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An Angle of Vision: American Southern Cosmopolitanism 1935-1974

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As they took stock of the ways that the Great Migration and America's post-war global role were changing the South, Richard Wright, Carson McCullers, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray crafted narratives that articulated a particular perspective on the South. These writers dreamed of putting the regionally distinctive characteristics that they found valuable in the South into conversation with a sense of expansiveness and possibility, one that they associated with a migratory and increasingly globally-connected nation. In this project, I examine these southern cosmopolitan negotiations in Wright, McCullers, Ellison, and Murray's southern narratives, and I argue that these writers are crucial to our understanding of the post-migration South in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Introduction: The Southern Magnet and the Cosmopolitan Angle

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson quotes Eddie Earvin, a black Mississippian who left for Illinois in 1963, that leaving the South “was like getting unstuck from a magnet.”¹ For many black and white southerners then and now, the South is a place to become unstuck from—a distinct part of the United States whose legacy of racial prejudice, poverty, and resistance to change many southerners struggle to leave behind. But the South also continues to occupy a unique place in the American consciousness, one of another kind of resistance: to cultural homogenization and to the individual isolation that often accompanies modernity. The South often functions as an abject other to the nation as a whole, but its regional particulars and community structures also exert a profound pull on southerners and non-southerners alike.

This project is the story of a group of writers who explored the tension between becoming unstuck from the South and remaining stuck to it, during a period when the very notion of southern identity was becoming reconfigured. As they took stock of the ways that the Great Migration and America’s post-war global role were changing the South, Richard Wright, Carson McCullers, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray came to see southern identity from a particular perspective. This was a perspective that Richard Wright called his “angle of vision,”² and it was one in which southern identity was revealed to be cosmopolitan in its negotiation between region and world. The “southern

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 221.

² It was a phrase he used often throughout his writing career, as I will discuss in the first chapter.

cosmopolitan” intersections in these writers’ narratives are crucial for our understanding of the way that the South became transformed into a fluid, negotiated, and transnational space over the course of the twentieth century. But perhaps most importantly, the negotiations of regional identity within a global context that these writers engaged in serve to illustrate the contemporary meaning of cosmopolitanism—for the South, for the United States, and for the world.

Southern Mobility

The South today remains in many places a bastion of social conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and right-wing politics. But as Donald M. Nonini argues, the current South is also suffused with intersections between regional and global influences, ideas, people, and economies. In many ways, the South has become a transnational space, “one geographical terminus for a multiplicity of transnational itineraries of persons, groups, and images moving back and forth between southern locales and offshore communities.”³ Today’s South is characterized as much by “these itineraries, the sites along them, and the processes of mobility of people and images they trace out” as by its resistance to change.⁴

But if the South has come to be characterized, at least in part, by “mobility,” we should recognize that this development occurred not merely because of the South’s current manifestation as a hub for international investment and as a terminus for flows of

³ Donald M. Nonini, “Creating the Transnational South,” in *The American South in a Global World*, ed. James L. Peacock, et al (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 251.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

information and labor. The Great Migration of blacks and many whites out of the South and into other parts of the nation over the course of the previous century helped to encourage a breakdown in the certainties of what “southern” meant; the post-World War II expansion of America’s military industrial complex and the nation’s assumption of the role of global military and economic superpower also served to destabilize many southerners’ sense of themselves as distinctly regional actors at odds with a larger national configuration.

The notion of a South that is fluid as much as it is fixed has become central to the current critical dialogue about the South. Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer argue that the collection of states that comprise the historic South constitute “a porous space through which other places have always circulated,”⁵ and Edward Ayers points out that “there was never a time when Southern culture developed secure from the outside, when people knew just where the borders were, when people knew just what the South was and was not.”⁶ Rather, “the very story of the South is a story of unresolved identity,” a story that emerged in a geographical area that “was not a fixed, known, and unified place but a place of constant movement, struggle, and negotiation.”⁷

But even if the South has been “unfixed” throughout its history, it was the influence of the twentieth century Great Migration and of emergent postwar globalization

⁵ Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, “Preface: Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies,” *American Literature* 78:4 (December 2006): 679.

⁶ Edward L. Ayers, “What We Talk About When We Talk About The South,” in *All Over The Map: Rethinking American Regions*, ed. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, et al (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

that served to reveal the South, to southerners and non-southerners alike, as a far less parochial, far less bounded, and far more complicated place than it had seemed to be. Over the course of the twentieth century, southerners came to recognize the “negotiation” and “fluidity” that was always latent within southern history and culture, and to see such concepts as essential components of a southern identity that is as cosmopolitan as it is regionally resistant.

What Cosmopolitanism Is

“Cosmopolitanism,” as a term, has a long history. We often think of it in terms of its Greek roots “cosmos” and “polis”—“world” and “citizen”—and thus a “cosmopolitan” is “a citizen of the world.” But although cosmopolitanism might be an ideal of “global citizenship” for some, in this project I will argue for cosmopolitanism less as a designation of a political or social ideal than as a description of a cultural process. Kwame Anthony Appiah makes this point, when he argues for cosmopolitanism as something that happens when people make use of their local particulars in an environment in which global presences have become inescapable. Appiah acknowledges that some local practices—circumcision for men is one of the examples he uses—are abhorrent and anathema to many people around the world, but are equally accepted and celebrated by many others. For Appiah, the value of the cultural practice itself is not the point, because

what makes conversation across boundaries worthwhile isn’t that we’re likely to come to a reasoned agreement about values. I don’t say that we can’t change

minds, but the reasons we exchange in our conversations will seldom do much to persuade others who do not share our fundamental evaluative judgments already.⁸

What Appiah wants is for people with otherwise irreconcilable local values to learn to share in the same global environment or participate in the same global conversation: “conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another.”⁹ The point of cosmopolitanism is not to reach some ideal of urban progressivism, but to engage in an active process of exchange between practices and beliefs that people identify as “rooted” with those values of “expansiveness” and change that they recognize as products of a global environment.

Ulrich Beck makes a similar point, when he argues that the increasing interconnectedness of world capital markets, international flows of people, and global exchanges of culture are examples of contemporary “cosmopolitanization.” This is “a process in which the universal and the particular, the similar and the dissimilar, the global and the local are to be conceived, not as cultural polarities, but as interconnected and interpenetrating principles.”¹⁰ We might say, then, that cosmopolitanism is what happens when people find themselves negotiating their senses of themselves as “local subjects” with their increasing cognizance of their participation in larger, “global” networks and exchanges. Cosmopolitanism is not a state one reaches after having made some linear movement from “rural” to “urban” sophistication, nor is it an exchange of “parochial”

⁸ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Norton, 2006), 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 72-73.

boundedness for some larger, “expansive” vision of broader horizons. To be a cosmopolitan is to be involved in an act of circulation, where one balances and negotiates a series of geographically-based cultural, economic, and community ties.

However, I am also mindful of the criticism that such a definition of cosmopolitanism has engendered. Some have castigated Appiah, Beck, and a number of other writers on cosmopolitanism such as Martha Nussbaum, Timothy Brennan, Homi K. Bhabha, and Arjun Appadurai, as promoting a top-down form of liberal elitism under the guise of cosmopolitan theory. David Harvey, in particular, cites Appiah’s phrase, “rooted cosmopolitanism,” an essentially positive term for Appiah in which people share their local values and experiences with an international community of other “locals,” as one whose reality might be far from the ideal Appiah imagines:

But what on earth is a ‘rooted’ cosmopolitanism rooted in? Can patriotism, nationalism, localism, and doctrines of religious, ethnic, gendered, or racial superiorities all equally well pass muster? If a patriotic cosmopolitanism is perfectly acceptable, then why not a nationalist, theocratic, or even fascist cosmopolitanism?¹¹

Harvey reads Appiah’s cosmopolitanism as elitism by another name—an ideal to reach for only if one has the “right roots.” And, certainly, many of the scholars Harvey cites do seem to be using “cosmopolitan” as shorthand for “enlightened,” “sophisticated,” or “liberal.” As most of the proponents of a “new cosmopolitanism” have done so from a Western, though apparently anti-colonial, standpoint, we might imagine that

¹¹ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 168.

cosmopolitanism in practice implies a coalition of the willing imposing a cosmopolitan morality on the “locals” who haven’t yet gotten on board with their universalist program.

But it is more useful to see the term as less a political practice, and more as a description of a process that people engage in, not because they are seeking some liberal or universalist end, but because they are trying to cope with the increasing presence of global influences in their local environments. It is Appiah’s emphasis on cosmopolitanism as something that people do rather than as a project that governments or international organizations promote that lends itself so well to a discussion of the regional-global negotiations in southern literatures.

Southern Regional Imagination in the Twentieth Century

Patricia Yaeger has argued for cosmopolitanism as the mindset that people make use of when they recognize and contend with a new reality, one in which “every locale is globally cross-hatched,”¹² and a number of theorists consider a cosmopolitan process to be one in which some notion of the “local” plays an important part. But I argue for “regional-global” negotiations in this project because in southern literature the local is often a stage upon which regional tensions are enacted, and in which regional resistances—to modernity, to the national center, and to notions of global interconnectedness—become reconfigured. It is not that southern writers believe that localities have no value in and of themselves in the South. Certainly, many of those who

¹² Patricia Yaeger, “Southern Orientalism: Flannery O’Connor’s Cosmopolis,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 61:4 (Fall 2003), 491.

count themselves as “southern locals” see themselves resisting change in the South on the local level, or making a specific local contribution to a larger southern enterprise. But in this project, I will argue that the southern writers I am examining use local spaces in their fictions as sites within which to consider the meaning of southern regionalism, as waves of out- and in-migration, along with the increasing influence of global ideas, transformed the very notion of what the South was.

