding a meeting held a few days later. Much to his surprise, Percy watched as the committee members one by one recanted their former position, stating that the blacks must remain. Stunned, Percy remembers, “I argued for two hours but could not budge them. At the end of the conference, weak, voiceless, and on the verge of collapse, I told the outraged captains that their steamers must return empty.”⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Percy, *Lanterns*, 256.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 258.

After his father's death, Percy learned that the Senator had secretly canvassed behind his son's back, lobbying the committee members to change their positions and to jointly conspire to keep the town's labor supply trapped on top of the levee until the flood waters receded. Justifying his father's self-interested and treacherous behavior, Percy claimed, "He knew that the dispersal of our labor was a longer evil than the Delta flood."⁴⁰⁴ Just as young Lillian Smith told herself that her parents were right to send young Janie away, the adult William Alexander Percy crafted a story to justify his father's behavior. He even purported to believe it. However, his avowal that losing labor was a "longer evil" pales in comparison to his earlier stated outrage at the committee's change of heart. The decision to keep local blacks in the town when evacuation would have provided them with improved sanitary conditions, better accommodations, and higher morale, violated Percy's profound sense of *noblesse oblige*. Not only was he unable to act in what he believed was the best interest of the black community, but he was also faced with the realization that when push came to shove, his own father was far more self-interested than benevolent. This violated Will Percy's inflated sense of the nobility of the Percy family. If Percy had allowed himself to dwell on this, the impact would have been devastating.

Percy chose to ignore the disconnect between ideals of southern paternalism and the unjust treatment of the town's African American community. It was the only thing he could do to keep his sense of himself and his place in the community intact. Unable to assist local blacks, he turned his wrath against them instead, despairing at the manner in which they responded to their captivity. Even though Percy felt uneasy about the decision not to evacuate local blacks, he found himself unable to understand their collective

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 258.

dissatisfaction over conditions in the Red Cross camps. He maintained that, “they had no capacity to plan for their own welfare; planning for them was another of our burdens.”⁴⁰⁵ He expected easy acquiescence to his mandates, even if he was uncomfortable with them himself.

Percy’s description of life in the levee camps is at odds with the historical evidence on the subject. The historical study of *Lanterns on the Levee* demonstrates that Percy was blinded by his own class sensibilities as well as his guilt over having failed in his mission to serve as protector the black inhabitants. According to Percy,

The Negroes had behaved admirably during the first few weeks of the flood. The camp life on the levee suited their temperaments. There was nothing for them to do except unload their rations when the boat docked. The weather was hot and pleasant. Conditions favored conversation. They worked a little, talked a great deal, and ate heartily of food which someone else paid for, and talked at night.⁴⁰⁶

However, this situation soon changed, and changed inexplicably from the perspective of Will Percy. The black inhabitants of the Red Cross camp soon began refusing to unload the supply boat when it arrived in camp. As a result, local police rounded up several men, forcing them to unload the boat at gunpoint. In the process, one man refused to go and was shot by local police, causing an uproar in the black community. Percy called a gathering at a local church, scolding those assembled for the man’s death, claiming, “For four months I have struggled and worried and done without sleep in order to help you Negroes. Every white man in town has done the same thing...Because of your sinful, shameful laziness... one of your own race has been killed.”⁴⁰⁷ Despite his harsh condemnation, Percy was only able to convince four volunteers to unload the boat. He

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 267-68.

describes the volunteers as, “a friend of mine, a one-armed man, and two preachers who had been slaves on the Percy Place and were too old to lift a bucket.”⁴⁰⁸

Feeling bewildered and betrayed, Percy cannot understand the actions of the black community. Several weeks after this confrontation in the church, Percy resigns his position as head of the local relief effort, sailing the next day to Japan on vacation. He cannot reconcile the gap between his conception of *noblesse oblige* and his having failed the black community. He also cannot accept the fact that local African Americans do not seem to view him as their protector and defender. They do not even seem to believe that his intentions are good.