However, regionalism, like cosmopolitanism, is a term that requires some unpacking. As Douglas Reichert Powell argues, “region is always a relational term,”¹³ one that implies less a “stable, bounded, autonomous place” and more a “cultural history, the cumulative generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region.”¹⁴ But if regions are, as Powell suggests, rhetorics that serve to “contain” intersections of places and cultural histories, they also serve particular functions, both for those who count themselves as national subjects and for those who see themselves as regional actors. Roberto Dainotto argues that, for many national subjects, regions are imagined spaces upon which the nation can project its ideals about itself, especially when those ideals appear to be compromised by modernity:

Just as the ‘locale or area’ is not this or that specific geographical spot but a topos of origins, what is at stake in the regionalist project is not, after all, the survival of this or that locale but the curative possibility of returning to an authentic topos of national identity when that identity is under threat.¹⁵

¹³ Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ Roberto Maria Dainotto, “All The Regions Do Smilingly Revolt: The Literature of Place and Region,” *Critical Inquiry* 22:3 (Spring 1996): 501.

For the United States, the South has long served this “curative” function, as a place of “authenticity” and “the down home” that somehow persists in a nation buffeted by immigration and technological change. And regional subjects see their regional spaces in this way as well, as repositories for the cherished values that the nation as a whole used to have, but now supposedly lacks.

The American South has served this function of “curative,” but it has also represented something of an unhealed wound upon the national body: a place that lags behind the rest of the nation and that needs to be “reconstructed.” Leigh Anne Duck makes this point when she argues that:

On the one hand, images of the region provided a venue through which national audiences could imagine restrictive but stable and sustaining bonds, and, on the other, they represented the conflict between U.S. democratic rhetoric and discriminatory practice as a difference between national and regional cultures.¹⁶

It is for these reasons that, for many non-southerners, refugees from the South, and progressive southern residents, it is the South’s self-conscious regionalism that needs to change. They see the imaginative construct of regional identity that many southerners rely upon as a barrier to the South’s adoption of progressive politics, global connections, and modern technologies. Carson McCullers herself took southern self-fashioning to task when she remarked to Ralph McGill, the progressive editor of the *Atlanta Journal*

Constitution:

Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and

¹⁶Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and US Nationalism* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2006), 6.

right and just—when all along we knew it wasn't. The fact we bolstered it with laws and developed a secular liturgy and sacraments for it is evidence of how little we believed our own deceptions.¹⁷

But there is yet another aspect of regionalism that we need to consider, and that McCullers, as well as Wright, Ellison, and Murray, sought to emphasize. This is the notion of regional resistance not to the progressive aspects of modernity, but to the cultural homogenization that is often modernity's accomplice. Regional particulars, as they emerge in foodways, community structures, and cultural manifestations, are aspects of regional identity that southern blacks and whites both acknowledge, and see as in need of preservation and celebration as they migrate from southern geographical places to other parts of the nation. As I will argue in this project, the writers under consideration here were not trying to denigrate an imaginative construct of southern regionalism that they saw as retrograde, nor exchange that construct for some larger affiliation to the nation and the larger world. Rather, they sought to find a way to be "regionally resistant" subjects within a larger, and potentially liberatory, context of emergent globalization. In so doing, they reconfigured the concept of regionalism as a position that is both resistant and participatory at the same time.

The Great Migration and Southern Identity

The southern cosmopolitanism that I am tracing in this project was developing in direct response to the massive movement of people from South to North that is often

¹⁷ Ralph McGill, *The South and the Southerner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 217.

referred to as The Great Migration. Although there had always been people moving from southern states to other parts of the nation, this particular event is generally thought to have begun during World War I, when a labor shortage brought on by wartime conscription, coupled with increasing restrictions on immigration, encouraged many southern blacks (and a good many southern whites) to migrate to the North, West, and Midwest. But the Great Depression slowed these movements; as James N. Gregory points out, the number of southern out-migrants slowed significantly as the Depression deepened. However, the pace of migration would accelerate again with the onset of World War II, and would continue steadily until the late 1960s.¹⁸

As this phenomenon was occurring, a great many writers sought to come to terms with its meaning. Lawrence Richard Rogers has argued that the “migration novel” proper almost certainly has its roots in Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and Nella Larson’s *Quicksand* (1928). Rogers sees the migration novel as one in which black characters “confront the geographical displacement from the foundational roots of its southern culture,” and certainly Richard Wright, along with many of the writers that Rogers discusses, is exploring “the relationship between geography and identity.”¹⁹

But, as I will show, the kind of work that the writers under discussion were contemplating was less about chronicling migration than it was about forecasting the

¹⁸ For a specific table of statistics of rates of out-migration, compiled from official census data, see James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 330.

¹⁹ Lawrence H. Rogers, *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997), 4.

ways that migration would transform the South and the nation in fundamental ways. The southern cosmopolitan novel begins to emerge during the brief lull between the first and second “phases” of the Migration, and accelerates as tensions over the meaning of regionalism in a migratory and globalizing nation become increasingly significant.

An Angle of Vision: Southern Cosmopolitanism 1935-1974

The four chapters in this project trace the development over a forty year time span of a particular way of looking at the South—a southern cosmopolitan perspective that each of these writers struggled to articulate. This period begins in the depths of the Great Depression, just before the start of the “second” Great Migration. Chapter one shows Richard Wright reaching for a new angle of vision on the South—and placing a great deal of weight on the phrase “angle of vision” itself. As I will argue, in his first, unpublished novel, *Lawd Today!* (originally circulated in manuscript form in 1935), Wright dreamt of black migrants to the North finding value in the culture they retained from their oppressive southern backgrounds. But that novel was only a precursor to Wright’s more detailed and complicated consideration of the value of regional particulars in an emerging global age. In the prose poem/photo documentary *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), in his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), and in his final novel, *The Long Dream* (1959), we can see that Wright was sketching a southern cosmopolitan identity, one in which those blacks who had fled the violence and poverty of the South would be able to make use of their southern pasts as they moved into a global present.

In chapter two, I show how Carson McCullers was in many ways Wright's kindred spirit—in fact, he praised her for the “angle of vision” that she cast on her own southern background. McCullers made the case that white southerners, as well, had the potential to realize a southern cosmopolitan identity. Like Wright, McCullers wanted to find those elements of southern regionalism—foodways, culture, speech, and aspects of southern community—that southerners who hoped to leave behind the South's parochialism could resonate with, engage with, and take with them as they journeyed elsewhere. Since her earliest days, McCullers had seen the North, and New York in particular, as representing a global counter to the southern regional mythology, racism, and codes of gender that she firmly rejected. In approximately 1935, as Wright was crafting *Lawd Today!*, McCullers would conduct her first fictional experiments with “The Aliens,” the story of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who moves to the South, and seeks to find some common ground between his European other-ness and a South whose residents seem hidebound by tradition and poverty. But it was over the course of the 1940s, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), that McCullers would make her most important attempts to realize a southern cosmopolitan vision. In the last of these narratives, *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers's protagonist, Frankie Addams, comes to realize that a South that has been transformed by migration and America's growing global role might be a place for outsiders like her after all, and that she might be able to reconcile her global longings with her regional surroundings in the coming post-war and post-migration

South. For McCullers, the cosmopolitan angle on the South that Wright had pointed towards in black identity was potentially the provenance of all southerners.

Unlike Wright and McCullers, Ralph Ellison did not come from a southern state, but from Oklahoma, a southwestern one. But in chapter three, I argue that Ellison saw in Oklahoma the ways in which black and white southerners took their southern regional affiliations and deterritorialized them. Following his time in Alabama attending Tuskegee University, and his later move from Alabama to New York, Ellison began to articulate in fiction what he called his “South-Southwestern identity.” In one of his earliest short stories, “Flying Home” (1946), Ellison draws a portrait of a black wartime pilot who literally crashes his plane into southern ground. While waiting for rescue, he finds himself negotiating his internationalist dreams of flight with the language, culture, and lives of those blacks who chose to stay in the South. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison takes the cosmopolitan implications of “Flying Home” even further. Here, the novel’s protagonist, a black South-to-North migrant, comes to realize the fluidity that had always underscored black identity, and the ways in which blacks could make use of their southern experiences in nation and a region whose boundaries were becoming more fluid all the time. In several of Ellison’s final, never-completed literary experiments, in particular Books I and II of the posthumously published *Three Days Before the Shooting*, we see Ellison continuing to explore a cosmopolitan literary language whose roots go back to the “South-Southwestern identity” that his Oklahoma and Alabama experiences had conjured for him.

Ellison may never have been able to focus, in a single narrative work, the cosmopolitan vision he had been working towards. But in chapter four, I argue that Ellison's friend and correspondent, Albert Murray, took up where Ellison left off. The Great Migration began to reverse itself in the early 1970s, and blacks returning to the South found themselves in a region whose racist and oppressive history existed side-by-side with its post-Civil Rights, and post-migration, possibilities. In this context, Murray wrote the non-fiction treatise *The Omni Americans* (1969) and the postmodern narrative of southern return, *South To A Very Old Place* (1971)—both works in which Murray pointed to the South, and especially to the Mobile, Alabama of his own youth, as illustrative of the cosmopolitan potential that the Great Migration had served to reveal in southern black life. It is in his first novel, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), that Murray completes the circle begun by Wright in 1935. Here, Murray constructs a narrative in which a young the protagonist, Scooter, chooses to stay firmly grounded in Mobile rather than take a train to the abstract Northern destination of “Philamayork.” Once he has made his decision to stay, Scooter comes to recognize the ways in which his southern experience lends itself to a cosmopolitan connection to the world, once he learns to see his environment from the proper perspective. In this way, *Train Whistle Guitar* brings together many of the southern cosmopolitan ideas McCullers, Wright, and Ellison had been working toward.