Percy finally concludes that the African Americans refused to unload the boat and showed other signs of resentment because of stories they read in the black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, which had criticized the relief effort. Percy claimed that “the Negroes at home read their Northern newspapers trustingly and believed them far more piously than the evidence before their own eyes.”⁴⁰⁹ It was inconceivable to Percy that local blacks might feel abused or betrayed by his decision not to evacuate them or that they might have legitimate complaints against the conditions in the camps. He also cannot conceive of the possibility that they were able to organize a local protest. Instead he feebly concludes that they were responding to stories originating in the north.

Two reports issued by the Colored Advisory Commission give glimpses into the black perspective of the conditions at the Red Cross camps during the 1927 flood. The reports were authored by Robert Moton, Booker T. Washington’s heir at Tuskegee. Moton was appointed by Herbert Hoover, chairman of the federal relief efforts. Much as Washington

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 268.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 264.

had done before him, Moton sought to stay in the good graces of powerful, white politicians. If anything, his reports minimize the poor conditions at the Red Cross camps. Nonetheless, Moton notes a number of shortcomings in the camps set up for the flood refugees. The most egregious violations of Red Cross policies concerned the distribution of food and other supplies. Moton claims that in a variety of instances local whites controlled the distribution of supplies. Sometimes African Americans were charged for Red Cross foodstuffs or made to work for them. In addition, they were not automatically issued supplies. Instead they had to apply to local landowners and ask for them, giving the landowners the power to stipulate conditions upon which the goods would be issued.⁴¹⁰

Thus, the black men whom Percy confronted in the church, labeling them as lazy and as having been duped by the northern press, were likely engaged in a legitimate protest against the unjust way that the Red Cross supplies were being distributed. Percy and Moton's account of the same historical moment are completely contrary. The historiographical consensus, however, is on the side of the African Americans. The extent to which Percy was responsible for the abuses in the system is less clear. Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that Percy knew, and disapproved of, the fact that some white landowners were controlling the distribution of Red Cross supplies. However, many of the criticisms printed against Percy in the *Chicago Defender* (such as the allegation that he withheld supplies from families without a male head of household) were untrue and unjustly damaged his reputation.

⁴¹⁰ Full texts of Robert Moton's reports to Herbert Hoover on June 13, 1927 and December 12, 1927 can be found at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/filmmore/ps_moton1.html.

This impasse between Percy and the African American community reveals the chronic lack of trust between the white and black communities. It also demonstrates the extent to which internal emotions and thoughts can influence one's perception of a historical moment. It is clear that Percy's inside experience of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 bore little resemblance to the event as interpreted by Robert Moton or any number of the African Americans in the Greenville Red Cross Camps.

Elsewhere Percy demonstrates a dim awareness that he doesn't understand the inner workings of black people nearly as well as he purports to elsewhere. Early in the text, Percy describes one of his early teachers, a red head, who he claims had the temperament commonly associated with his hair color. In that context, he offhandedly remarks on the "Negro's interior," stating, "I am told there is no relation between what you see of him and what there is of him."⁴¹¹ However, this isn't an observation that Percy takes much to heart. He seems content throughout most of the text to make generalizations about black behavior and then to appear injured or confused when his generalizations are not born out. Percy's racial ideology is so controlling, that it persists even when the facts don't support his belief.

Like his fellow Mississippian Richard Wright, Percy recounts an episode that brilliantly demonstrates southern irony. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wright toys with the literary device of irony. He suggests that because he is initially unable to understand this complicated form of southern communication he must learn to say one thing and mean another. This tool is necessary for survival in the South. Had Wright chosen to articulate his anger and resentment towards the white community, he would not

⁴¹¹ Percy, *Lanterns*, 84.

have lasted long. Ultimately he learns how to communicate ironically and uses this newfound knowledge to facilitate an escape from Jim Crow Mississippi.

Percy hears blacks on his plantation speaking with southern irony, but he does not understand their true meanings. Ford, his black servant, likely acting out of intermingled pity and malice, explains the exchange to him. Percy uses his literary skills to powerfully describe his initiation into an understanding of southern irony. He does so at his own expense, since he turns out to be the butt of the joke, the unsophisticated dupe who is unable to grasp the utterer's true meaning.

In late autumn we drove to the plantation on settlement day. Cotton had been picked and ginned, what cash had been earned from the crop was to be distributed. The managers and bookkeepers had been hard at work preparing a statement of each tenant's account for the whole year. As the tenant's name was called, he entered the office and was paid off. The Negroes filled the store and overflowed onto the porch confabulating. As we drove up, one of them asked: "Whose car is dat?" Another answered: "Dat's *us* car." I thought it was curious they didn't recognize my car, but dismissed the suspicion and dwelt on the thought of how sweet it was to have a relation between landlord and tenant so close and affectionate that to them my car was their car. Warm inside I passed through the crowd, glowing and bowing, the lord of the manor among his faithful retainers... As we drove off I said:

"Did you hear what that man said?"

Ford assented, but grumpily.

"It was funny," I continued.

"Funnier than you think," observed Ford sardonically.

I didn't understand and said so.

Ford elucidated: "He meant that's the car *you* has bought with *us* money. They all knew what he meant, but you didn't and they knew you didn't. They wuz laughing to theyselves."⁴¹²

Instead of absorbing the lesson of southern irony and realizing what a gulf exists between his understanding and experiences of the historical reality of Jim Crow and that of the laborers, Percy reacts by feeling injured and betrayed. By the standard of the time,

⁴¹² Ibid., 291.

Percy was a good landlord. He did not manipulate the books to cheat his tenants and sharecroppers at harvest time or overcharge his tenants at the plantation commissary. He helped many of them buy land. He also spoke out against lynching and police brutality.⁴¹³ As his nephew, Walker Percy, observed, such behavior branded him as a “nigger lover” in the eyes of his white contemporaries.⁴¹⁴

Percy craved respect for his paternalistic virtue, and was deeply hurt when it was not forthcoming. He was so imprisoned in his own world view that he could not understand that his tenants might have reasons to resent even a good landlord. According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Well meaning as Will’s philanthropy was, it could not replace genuine independence.”⁴¹⁵ A historical study of *Lanterns on the Levee* reveals not only Percy’s felt experience of the past but also the extent to which he was incapable of imagining another way that Jim Crow could be experienced. Early on in the text, Percy recalls that as a child he once told a priest that he was unfit to take communion. The priest had little time for his childish sense of piety and gave him communion anyway. Percy remembers, “it never crossed my mind I wasn’t right. It never does.”⁴¹⁶

Percy lived his life professing this same kind of certainty. Although his autobiography reveals moments of doubt or hesitation, he quickly rids himself of any second thoughts and lets his notions of honor and southern tradition guide him. For Smith, doors occasionally open that allow one to gain some perspective and to question the structure of the social world. However, when these doors begin to swing open in Percy’s mind, he quickly slams them shut.

⁴¹³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 263-270.

⁴¹⁴ Walker Percy, “Introduction,” *Lanterns on the Levee*, xiii.

⁴¹⁵ Wyatt-Brown, 267.

⁴¹⁶ Percy, *Lanterns*, 88.

Because Percy conceives of himself as a champion of the black underclass while the black community often seems reluctant to afford himself that status, he thinks of himself as underappreciated and misunderstood. Such feelings lead him to the conclusion that southern whites deserve sympathy. He describes himself as a champion of the weak who is himself often at the mercy of those whom he is championing. When describing his relationship with his servant Ford, he confesses, "In the South every white man worth calling white or a man is owned by some Negro, whom he thinks he owns... Ford is mine."⁴¹⁷ Emotionally at least, Percy does seem to be at Ford's mercy.⁴¹⁸

One day Ford strolled into the bathroom while Percy was taking a shower and nonchalantly remarked, "You ain't nothing but a little old fat man... Jest look at your stummick."⁴¹⁹ Flabbergasted that Ford isn't showing him the kind of deference he expected and humiliated by the revelation that Ford perceives him as merely a middle age man rather than as the benign lord of the manor he fancied himself, Percy fires Ford. However, their relationship does not end there. Percy sends Ford to school for mechanics in Chicago and afterwards continues to accept his long distance phone calls asking for money. Percy does so because he persists in believing that "Ford is my fate."⁴²⁰

White Perspectives on Jim Crow as revealed by Morris, Smith, and Percy

While Willie Morris was at Oxford studying under his Rhodes Fellowship, he concluded a paper on the English Reform Act of 1832 by stating, "Just how close the