Towards a Southern Cosmopolitan Literary Practice

This project asks its readers to look at the ways in which certain southern writers worked through the meaning of regional identity in a globalizing nation, and did so by proposing a cosmopolitan negotiation between region and world. As we trace the development of southern cosmopolitanism in the literatures of Richard Wright, Carson McCullers, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray, we can see that these authors are pointing towards the emergence of a South that is cosmopolitan in its merging of rootedness with contemporary rootlessness. Indeed, the moves that these writers made in their works help us to see the parallels between regional and global intersections within the United States and similar intersections in transnational spaces elsewhere. The cosmopolitan negotiations among regional, migratory, and global influences that these writers worked through are essential to our understanding of what people everywhere do with their sense of being locally “grounded,” when they work, communicate, and socialize in a world of global mobility. The more that we examine the literature of southern cosmopolitanism over the course of the twentieth century, the more we recognize that literatures that emerge from the most grounded of environments can help us come to terms with a globally-connected society.

Chapter One: “The Living Past Living In The Present”: Richard Wright’s
Southern Cosmopolitanism

On April 9, 1943, Richard Wright addressed a group of black undergraduates and academics, along with a number of white trustees, at Fisk University, an historically black college in Nashville, Tennessee. It did not go very well. Hazel Rowley alleges that Wright’s talk, which the program for the assembly referred to as “What I’ve Been Thinking,” had been carefully calculated “not to appear too anti-southern,” but that seems to have been exactly how it came across.¹ No transcript of the speech appears to have survived; however, Constance Webb, in her biography of Wright, contends that the audience perceived Wright’s speech as a provocation and an insult. According to the recollections of those who were there, Wright attempted to make his case for “what it felt like to be a black man in America,” and in so doing focused on “a description of the shabbiness and emptiness of life lived under white domination as reflected in the personalities and relationships in his own family.”² One of those present that day, reminiscing to Horace Cayton twenty-five years later, recalled that “the audience was first confounded, then shocked” by Wright’s apparent unwillingness to present a more balanced portrait of southern black life to a southern black audience at an historically black southern institution.³

¹ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life And Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 280.

² Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968), 206.

³ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 280.

Wright himself seems to have taken the audience's resistance to his remarks as evidence that he had truly left the South behind, and that those blacks who continued to live there were now his ideological enemies. Drawing on her own later conversations with Wright, Webb relates that

[i]n the middle of the speech he sensed, and then observed, that the audience was restive and he received a distinct impression of hostility emanating toward him as if upon waves of air. . . . As soon as he finished speaking the people in the audience began to leave quickly. There were no questions and there was no applause—just a quick clutching at pocketbooks, an indignant fumbling with jackets and a scurry for the exits. A brief ironical smile passed over Richard's face and suddenly, a strange surprising sensation, of a sort of bitter hatred for everyone leaving the auditorium, passed through his body.⁴

Wright's confrontation with southern blacks at Fisk ended in a moment of mutual antagonism and confusion. But the event also illustrates Wright's need to confront the South he had left behind, and to find a language that would bridge his southern past and his post-migration present. Although Wright found himself unable to construct that bridge at Fisk, we can see in much of his written output a far more successful negotiation between southern regional particulars and a larger sense of "post-migration expansiveness."

Since his move from Mississippi to Chicago some twenty years before his visit to Fisk, Wright had rarely ventured South again, and his relationship to southern blacks and to the American South in general remained fraught. Wright was working during a period when the South was arguably in its ascendancy in political and cultural influence, and

⁴ Webb, *A Biography*, 206.

when it seemed to him that there were few ways for southern-born blacks to conceive of themselves as “southern” in a way that did not reinforce white racial hierarchies or serve as apologies for white power.⁵ But throughout his career, Wright crafted a series of narratives that examined the nature of southern regionalism for post-migration blacks such as himself. In this chapter, I will consider what I call the “cosmopolitan turn” in southern regionalism that Wright was expressing over the course of his publishing career, but particularly in those texts of Wright’s that are set in the South: *Lawd Today!* (1935)⁶; *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938); *12 Million Black Voices* (1941); *Black Boy* (1945); and *The Long Dream* (1958). I will argue that, throughout those texts, Wright was not only destabilizing prevailing white certainties about what it meant to be southern, but was also arguing for a southernness with a global reach—a southernness that blacks as well as whites had a stake in.

Richard Wright’s South

In order to understand the move that I am arguing Wright was making towards the South, we need first to understand “southern regionalism” as a term, both as it was configured in Wright’s day and as I argue Wright sought to reconfigure it. Born near

⁵ Certainly, many have seen Wright as operating against the traditions and accepted fundamentals of southern literature as it was constituted in the 1930s and 40s. See Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1998), 79-80; Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and US Nationalism* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2006), 210; and Andrew Warnes, “From Memphis to Bandung: The Political Uses of Hunger in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*,” in *Reading Southern Poverty Between The Wars, 1918-1939*, ed. Richard Godden and Martin Crawford (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2006), 127.

⁶ *Lawd Today!* was originally published posthumously in 1963. I have chosen to designate it by the date at which it was circulated for publication following Wright’s completion of the first version of the manuscript.

Natchez, Mississippi in 1908, Wright moved to Chicago with his aunt Maggie in 1927 (he would eventually be joined by his mother Ella and his brother Leon). By then, blacks had been moving from southern rural areas to northern urban ones in large numbers for at least ten years, and Wright is often lumped in with this Great Migration.⁷ In *White Man, Listen!* (1957), Wright lumped himself in with it, arguing that he felt “personally identified with the migrant negro, his folk songs, his ditties, his wild tales of bad men,” and he understood that “my own life was forged in the depths in which they live. . .”⁸ But those “depths” were not always easy for him to figure out or clearly define, almost certainly because the South that he migrated from occupied a remarkably unstable position within the national imagination.

The South was a region whose white residents, for the most part, saw themselves as fighting (and generally winning) a cultural and historical argument with the North. Having lost the Civil War, many southern whites spent the next century pressing the case that the South’s cause was a noble one, that Reconstruction was an unjust humiliation, and that white supremacy was an essential fact of human existence.⁹ The 1930 publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, a series of essays by “12 southerners” which sought to extol the South’s supposedly pastoral past in defiance of industrialization and northern (and black) denunciations of southern backwardness, gave intellectual force to the

⁷ It is estimated that between 450,000 and 500,000 blacks from largely rural southern areas moved to northern cities between 1915 and 1918, and a further 700,000 during the 1920s. Eric Arneson, *Black Protest and the Great Migration* (Boston: Bedford, 2003), 1.

⁸ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 126.

⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois began attempting to correct the historical record in *Black Reconstruction in America*, (1935) (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007). See also Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper, 1988), and Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

southern argument that the South was “special” and proudly defiant in the face of change. But the southern whites who defended the South, who still felt humiliated by its Reconstruction, who extolled its antebellum past, and who affirmed its system of Jim Crow repression as beneficial to both races, seemed to many southern blacks to be living in a kind of fantasy world.

Certainly, blacks had long confronted the gap between southern myth and southern reality on a daily basis, and when they had the chance some pointed out the depth of southern white self-deception. Hortense Powdermaker, in her study of Indianola, Mississippi in the early 1930’s, gives numerous examples of the instances, rare though they were, when blacks openly confronted whites’ perceptions of their black neighbors as cheerfully subservient. A stark example comes in Powdermaker’s brief but fascinating account of blacks’ take on whites’ fond reminiscences of their “black mammies”:

On at least two occasions, white people speaking before Negro students have been hissed for their repeated sentimental reference to the ‘beautiful tradition of the black mammy.’ Both times the teachers refrained from rebuking the students. In a neighboring community a group of very young Negroes refused a desirable opportunity to earn money and prestige through radio broadcasts, because the prospective benefactor prefaced his offer with a eulogy of his father’s ‘old black mammy.’ A middle-aged woman of the upper class exclaims vehemently: ‘I’ll be glad when every black mammy is dead in her grave, and we all feel like that! They give everything to the white people and got nothing in return.’¹⁰

For many blacks, living in the South meant more than attempting to survive within a violent racist system; it meant putting up with a white ownership class who were lost in a dream of stereotyping, false history, and naiveté, a dream that blacks only rarely

¹⁰ Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study In the Deep South* (New York: Viking, 1939), 345-46.

had the opportunity to disrupt.¹¹ “Southern regionalism,” as blacks of Wright’s background saw it expressed by whites, was an act of self-delusion, a willful leap into the fantastic in disregard of inconvenient facts.

However, fantasy and “regional sensibility” have long been interrelated. When Americans think of regions such as the West or the South, many of us often think of generalized areas that we want to count as the “real” or “authentic” parts of the nation—a nation which has otherwise been compromised by technology, population growth, environmental destruction, or “modernity,” however we choose to define that term. This sense of regions as places that hold the essence of unadulterated national experience is common to those who count themselves as “national” subjects, who identify with an idea of nation as, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, “a deep, horizontal comradeship” among peoples who adhere to a common set of values.¹² For them, regions are imagined places within the larger national imaginary, compensatory strategies for national projects that seem to have been compromised by multiculturalism, hybridity, or change in its broadest sense.¹³

Regions also provide, as they did for southerners who counted themselves as “regional” subjects first and foremost, fuel for resistance to larger national projects. Frank Davey has considered this kind of regionalist resistance in terms of Canadian

¹¹ Dollard, in his study of the same town, gives similar accounts of blacks disrupting southern whites’ sense of racial certitude during the 1930’s. See John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937).

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 16.

¹³ As mentioned in the introduction, see Dainotto, Roberto Maria, “All The Regions Do Smilingly Revolt: The Literature of Place and Region,” *Critical Inquiry* 22:3 (Spring 1996): 505; also his *Place In Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), 2000.

regionalism; he argues that rural Canadian subjects often find their identity as actors who are resistant to what they think the nation-state embodies: control, development, cultural homogenization, and change.¹⁴ But they also often deceive themselves into thinking that their identity as regional subjects is somehow authentic, natural, and not complicit with the nation-state against which they array their regional sensibilities. Regionalism provides a sense of agency to local subjects, gives them a “resistant” relation to the nation as a whole, but it also masks the self-deception and ideological complicity in which that resistance is often engaged. Regions are places that both “regional” and “national” subjects think that they know, even though both have invested the concept of region with meaning in order to serve particular national and regional ends. And southern whites conceived of their regional selves, particularly in the years immediately prior to and during World War II, in an especially self-conscious and contradictory manner.

But this is not to say that the idea of “southern region” did not retain a hold on some black southerners, nor that whites’ idea of southern regionalism was the only one available. As much as blacks recognized the delusional nature of their southern white neighbors’ regional affection, many southern blacks of Richard Wright’s generation also held onto a version of regional knowledge that was inextricably tied to their sense of themselves as blacks. I am thinking here of a “southern feeling” that many blacks experienced even in the midst of poverty: a feeling that emerged in cultural expression, community association, and religious celebration and belief. For example, Ralph Ellison

¹⁴ Frank Davey, “Towards The Ends Of Regionalism,” in *A Sense Of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*, ed. Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie (Edmonton: U of Alberta Press, 1997), 1-17.

makes reference, in the 1961 interview “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” to a time in his childhood when schoolmates would leave urban Oklahoma at certain times of the year to pick cotton with their parents in agricultural parts of the state. Although “most parents wished their children to have no contact with the cotton patch,” because “it was part of the Old South which they had come west to forget,” Ellison remarks that he was to some degree “envious” of them because, despite the grinding labor, they returned with a vision of black folk life—jokes, stories, songs, and “communion”—that Ellison thought his middle-class existence lacked.¹⁵ But even if Ellison’s young companions were able to draw cultural strength from rural “southern” labor, for blacks to affirm black southern culture as *southern* seemed to some to affirm the conditions against which that culture emerged as a survival strategy. In the original published conclusion to *Black Boy*, Wright struggled to articulate the relationship between his sense of belonging to and alienation from his place of origin:

I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it, might come to know what its rigors had done to me, to its children. I fled so that the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain—years later and far away—of what living in the South had meant.

Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feeling had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South. So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom. . .¹⁶

¹⁵ Ralph Ellison, “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 67.

¹⁶ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 414.

At the time that Wright wrote this passage in 1944, the white South was arguably at its peak of national political power, and, to a degree, cultural influence. When Wright said “the South” then, he meant a region that he had just spent his entire autobiography excoriating as a place where no black with any sense of self-possession ought to remain, and which was experiencing an historic outflow of its rural black population to northern urban centers, although it was still home to the vast majority of blacks. He meant a series of American states whose white populations saw themselves, as varied as the specific histories of each state might have been, as resistant to modernity, resistant to the national center, and resistant to racial equality.

The conclusion to his autobiography indicates that Wright wants to point us towards another vision. Although that South was not *his*, the Richard Wright that we encounter in *Black Boy* is struggling to articulate a different kind of southernness, one that would allow him to both *feel* “the pain . . . of what living in the South had meant” *and* acknowledge “the culture of the South” as an essential part of a new black identity that was emerging as blacks migrated out of the South in increasing numbers. Southern regionalism, as put forward here, is a kind of balancing act, a continual working through of different notions of regional belonging.

Roots and Rootlessness

When we consider what Wright was getting at by conceiving of regional sensibility in this way, we can see that he was arguing for an idea of southernness that is

intimately tied to something much larger. “Cosmopolitanism” is a term we often associate with being “a citizen of the world,” and of thinking of oneself as unmoored from particular regional communities and histories.¹⁷ And critics have often considered Wright, who was a product of a geographic migration and who would later relocate permanently from the United States to Paris, as a cosmopolitan in that sense; in fact, elsewhere in *White Man, Listen!*, Wright would define himself as “a rootless man . . . I can make myself at home almost anywhere on this earth and can, if I’ve a mind to and when I’m attracted to a landscape or a mood of life, easily sink myself into the most alien and widely differing environments.”¹⁸ But this assertion of rootlessness is not a substitution for his earlier acknowledgement of having been “shaped” by the “culture of the South.” In this passage, Wright imagines a kind of cosmopolitanism that is informed by his recognition of the idea of “being at home,” even though he remains conscious of the contingency of that home’s specific character. Wright may have defined himself as “rootless,” but his rootlessness, for want of a better term, had roots.

The “rooted rootlessness” that Wright spoke of in *White Man Listen!*, and that he sketched out in the originally published conclusion to *Black Boy*, is one that emerged during an historical context of migration, both his own and that of millions of black southerners. Wright’s move from the American South to its North and eventually to Europe caused him to “deterritorialize” the South in a particular way—to come to see the

¹⁷ As discussed in the introduction, the term also carries with it the trace of elitism, with picking and choosing the global cultures one wants to resonate with: cosmopolitanism as “liberalism on safari,” as Appiah puts it. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 222.

¹⁸ Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 17.

South as a set of “regional particulars” and “resistances” that he could examine, take stock of, and project onto a continuously unfolding “new ground.” But in doing so, Wright was ahead of the historical curve. James Clifford speaks of a similar confluence of “roots” and “routes” when he discusses contemporary Native Pacific peoples whose struggles “are about finding ways to exist *in* a multiplex modernity, but with a difference, a difference derived from cultural tradition, from landedness, and from ongoing histories of displacement, travel, and circulation.”¹⁹ It is in recent studies of the post-migration South that we see such confluences as widespread features of contemporary southern identity. James L. Peacock, in particular, has attempted to analyze what he calls the “grounded globalism” of the South. Peacock traces the emergence of a “new pluralism” in southern regional identity in which, in light of waves of new immigrant populations, the prevalence of new communications technologies, and the increasing interrelationships of southern economies with international ones, twenty-first century southerners have begun projecting their southernness “not only onto immediate surroundings but also onto the globe, experiencing the wider world in terms of [their] own immediate and regional one, rendering the global as local.”²⁰

In effect, Wright was developing and articulating a cosmopolitan consciousness in much the same way as Peacock’s contemporary southerners, but doing so before the “facts on the ground” of the South necessitated that he do so, and before many of his fellow southerners, startled by the upheavals that the migration itself was causing, were

¹⁹ James Clifford, “Indigenous Articulations,” *The Contemporary Pacific* (13:2 Fall 2001): 483.

²⁰ James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2007), 15.

able to see the way in which their own migration was bringing about a redefinition of what it meant to be southern. But before we consider more closely exactly how Wright worked through this southern cosmopolitan sensibility, some further discussion of terminology—“local,” “global” and “cosmopolitan” itself—is in order.

A number of globalization theorists consider a cosmopolitan process as the pairing of the dyads “local” and “global,” but Peacock’s collapsing of “immediate and regional” experiences with “local” ones in the quote above points out an important aspect of the relationship between southerners and the places to which they form connections.²¹ For many southern whites, local places are often microcosms of southern regional identity, small places that stand in for a broader regional sensibility, and stages upon which regional tensions are enacted. Many white southerners who perpetrated violence against blacks and maintained Jim Crow segregation saw themselves as upholding the “southern way of life” from their local vantage points, lynching local blacks as a way of playing their part in a broader southern belief in white racial hierarchy. Similarly, many southern blacks saw their own struggles against segregation on the local level to be symbolic of the change they hoped to see taking place across the broader South, and their local successes in the Civil Rights movement as actions taken against southern apartheid in a general sense.

Because of this metonymic relationship between “local” and “regional” in southern history, we should consider the “ground” in “grounded globalism” or the “roots”

²¹ For more “local/global” negotiations, see Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) and Timothy Brennan, *At Home In The World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

in “rooted rootlessness” as a regional ground—at least when we are discussing the South. This is not to say that “local” places have no value for southerners, nor that “local” places cannot themselves exist in a tense relationship with some larger “regional” sensibility. It means that when southerners work through the meaning of southernness, they tend to use imagined local spaces as opportunities to perform such examinations.

We can come to a clearer understanding of Peacock’s “grounded global” neologism, and Wright’s slippery sense of “being at home” anywhere, when we consider what globalization and cosmopolitanism have come to mean beyond the South itself. Kwame Anthony Appiah argues for cosmopolitanism as a response to an increasingly global world, a world in which “every human community has gradually been drawn into a single web of trade and a global network of information,” and in which we could both send “any other of our six billion conspecifics something worth having: a radio, an antibiotic, a good idea.” But Appiah is not blind to the negative, homogenizing, and destructive possibilities of this global network: “unfortunately, we could also send, through negligence as easily as malice, things that will cause harm: a virus, an airborne pollutant, a bad idea.”²² It is because of this increasingly widespread sense of global expansiveness and connectivity that Appiah makes a case for an identity founded on the belief that “we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even formal ties of a shared citizenship.”²³

²² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Norton, 2006), xiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, xv.