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁴¹⁸ Many critics have noted the homoerotic overtones of many passages in *Lanterns on the Levee*, including Percy's descriptions of his relationship with Ford. University of Massachusetts, Boston history professor (and Percy family member) William Armstrong Percy claims that William Alexander Percy and his valet Ford had a sexual relationship. See "William Alexander Percy (1885-1942): His Homosexuality and Why it Matters" by William Armstrong Percy in *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, Peter Howard ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

⁴¹⁹ Percy, *Lanterns*, 287.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 296.

people of England came to a revolution in 1832 is a question that we shall leave with the historians.” His tutor responded to Morris’ rather inconclusive analysis by remarking, “But Morris, we *are* the historians.”⁴²¹ That admonition fueled him as he wrote *North Toward Home*, no doubt inspiring him in his scrupulous honesty in describing his unthinkingly cruel racist behavior as a child.

Smith and Percy also figure themselves not only as chroniclers of their own lives but also as historians of their region. All three memoirists imbed their life stories in the larger narrative of southern history. Morris recalls a history of southern moderation. Smith’s version of southern history shows how African Americans were systematically excluded and injured by calculating whites who damaged their own psychological health in the process. Percy writes about a glorious antebellum past populated by contented slaves and by benign and intelligent slave owners. These memoirists are fighting for the historical memory not only of their own lives but of the South as a whole.

All three love the South. Morris and Smith regard it as loveable and flawed. Percy sees the South as undergoing a period of decline from its former glory but also as unfairly vilified and misunderstood. All three seek to complicate the version of the South as a backwoods full of victimized blacks, unthinking whites, and lynch mobs. Morris does so by describing pleasant childhood memories and later by exposing northern racism. Smith delicately argues that most whites aren’t racists but rather conformists. Percy figures himself and his class as enlightened aristocrats looking out for the best interests of the region’s black population.

Smith and Percy characterize white southerners as victims, a trend that is not represented in the historiography of the era. Smith claims that white southerners are

⁴²¹ Morris, *North Toward Home*, 195.

victims of a debilitating system of racism that her generation inherited but did not create. Her analysis becomes surprising when she claims that whites were as victimized by Jim Crow as blacks were. Percy goes to yet another extreme when he claims that upper class whites such as himself were the victims of an ungrateful and brutish black population. Morris does not dare present himself as a victim, writing as he is in 1967, just after the close of the nonviolent phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Rather he describes himself as a reformed perpetrator. When confronted with the media coverage of civil rights activities or of urban rioting he painfully felt, “they remained with me not in righteousness, but in simple horror; they obsessed me not merely on their own terms, but out of agonies I had seen in my own past....these images were part of me; I could not say I was innocent of them.”⁴²²

These three memoirs reveal that white conceptions of Jim Crow reality were varied, contradictory, and sometimes as at odds with one another as Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston’s Jim Crow memories. Morris saw himself as a reformed perpetrator of Jim Crow racism. Smith saw herself and other southern whites as both victims and perpetrators, while Percy claimed the complicated status of both protector and victim of the African American population. Confusion, anxiety, and mixed messages dominate all three memoirs, revealing that these white memoirists were not any more at peace with the Jim Crow system than Wright or Hurston.

One of the most compelling historical insights that can be gleaned collectively from these three memoirs is that there is no single Jim Crow experience, nor is there a single white Jim Crow experience. Each individual’s experiences are themselves too conflicted, too ambivalent to be described in a singular fashion. For example, Percy can’t

⁴²² Percy, *Lanterns*, 377.

fill the role of the stock character of “southern reactionary.” *Lanterns on the Levee* reveals ambivalences lurking behind his racial ideology. The extent to which he is genuinely hurt by the behavior of the black people he dubs as inferior is baffling and complicated, the stuff of real life rather than of historical fiction populated by historical “types.”

Morris, Smith, and Percy, regardless of their respective political positions, all demonstrate an inability to empathetically connect with the black population. Their inside realities, their thoughts and emotions, impact the way they view the outside reality of Jim Crow. Morris reveals the extent to which he feels alienated from the black population in his encounter with the black southerner on the New York subway. Smith reveals her lack of empathetic imagination when she resorts to stereotypical ways to describe black southerners. Percy, to an even greater extent, draws on internalized, stereotyped ideas about blackness to explain black behavior.