In designating a cosmopolitanism that is grounded in ethical responsibility, Appiah is not arguing for a dilution of “groundedness” by some abstract sense of a “universality” of values: “The points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what those particular people have in common.”²⁴ For Appiah, cosmopolitanism means “universality plus difference,” and Wright’s difference, the particularity he brought to the global conversation, emerged from a sense of the regional—a regional that could travel.²⁵ The intersection between region and world that Peacock notes as existing in contemporary southern life was foreshadowed by a number of historically earlier southern writers, Wright among them, who managed to think their way out of a regional identity that was “resistant,” “sheltered,” and small, who found a way to make use of regional attachment to inform their emerging understanding of what then counted as a “global network.” Leigh Anne Duck identifies such “provincial cosmopolitans,” including Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers and Erskine Caldwell, as writers who “vigorously situated the image of the South in relation to other spaces, demonstrating the ways in which aspects of regional life considered backward were comparable to cultural forms seen elsewhere and, accordingly, exemplified prominent patterns in global modernity.”²⁶

Wright said that he felt “at home anywhere,” but his cosmopolitanism was not a form of cultural tourism. It was a sense of moral engagement with oppressed peoples on

²⁴ Ibid., 97.

²⁵ Ibid., 151.

²⁶ Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2006), 178.

every continent, a sense of being at home on any ground precisely because of the “unbounded” nature of black southern experience. Wright’s cosmopolitanism emerged from a migration that redefined such regionally specific experience as transplantable, as exchangeable with the experiences of others. This is not to say that Wright’s work directly intermingles international experiences with regional ones, and in his work on what we might think of as “the globe” rarely becomes part of the lives of southern blacks. But in rendering southern black experience as transplantable, as migratory in its essence, and as the product of multiple cultural and economic intersections, Wright maps a southern cosmopolitan consciousness whose expansiveness resonates with a South transformed by contemporary globalization.

Wright’s Unhomely South

We can see Wright working towards his own notion of “rooted rootlessness” in his first novel, *Lawd Today!*, as the characters attempt to balance their cognizance of southern racial realities with their acknowledgement of themselves as inevitably shaped by a shared southern history. Wright originally wrote *Lawd Today!* in 1935 and submitted it to various publishers under the title *Cesspool*. At the time, Wright was living in Chicago and had become heavily involved in working with and writing for the Communist Party. But Wright was, according to Hazel Rowley, “well aware that the Party would deplore” this novel.²⁷ The story of a day in the life of Jake Jackson and his

²⁷ Rowley, *Life and Times*, 103.

friends, all Chicago postal workers, the novel has little “moral message” nor “revolutionary optimism,” but rather presents a series of misanthropic characters drinking and whoring their way through a single day. The novel’s characters draw on one another to escape the occasional bleakness of their Chicago lives, and to reinforce their threatened masculinity by railing against the women they are involved with (most of whom, Jake’s wife excepted, are kept far offstage).²⁸

Lard Today! succeeds less as a novel about black Chicago life and more as an argument for a new way of thinking about how blacks can make use of the South and incorporate a sense of regional belonging into a new, more cosmopolitan consciousness. Before we are even introduced to Jake, the novel is framed by a radio broadcast celebrating Lincoln’s birthday (February 12th); each of the novel’s three sections begins with an extended quote from a radio announcer retelling the story of Lincoln’s presidency and assassination. Although this narrative device might seem, at first, like a rather ham-handed reminder of the persistence of slave memories and the unfinished business of Reconstruction, we should bear in mind that Civil War references were frequent in the rhetoric of the 1930s. May 2nd, 1935 saw a major reenactment of the Battle of Chancellorsville performed by U.S. Marines and students from the Virginia Military Institute,²⁹ only the latest national celebration of post-Civil War reunion and

²⁸ For Fabre, the novel was Wright’s early attempt “to show the transition from life in Mississippi to life in Chicago with its initiation into city routine, intellectual awareness and political responsibilities.” See Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993), 136.

²⁹ Held in Lexington, Virginia, the event was reportedly attended by 40,000 spectators. Civil War reenactments had been held since the early part of the century. Like those, the 1935 Chancellorsville event was an occasion for southern and northern whites to celebrate their mutual national reconciliation. See

reconciliation. At the same time, southern senators successfully filibustered to block a federal anti-lynching bill, with South Carolina's Senator Ellison D. "Cotton Ed" Smith, whom *Time* magazine had called "a conscientious objector to the 20th Century,"³⁰ railing against it as a contemporary humiliation on par with Reconstruction.³¹ For southern-born blacks of Jake Jackson's generation, the Civil War must have seemed like an unfinished conflict: southern Senators and Congressmen held major positions of power in the Democratic Congressional majority, and news of New Deal efforts to enforce race-blind hiring practices in federal jobs programs was often accompanied by denunciations of those practices by southern politicians from Roosevelt's own governing coalition—denunciations often referenced with appeals to southern pride and affirmations of white racial hierarchies. The novel's Lincoln memorial broadcast, then, is only the latest bit of cultural noise that forces Jake and his friends to remain aware of the persistence of twentieth century southern white power, and of the way that that power was actively obscured through joint northern and southern projects of remembrance and reunification.

Waking up just as the announcer reads that "[William Lloyd] Garrison, a forerunner of Lincoln, was a man whose soul was aflame with a Holy Cause," Jake proceeds to fight bitterly with his wife, Lil. Wright presents Jake as a brutish anti-intellectual misogynist, and in concert with his small-mindedness is his seeming lack of concern for the situation of blacks who remain in the South. He and Lil argue over

David W. Blight, *Race And Reunion: The Civil War In American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press 2001), 397.

³⁰ Walter B. Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998), 506.

³¹ "Southern Filibuster Against Anti-Lynching Bill Encompasses Its Sixth Day," *Atlanta Journal Constitution* [Atlanta] 1 May 1935, sec. A:1.

breakfast about news from the *Chicago Tribune*, with Jake first railing against

Communists, and then dismissing Lil's anguish over an article about a lynching:

'And they burned a colored man alive the other day.' 'Who?' 'The white people in this country' 'Shut up! You don't know what you talking about!' 'Well, they *did!*' 'How you know?' 'It was in the papers.' 'Aw, that was down South, anyhow.' 'But the South's a part of this country.' Jake stopped chewing and glared at her. 'Woman, is you a Red?'³²

Jake's initial reaction to Lil's locating of the South as "a part of this country" is to try to assert his immunity from both contemporary southern black reality and the slave history that preceded it—to think of his present Chicago existence as taking place in an entirely different country from the Mississippi of his earlier years. Being in Chicago has allowed him to reinvent himself as a politically conservative, self-interested, and materialistic creature, and it is only "Reds" who would seek to remind Jake of his relationship to a southern black story.

After he leaves his apartment, Jake encounters a number of his friends from his post office job: Bob, Al, and Slim, with whom he plays bridge and enters into an extended series of dialogues about women, politics, and white people. The talk continues almost uninterrupted as the three friends journey from Bob's apartment to the Chicago L train and eventually to their jobs at the post office, observing women, headlines, and advertisements, and cracking jokes along the way. Gradually, southern memories and references begin to appear at regular intervals in the men's conversation, evidence of the essential southern undercurrents to their present existence. Sorting mail at the post office,

³² Richard Wright, *Lawd Today!*, in *Richard Wright: Early Works* (New York: Library Of America, 1991), 33.

Jake takes to separating the letters by state, and finds himself forced to confront his own southern past: “Some sentimental thought always made him carry a Northern state rather than a Southern one. He never wanted to carry Mississippi, his home state. *That’s one state I’m damn glad to be from.*” Confronted with evidence that his northern job was ultimately a national one as well, Jake initially retreats from the implications of this, and he defines his northern existence to himself as a decided counter to his earlier southern one: “When he went to the movies he always wanted to see Negroes, if there were any in the play, shown against the background of urban conditions, not rural ones. Anything which smacked of farms, chain gangs, lynchings, hunger, or the South in general was repugnant to him. These things had so hurt him once that he wanted to forget them forever; to see them again merely served to bring back the deep pain for which he knew no salve.”³³

As much as Jake defines southern life in terms of violence, fear, and oppression, the presence of black southern culture as an essential undercurrent to Jake’s northern existence begins to emerge in increasingly overt fashion. Confronted by racist slights at work from his superiors, Jake finds himself resorting to the language of the black South as a form of resistance to the white North: “*They’s looking at us like we was monkeys in a zoo!* A phrase he had heard an old Negro preacher say down South in his youth welled up in his consciousness, ringing in his ears like a bell. *Lawd, if I had my way I’d tear this building down!*”³⁴ It seems that, for Jake, what has caused him such deep pain, the

³³ Ibid., 138.

³⁴ Ibid., 143.

southern history that he associates largely with white supremacy and the exploitation of blacks, also provides him with a southern black identity that he can make use of in this northern setting—a language that is usable precisely because he identifies himself as someone who is *able* to make use of it.

What Wright is reaching for with this scene and others like it is a regional sensibility that relies upon a sense of being from the South but not bound by its conventions or stereotypes—southern identity as a web of words, to use Richard Gray’s phrase,³⁵ which migrant blacks engage in and disengage from, all the while continually renegotiating the terms of that engagement and the extent of their participation in that dialogue. The South here is a series of cultural memories and attachments that Jake can draw on as a form of resistance to white power, but that also allows him to recognize manifestations of racist structures in a northern setting precisely because he can see their parallel in southern oppression. The key to Jake’s regional sensibility, it seems, is the degree to which he can make use of both the pain and pleasure of southern black history.

As their day at the post office continues, the men’s conversations are shown to us as increasingly interconnected, and Wright presents us with long sections of joking, commiserating, and tall-tale spinning. Southern-to-northern migrants all, Jake and his friends find themselves increasingly working through their own southern pasts, as though seeking to locate their own places within those pasts. The conversation veers from dreams, to commentary on a religiously themed railway circular, to issues of race and

³⁵ See Richard Gray, *A Web Of Words* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2007), 9-11.

place. Discussion of white violence against blacks turns, almost inexorably, into an argument about the meaning of the South for northern migrants like them: “Looks like it’s fun to them to see people suffer.” “That’s cause they ain’t happy...” “... and they take it out on you.” “That’s the reason why we had to get out of the South...” “and to stop slaving for them white folks from ‘kin ‘til can’t...” “...from sunup to sundown...”³⁶

Soon, though, the conversation turns to evocations of southern pastoral memories:

“Yeah, but there was some goodtimes in the South...” “...when the white folks wasn’t nowhere around...” “...and the guys all gathered in the backyard with guitars...” “...playing and singing...” “...and that evening sun going down...” “...red like blood...” “and that old lazy river flowing South...[. . .] “...Boy, the South’s good...” “...and bad!” “...It’s Heaven...” “...and Hell...” “...all rolled into one!”³⁷

These characters want to seize for themselves the very pastoral affirmations of southern life that whites used to enforce their racially hierarchical vision of the South—to “speak” a southernness that belongs to blacks as well. Jake and his friends recognize the constructed nature of white southern affirmations; they understand the violent threat that exists just beyond the circle of their own “playing and singing.” But they also consider affirmation of their shared southern history to be a useful component of black identity. The southern regionalism that we see on display here is one whose practitioners gaze back towards the South from the perspective of northern transplants, cognizant of the South as an imaginary construction. It is also a regionalism that allows them to recognize the value of their “local” southern knowledge, as they seek to achieve empowerment and agency in the North.

³⁶ Wright, *Lawd Today*, 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 178-79.

This balance of pride in escape into a “larger world” and simultaneous longing for the familiarity of “home,” despite the horror, pain, and trauma that living in that home engendered, is characteristic of what Homi K. Bhabha calls an “unhomely” consciousness. Here, Bhabha conceives of the “paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition,” wherein “the border between home and world become confused, and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”³⁸ To the extent that Jake and his friends have fled a place of trauma but find themselves continually drawn back there because of the sense of home that they associate with it, we can consider their southern regional consciousness as akin to the “unhomely” disorientation that Bhabha speaks of. However, the characters in *Lawd Today!*, no less than other South-to-North migrants, also remained in a nation whose culture affirmed southern myth on a daily basis. It was this cultural presence that Wright would seek to destabilize, even as he sought ways to put an increasingly “cosmopolitan” worldview in accommodation with the “home” that blacks like him had left behind.

Catering to Fantasy

Lawd Today! was a novel for which Wright could not find a publisher, and part of the problem may have been that the work’s attempt to articulate the relationship between southern and northern black lives was simply not what publishers wanted to see from

³⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 27.

black writers. Jeff Karem argues that the novel “demonstrates that there is no single place where America’s design for freedom is fulfilled for all its citizens, that the nation’s joys and pains, faults and triumphs, cannot be confined to one place.”³⁹ This mediated treatment of black southern experience was the opposite of what white northern publishers wanted to see from a black writer; Karem goes on to make the case that, given the complex place that the South held in the national imagination at the time, Wright could not be successful in the marketplace unless his work “quarantined” the South as the repository of the nation’s racial and social ills, and little more.

Karem reports that it was only when “Big Boy Leaves Home” first appeared in the anthology *Caravan* in 1936 that a number of publishers, Simon and Schuster and W.W. Norton among them, solicited Wright for a manuscript, and then only because that story, to those publishers, seemed to provide the kind of quarantining work that they wanted.⁴⁰ But although the story may have been a response to Wright’s growing realization that “his most negotiable cultural capital was his ability to represent southern black life,”⁴¹ we can see that it is actually a far more unusual and fraught depiction of “southern authenticity” than it may have appeared to observers at the time.

When “Big Boy Leaves Home” was reprinted as the first story in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), it announced itself as a self-conscious intervention in the prevailing narrative of southern regionalism. On a facing page that precedes the beginning of the

³⁹ Jeff Karem, *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2004), 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

story, there is a quote from the first verse of “Is It True What They Say About Dixie?,” followed by Wright’s subtitle, “—Popular Song.” Indeed, it was quite a popular song—in 1936, the song had been a #1 hit for Jimmy Dorsey and his Orchestra. By the time the quote was included at the head of “Big Boy” in its incarnation in *Children* two years later, it had become a standard.⁴² The song had been written and published by three Jewish men from New York: Irving Caesar, Sammy Lerner and Gerald Marks. With its lyrical references to “sweet magnolias” blossoming “at everybody’s door,” and “folks eating ‘possum, till they can’t eat any more,” the song is a northern white songwriter’s embrace of southern white myth: the South here is one whose pleasures are open to all, and where life is literally carefree for all its residents, black and white. The part of the song’s lyric that Wright chose to reprint references other popular songs of the day, “Swanee” most notably,⁴³ and it implies that, should we attempt to compare southern myth to southern reality, we might see the myth confirmed: “Do they laugh, do they love, like they say in ev’ry song?/If it’s true, that’s where I belong.”⁴⁴

Wright was intending to shock his readers with the familiar reference, and “Big Boy” proceeds to answer the singer’s question—it isn’t true what they say about Dixie, and “belonging” in the South is not a concept that can be easily understood.⁴⁵ But the

⁴² The African American vocal group, The Mills Brothers, would record another hit version in 1949, in collaboration with blackface singer Al Jolson. See Steven J Whitfield, “Is It True What They Say About Dixie?,” *Southern Cultures* 8.2 (2002): 9-37.

⁴³ Something of a parody of Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks At Home,” “Swanee” was George Gershwin and Irving Caesar’s biggest hit, with Al Jolson’s 1919 rendition selling millions of copies of both sheet music and recordings.

⁴⁴ Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 2004), 16.

⁴⁵ Indeed, so obvious was the move that Wright was making with the song that the reviewer for the Michigan Chronicle, “G.E.M.,” took it as his initial point of reference for his review: “Using several lines

quote's placement at the head of this story and of the collection of stories has another purpose: it announces to the public that the song of the South is an imaginary projection, one that the following stories will seek to subvert and complicate in heretofore unexpected ways.

“Big Boy” itself seems, at first, to be an affirmation of black southern cultural forms, in contrast to the faux-South of “Dixie.” The story starts with the first line of another set of lyrics—this time, of the song sung by the four black boys to whom the story introduces us: “Yo Mama don wear no drawers... .” In the first line of the story, the boys sing us into their world, “a quartet of voices, blending in harmony, high above the treetops.”⁴⁶ Wright allows us just enough of a glimpse into their lives to make us wonder why they might want to be anywhere else: “They fell silent, smiling, drooping the lids of their eyes softly against the sunlight. ‘Man don the groun feel warm?’ ‘Jus lika bed.’ ‘Jeesus, Ah could stay here forever.’”⁴⁷ When the boys, who have apparently skipped school in order to go swimming in the woods, begin to mention the threat of lynching and the racism inherent in the “No Trespassing” sign they encounter around the swimming hole, they don’t seem especially concerned by the possibility of these threats manifesting into reality. And once we have read the vivid descriptions of the warmth of the ground

from the popular song of a few seasons ago, ‘Is It True What They Say About Dixie,’ as introduction for his book, Richard Wright shows in four well-written stories that what they say is definitely not true for the Negro...” John M. Reilly, *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception* (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1978), 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

and the vitality of the boys' shared songs, we wonder how the world that Wright has painted for us could ever turn against the characters that populate it.

But when the naked boys emerge from the water, the first person they see (and who sees them) is a white woman, Bertha, who cringes fearfully from what she assumes is a sexual threat. Her fiancé, Jim, shoots two of the boys, and the two others, Big Boy and Bobo, kill Jim with his own gun, before running away. Bobo is later killed by a mob of whites, whose own song—"We'll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree"—lets us know that, no matter what songs blacks sing to enforce their shared sense of community with one another, whites' songs are backed up by power, force, and violence. White violence is revealed to be the essential undercurrent to black southern life, the truth barely obscured by the cultural persistence of southern myth.

Many critics, Michael Kreyling among them, see Wright's subversion of southern regional ideas in "Big Boy" as simply that—propaganda, and a signal to white southern writers that he would fight their propaganda with his own.⁴⁸ Indeed, the portrait of the South that emerges in "Big Boy" does seem to present the very cultural forms that the boys traded in as ineffectual, mere window dressing in the face of the realities of white power. And once the power of the boys' song has been swept away by the violence that lay latent around them, black southern life stands revealed as essentially powerless. The community of black parents and church elders who gather, concerned over Big Boy's fate, are shown as utterly unable to do anything for Big Boy but help him escape a South

⁴⁸ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1998), 79-80.

that is now unlivable for him. The other community members might be able continue living there, hoping that they can escape further white wrath, but Big Boy, having drawn the attention of angry whites, will have to leave. Even worse, his family, rather than immediately rallying to his defense, doesn't initially believe his innocence in the matter: when Big Boy tells his father that Bertha "jus backed erway t the tree n screamed," he replies, "Big Boy, did yuh-all bother her?"⁴⁹ The black family here, rather than being a source of strength for fellow blacks threatened by racist violence, is a symbol of southern blacks' disunity and weakness. The only hope for survival in such a system is to escape.

In nearly every story in the volume, in fact, evocations of southern place, southern black community, and southern culture are precursors to the disruption of those evocations by brutal acts of violence, perpetrated by whites against blacks. In this way, these stories self-consciously invert southern myth by defining the South as the necessary start of blacks' inevitable journey North, but in doing so also reiterate a southern-northern dichotomy. But on the other hand, there is little question that Wright's evocations of southern landscape and black folk life resonate, in all of the stories. Even though many northern readers saw in *Uncle Tom's Children* a confirmation of their fantasies of the South as the necessary start for blacks of an inevitable journey North, Wright couldn't help but evoke southern black culture as an essential component of the communities from which migrants made that journey. The songs that the boys in "Big Boy" sing to

⁴⁹ Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, 40.

themselves are all presented to us in language too warm for them to be simply props in a drama that confirms white northern fantasies about their southern neighbors.