To come to a greater historical understanding of Jim Crow, we must be able to vicariously experience Wright’s anger and fear, Hurston’s joy and her ambivalence, Morris’ guilt and his fond childhood memories, Smith’s love of her region and her simultaneous hatred of racism, and Percy’s intermingled feelings of power and responsibility and powerlessness and despair. The result is a complex portrait of the era, which defies easy generalizations about the “black experience” or the “white experience.”

CONCLUSIONS

“THE MISSISSIPPI THESE YOUNG PEOPLE TALKED OF WAS A VERY DIFFERENT PLACE”

The historical study of this handful of memoirs written about the Jim Crow era reveals that there is no singular Jim Crow experience. There is no god’s eye perspective, no disinterested account of what really happened during the era. Although the memoirists under discussion in this dissertation corroborate one another on the broad outline of what the Jim Crow era was like—on what the general rules were that governed the existing racial order—their accounts differ in significant ways. However, each Jim Crow experience represented in these memoirs is a valid one. These varied perceptions, misperceptions, thoughts, and feelings about Jim Crow are all part of the historical reality of the era. To understand Jim Crow, we must endeavor to re-feel the historical moment from different points of view. The core contention of this dissertation is that the complexity of what the universe looked like from one perspective can be captured more fully in well-crafted, literary memoirs than in any other single historical resource.

Close readings of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Zora Neal Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on the Road* reveal that easy generalizations about the “black experience” do not do justice to the complexity of the felt experience of that historical moment. Wright’s decision to emphasize the impact of white racism on his life and Hurston’s surprising decision to sidestep the issue of race whenever possible result in different depictions of what life was like for African Americans during the era of segregation. We much keep in mind that each memoirist’s response to and memories of Jim Crow are valid ones.

As critical readers of these autobiographies, we are charged with the responsibility of engaging with these texts—questioning memories and motives and asking to what extent these accounts are typical. However, we cannot simply dismiss memoirs that challenge the historiographical consensus. Nor can we conflate our definition of a typical experience with criteria for identifying a valid point of view. As I observed in a previous chapter, Hurston’s decision to deemphasize racism flies in the face of the historiography of Jim Crow. Nonetheless her memoir represents one of the ways that Jim Crow was experienced and remembered.

If Hurston’s perceptions of the impact of Jim Crow racism seem too rosy to some, Wright’s may correspondingly seem too grim. When talking about large groups of people, such as the “black community,” historians must necessarily generalize. However, in particular examples, in individual life stories, many of these generalizations break down. As readers of Wright and Hurston’s accounts, we must try to determine to what extent the stories they tell are calculated to achieve a particular effect and to what extent they represent an accurate assessment of how the author experienced a particular historical moment. However, we are left with the fact that motivations and memories, thoughts and emotions, past realities and the writer’s present one, are hopelessly intertwined. In the end, no one is a better authority on what Jim Crow felt like than the people who lived in that reality. However complicated and qualified their recorded memories might be, they are the best access that we have to this past reality, to the felt experience of a particular historical moment.

Memoirs written by Willie Morris, Lillian Smith, and William Alexander Percy reveal that there was no single “white” Jim Crow experience either. These memoirs

reveal that life as a member of the upper caste or even of the upper class during the Jim Crow era was not altogether blissful or carefree. All three white memoirists express anxiety about the Jim Crow social order. Smith and Percy even go so far as to declare that whites had been victimized by the system of segregation. This stunning characterization of white southerners as victims of the Jim Crow system does not match the historical consensus. In almost every conceivable measure of oppression (in terms of political participation, living conditions, socioeconomic status etc.) African Americans were clearly on the receiving end of Jim Crow brutality in its various manifestations. However, to imaginatively re-feel Jim Crow reality from the perspective of these white southerners, we must try to understand why they might have felt victimized.

Empathetically connecting with the Jim Crow experiences of say, William Alexander Percy, is not the same thing as endorsing his point of view. Although Percy felt anxious and uncomfortable about the state of southern race relations (indeed he longed for the glory days of the antebellum slave system), the hard, historical evidence makes his claims of victimization seem ludicrous in contrast to the lynchings, disenfranchisement, and impoverishment of many of his native Mississippi's black inhabitants. Nonetheless we must endeavor to understand how Percy perceived his world if we are to understand his actions, and if we are to comprehend important aspects of the social reality of Jim Crow. Whether or not we like Percy or agree with him, his experiences are partially constitutive of his moment in time.

The case of Percy and Smith illuminates another insight about how our historical perspectives are enriched when we attempt to vicariously experience the past from a number of different viewpoints. As discussed in the last chapter, Percy and Smith

embraced similar stereotypes about the behavior and character of African Americans. Both believed (consciously in the case of Percy and unconsciously in the case of Smith) that there were inherent differences between whites and blacks. However, Smith manipulated these black stereotypes to make the case that blacks were loveable people who had been grossly abused by the Jim Crow system and deserved political and social equality. Percy utilized similar stereotypes to make his case that African Americans were childlike, simpleminded, and in need of white guidance.

These contradictory conclusions drawn from the same misperceptions about black people reveal what a complex task it is to endeavor to understand a particular historical reality. Both Percy and Smith had accepted certain ideas about blackness, which were common currency in their society. However, they manipulated these ideas to different ends. In doing so, they demonstrate the extent to which they were both products of their society. In some ways they were unable to think outside of the frameworks available to them. However, simultaneously they were also at work constituting their social order, putting their own particular shapes on these ideas and launching them into the world in an attempt to influence popular opinion and also the way that Jim Crow would be remembered. Using their skills as creative writers, they reveal just how complicated their lived experience was as they reflect points of view common in their society at the same time that they help shape the social world they inhabited. Simultaneously they are responding to and creating their social world.

When reading Wright, Hurston, Smith, Percy, and Morris side by side, it becomes vividly clear that the world looked quite different from each person's perspective. Willie

Morris' epiphany that his Mississippi bore little resemblance to the Mississippi African American civil rights workers knew has far reaching implications. He realized:

The Mississippi these young people talked of was a different place from the one I had known, the things they said were not in context with mine; it was as if we were talking of another world—one that *looked* the same, that had the same place names, the same roads and rivers and landmarks, but beyond that the reality was awry, removed from my private reality of it.⁴²³

Morris eloquently sums up one of the problems of historical interpretation. There is no such thing as an objective account of a particular time or a particular place. Different observers of the same moment in time frequently perceive radically different realities. Morris' Mississippi and the other Mississippi were both part of Jim Crow as it was experienced, and as we endeavor to understand this past moment, we must attempt to vicariously re-experience both.

Morris' observation is remarkable partially because he was able to reach that conclusion at all. Many historical agents are so blinded by their particular perceptions that they are unable to recognize that the world looks different from other points of view. We see evidence of this in Percy's account of the Mississippi River flood. When he was absolutely unable to recognize that the African American refugees from the flood had any legitimate grievance about the way they were treated during the Red Cross relief effort. Both Percy and the black community felt abused and misunderstood during the course of their interaction. Neither side was able to understand how the other side felt, how the situation appeared from another perspective. They each had dramatically different interpretations of the same historical moment, and the end result was an impasse.

The historical study of memoirs, the comparison of many different accounts of a historical moment, reveals just how multi-faceted social realities are. We must re-feel the

⁴²³ Morris, *North Toward Home*, 380.

past moment from Percy's perspective and from the perspective of the refugees on the levee. In historical hindsight it is possible to see the events surrounding the Mississippi River flood with a certain degree of objectivity. Indeed historical census seems to have fallen on the side of the black community in the dispute over "what really happened." However, if we are to understand why an agreement was not reached, we need to understand that moment from Percy's point of view as well.

Understanding the Jim Crow social order is a complicated undertaking. Despite some similarities in each of the memoirs under consideration here, the fact remains that there was enormous disagreement concerning what life was like in the era of Jim Crow. If we were to multiply the number of memoirs analyzed, the results would be the same. There is no single Jim Crow experience, but a multi-faceted one, represented by the points of view of everyone who lived during that era. Unfortunately, we do not have access to testimony from even a fraction of the people who comprised the world of Jim Crow. However, through the vehicle of the literary memoir, we have multi-layered, complex, contradictory portraits of the era from a variety of different points of view. A close study of these memoirs gives us a taste of the rich and complicated historical reality of that era.

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