The final story in the volume, “Bright And Morning Star,” a tale that Wright published separately from *Uncle Tom’s Children* but added to subsequent editions of the collection, represents a continuation of Wright’s affirmation of southern regional particulars, even as he presents the South in which those particulars emerged as a hell on earth for people of color. “Bright and Morning Star” portrays black Communists in the South refusing to break solidarity with one another. The mother of one of them is shot by a mob of whites after she shoots an informant before he can reveal the identities of other Party members. The violence that concludes this story is that of a martyr’s death, and in some ways “Bright and Morning Star” is an argument that southern black survival does not necessarily entail abandoning southern connections entirely; rather, southern blacks can survive in the South if they learn to see their struggles as part of a larger international movement of the oppressed against the oppressors—if, in other words, they can see their regional lives in an international light.

Leigh Anne Duck makes the point that, in “Bright and Morning Star,” the mother, Sue, presents herself to the white mob who kill her “as a folk mother who is seeking only to preserve her son’s body,” and that the story thus “compresses both old and new and southern and leftist-national.”⁵⁰ Indeed, we are told that Sue has found a way to bridge the southern “old” and the international socialist “new,” compressing both into some new

⁵⁰ Duck, *The Nation’s Region*, 195.

consciousness: “But sometimes like tonight, while lost in the forgetfulness of work, the past and the present would become mixed in her; while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lips with their beguiling sweetness.”⁵¹ That song, the traditional hymn “Lily of the Valley,” recurs throughout the story, a reminder the “bright and morning star” of her old religious beliefs even as the “strange star” of leftism threatens to eclipse them. We are told that, even as she had lost faith in the belief that the hymn represented for her, she had never fully abandoned faith in favor of a commitment to “the fight of black men for freedom.” Instead, she felt the need “to fling into her black sky another star, another hope, one more terrible vision to give her the strength to live and act.”⁵² That vision, “the depths of her star,” is what she sees as she dies, bloodied but unbowed, as the sky looks down upon “the doomed living and the dead that never dies.”⁵³ Wright is unclear about just what this new, personal star of Sue’s might imply, but it clearly encompasses both the vision of grace that had suffused her rural youth and her commitment to the struggle of the “white and black comrades” whose “array of shacks” now dotted the countryside around her community.⁵⁴ *Uncle Tom’s Children*, even if it began for many readers as a split between a southern starting point and northern destination, concludes by pointing towards a comingling of the South with leftist political philosophies that extend beyond regional and national boundaries alike.

⁵¹ Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, 226.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

At the time, much of the reading public missed these nuanced negotiations of the meaning of regional culture in a South whose black population was rapidly migrating away from it. The vast majority of critics lauded the collection precisely because it seemed to grant them the license to project an equal and opposite fantasy upon the South from “Is It True What They Say About Dixie”—a fantasy in which lynching, pain, and oppression became the equal and opposite number for visions of magnolias, possums, and sunshine. Wright himself recognized the failure of the collection to provide a representation of southern black life that was more than a mirror image of the pastoral stereotype. Reflecting on his success with the collection in his essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” (1940), Wright admitted:

I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.⁵⁵

In providing catharsis to northern white readers, Wright felt that he had created another opportunity for whites to distance themselves from southern black life, this time because they perceived that life as no more than the negative opposite of southern white myth.

The subsequent success of the novel *Native Son* (1940) would raise Wright’s public profile dramatically and transform him into a national black spokesman. But that novel would also confirm, for many, the false portrait of black southern life as an unremitting horror that white readers and reviewers believed that they had seen in *Uncle*

⁵⁵ Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in *Native Son* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2005), 454.

Tom's Children. The novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, moved to Chicago from Mississippi, went to school "mostly in the South," and his father "got killed in a riot when I was a kid—in the South."⁵⁶ A small-time criminal, Bigger gets a job working for the liberal Dalton family, but he murders their daughter Mary in a moment of panic. After attempting to extort money from the Dalton family by pretending to have kidnapped Mary, Bigger is caught, tried, and convicted for the murders in a trial in which the prosecutor blatantly plays on the white jury's racist fear of black violence and sexual predation. There are few innocents in the story, and Bigger himself is hardly the innocent victim of racist violence that Big Boy was.

In many ways, Bigger is a version of Big Boy after he left the South, a Big Boy who had come to recognize the uselessness of southern black folk culture in the face of the realities of white power. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright argued that Bigger acts as he does only because he "had become estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race."⁵⁷ The resistance that Wright imagined the Biggers of his youth enacting emerged because they didn't become "submissive" in the face of southern white oppression; submissive, that is, like southern blacks who embraced southern black folk culture and the submissiveness to white authority that Wright saw as that culture's accomplice. In a critique that Wright would reiterate in *Black Boy*, he argued that "the civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him

⁵⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 74.

⁵⁷ Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 439.

and left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities. . .”⁵⁸ Indeed, throughout *Native Son* there is a notable absence of any trace of black culture that is not somehow negative or value-less. Unlike the evocative southern black cultural portraits that Wright painted in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, the culture that underlies Bigger Thomas is void, a nothingness against which to react, but little more than that. Here, black flight to the North only shows a removal of a limited and limiting southern portrait from one setting to another. It is Bigger’s very distance from that culture that empowers him to act in a resistant manner to white power in the North.

Wright’s Angle of Vision

Wright’s denunciations of southern black folk culture in “How Bigger Was Born,” and his narrow portrait of urban black culture in *Native Son*, remain major stumbling blocks for critics. How do we square Wright’s dismissal of black culture as containing “no spiritual sustenance” with his evocations of it in “Bright and Morning Star”? Paul Gilroy, for one, argues that Wright was always “deeply ambivalent both about the Folk and about all forms of popular culture, in which he observed the effects of racism as well as the dazzling capacity for creative improvisation in the face of adversity.”⁵⁹

But Wright’s “ambivalence” about black culture in *Native Son* is part of a grappling with how best to present the southern origins of that culture. In “Blueprint for

⁵⁸ Ibid., 445.

⁵⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 157.

Negro Writing” (1938), Wright had attempted to explain what he had in mind, and what kind of regional vision he was aiming for. There, he affirmed black folk culture in explicit terms, and in ways which stand at odds with some of his denunciations of that culture elsewhere and later:

[I]t was ... in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which racial vision flowed.⁶⁰

The writing that Wright calls for here is writing that acknowledges both the “rigorous and inhuman conditions” as well as the “racial vision” which emerged from those conditions.

Asking black writers to consider Marxism only as a starting point, “because no theory of life can take the place of life,” Wright asked:

What vision must Negro writers have before their eyes in order to feel the impelling necessity for an about face? What angle of vision can show them all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic development converging toward a distant point of hope? . . . Perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly on paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Richard Wright, “Blueprint For Negro Writing,” in *The Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

Wright would make use of the Emersonian phrase⁶² “angle of vision” in a number of other essays throughout his career, but here the phrase names a perspective from which black writers, and Wright certainly includes himself in that category, can come to see black life as intimately connected to its southern and African history, as well as to the “distant hope” that those histories tend toward.⁶³ This angle is one that also entails a certain kind of authorial distance—neither “too close” nor “too far way”—from those histories.

Native Son shows Wright stepping back from this vision and catering to an expectation on the part of readers for a portrait of the South as the dark side of a northern light. However, one month prior to *Native Son*'s publication, Wright offered a glimpse of the kind of cosmopolitan regionalism that he was seeking to define, in the short story “Almos' A Man.”⁶⁴ The story, published in *Harper's Bazaar*, plunges readers back again into southern rural life, but here Wright's vision of southern black life was vastly different from what he had shown in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “How Bigger Was Born.” Although written at roughly the same time as “Big Boy,” “Almos' A Man” was

⁶² In “Natural History of the Intellect,” Emerson wrote: “What is life but the angle of vision? A man is measured by the angle at which he looks at objects.” For an analysis of this essay, see Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952), 71.

⁶³ Notably, in his introduction to George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (1956). Here, he was discussing the particular outlook of Africans and African Americans in a postcolonial world: “The black man's is a strange situation; it is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people; it is an outlook of people looking upward from below.” Richard Wright, “Forward, *George Padmore, Pan-Africanism or Communism?*,” in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, ed. Michel Fabre (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1990), 232.

⁶⁴ It appeared in January, 1940. “Almos' A Man” would later be re-titled “The Man Who Was Almost A Man,” and with some minor changes to syntax would be included as the first story in Wright's short story collection, *Eight Men* (1961). For the benefit of current readers, I will follow the language and page numbering from its reprinted version in *Eight Men*.

the first public step Wright took in asking readers to come to terms with a vision of southern regional affiliation that was far more complicated than the public had yet come to expect from him, and that points us towards Wright's developing cosmopolitan vision.⁶⁵

Safely sandwiched between pictures of white models in a women's fashion magazine, "Almos' a Man" was accompanied by two illustrations by Thomas Hart Benton, with the first located immediately above the title and author's name. Benton had, by 1940, become internationally known as a principle practitioner of "regionalism" in art, a movement in which Benton, along with such artists as Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, was understood to be celebrating and evoking Midwestern working class life and rural scenery in the most resonant and uncomplicated way possible. Although recent scholars have been more kind,⁶⁶ at the time Benton was associated with a conception of "the regional" that was conservative, reactionary, and limited. Benton's stylized portraits of landscapes and their residents affirmed their subjects as beautifully and proudly resistant to the predations of the new, and his work was championed by national opinion-makers desperate for evocations of "authenticity" amidst the confusion engendered by modern art—and, indeed, by modernity itself. The simplistic notion of region that the public had come to expect from Benton is underscored by his biographical entry in the

⁶⁵ Prior to the publication of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright had been circulating another novel, *Tarbaby's Dawn*, which remains unpublished. "Almos' A Man" was excerpted from the final chapters of the manuscript and published on its own. See Rowley, *The Life and Times*, 131-32, and Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 153-54.

⁶⁶ See James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: Univ. Press of Wisconsin, 1998).

magazine's "Editor's Guest Book." The editors remind us that Benton was well known for producing "some of the most vital and rugged mural paintings ever done in this country" following the artist's return from Paris "to Missouri, where he now lives with his tall beautiful wife and eleven-year-old son."

Wright's biographical information appears just above Benton's. The editors tell us that Wright "was born twenty-nine years ago on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi," and that "in early childhood he remembers something like an orphan home, then later his mother cooking and washing in Tennessee and Arkansas to support her two children."⁶⁷ In these instances, readers are being asked to locate both writer and artist as emerging from some easily understood regional "real"—the "rugged" Midwest in Benton's case, a southern plantation in Wright's—against which the hair salon or living room in which they read the magazine could be measured.

The first illustration that accompanies Wright's story underscores the "regionally authentic" tone of the biographies. It shows a young black man standing behind a mule and plow with a wavering gun in his hand, wearing overalls that are a size too small, with a tree stump and a felled log in the foreground.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "The Editor's Guest Book," *Harper's Bazaar* (January, 1940): 10

⁶⁸ It was Benton's caricaturing of black figures that drew particular ire from leftist critics of the day. Stuart Davis, a modernist painter associated with the Communist-affiliated Artists Union, wrote that "the only thing [Benton's black figures] directly represent is a third-rate, vaudeville cliché with the humor omitted." Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 30.

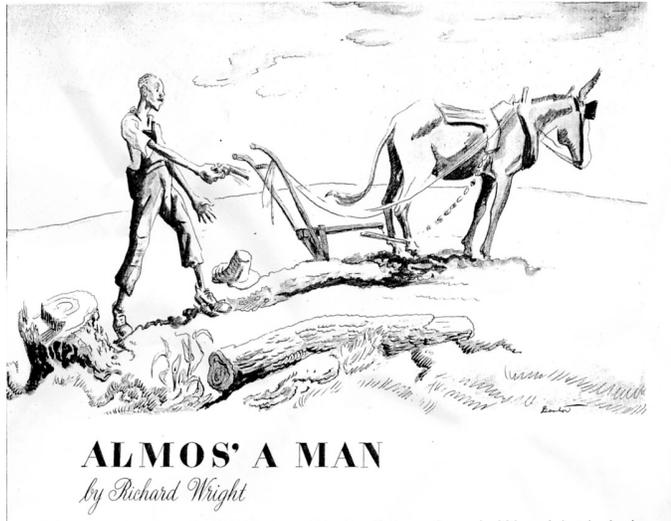


Figure 1: Thomas Hart Benton illustration for “Almos’ A Man” title page, *Harper’s Bazaar*, January 1940.

The other illustration,⁶⁹ placed at the bottom of the second page, shows the black figure watching an approaching train in the distance, and is postcard-like in its simplicity. The figure braces himself against a barbed-wire fence as the train makes its way towards him, its smoke trailing behind it, while a full moon gazes down on the scene.

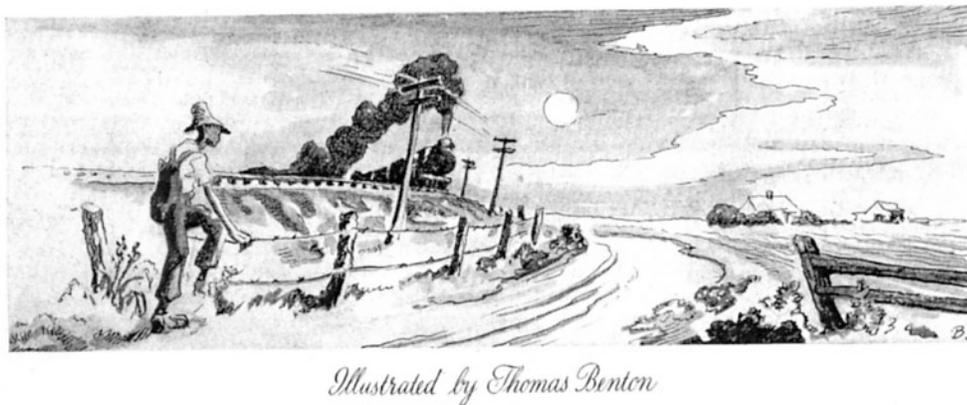


Figure 2: Thomas Hart Benton illustration for “Almos’ A Man” final page, *Harper’s Bazaar*, January 1940.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 41.

But unlike the placement of “Dixie” prior to “Big Boy,” the illustrations here perform rather different work, and the story that follows them is an inversion of that earlier story’s apparent delegitimizing of regional particulars. “Almos’ A Man” is the story of Dave, a seventeen-year-old sharecropper who works with his family on land owned by Jim Hawkins, a white farmer. Associating his emerging masculinity with the idea of buying a firearm, Dave arranges to purchase a gun from Joe, the white owner of a general store. He borrows the two dollars for the gun from his mother, under the provision that he will give the gun to his father right away, but instead hides it and keeps it for himself. The next day, Dave mistakenly shoots a mule while practicing with the gun in a field. He eventually confesses to having done so to Hawkins, who arranges to have Dave work off the debt for the cost of the mule. His parents are furious with him, and so humiliated is Dave over the situation (not to mention a fifty dollar debt that will take him two years to pay off), that he hitches a ride on a passing train, assumedly to Chicago—the great destination for so many southern-to-northern black migrants.

Unlike the stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Almos’ A Man” shows no hint at all of the threat of racial violence from whites. In fact, whites in the story are either helpful to Dave (Joe the storeowner) or relatively innocuous (Hawkins the plantation owner). When Joe offers to sell Dave a gun, he at no point questions Dave’s worthiness to own a firearm because of his color, and facilitates the purchase by lending him a Sears Roebuck catalog to peruse. Although Joe and Hawkins are both in control of the levers of economic power, Dave is able to operate with some degree of agency within their system,

and his relationship to his own southern black community, while hardly ideal, is also far more complicated than it at first appears. Although Dave feels alienated from “em niggers in the field,” there is little indication that they feel alienated from one another. Although Dave’s mother is opposed to the idea of her son owning a gun, she ultimately lends him the money to buy one for his father—a situation that she apparently recognizes as justifiable when Dave offers the excuse: “We needa gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell whut might happen.”⁷⁰

The implication in Dave’s statement, that a gang of angry whites might descend on the family if Dave or his father transgresses the Jim Crow rules for black conduct, never comes to pass. Dave even imagines that he could “kill a man with a gun like this. Kill any man, black or white,”⁷¹ but the story involves no violence between human beings at all. Even though Dave longs to “taka shot at tha house” that Hawkins lives in, he never does.⁷² The narrator points out to us that Dave has always felt estranged from fellow blacks,⁷³ and this incident certainly elevates Dave’s isolation from those around him. But even if Dave, at the story’s conclusion, comes to see his himself and his parents as actors who are trapped in a southern system of debt and wage-slavery that allows for little momentum, the cost of paying off the mule is Dave’s problem, not theirs. The alienation that Dave comes to feel from his community, one that compels him to jump on the Illinois Central and ride the “the long rails” that were “stretching away to somewhere,

⁷⁰ Richard Wright, *Eight Men* (1961; repr., New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2008), 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷³ “Whut’s the use talking wid em niggers in the field? ... Them niggers can’t understan nothing.” *Ibid.*, 3.

somewhere where he could be a man,”⁷⁴ is an alienation that *he* feels, and his leaving is as much a selfish act of abandonment of his family to deal with his debt as it is a leap into some new, wider world.

“Almos’ A Man” tells the story of a young black man leaving the South, but not because he is fleeing white violence, and it shows a South whose black residents, while they might not be exactly ripe for revolution, are not trapped in as rigid a set of social restrictions as Wright’s earlier stories had depicted. Dave’s migration North at the end of the story, his search for a place where he can “be a man,” is balanced by a relatively stable black community back home that has to remain behind to clean up after him—working off a debt that he will one day have to repay.

Seen in light of the story itself, the regionalism that Benton’s illustrations evoke is more complicated than his detractors imagined. Although there is no indication that Wright and Benton collaborated on the piece in any way, we can see the illustrations as presenting a portrait of the South as a poverty stricken wasteland that migrants are bound to leave, and at the same time as a place that is the basis for a deeply embedded southern black culture. The second illustration, in which Dave sees the train approaching in the distance, is particularly important in this regard. A hat on his head, his foot braced against the fence, Dave watches a train that seems as integrated into the landscape as is the moon that hangs over the scene. The landscape, the train out of that landscape, and Dave himself all seem like parts of the same whole.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 18.

“Almos A Man” was, in fact, an excerpt from *Tarbaby’s Dawn*, a novel that Wright had written around the same time as *Lawd Today!* (but before the majority of the stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children*).⁷⁵ Its later publication presented to readers a side of Wright that they had not glimpsed heretofore. The story marks the beginning of Wright’s return to the cosmopolitan path that he had been on before the interruption of *Native Son*. As minor a piece as it is, “Almos’ A Man” reaffirms Wright’s earlier need to articulate a balancing act between evocations of southern black life and explorations of the value of rootlessness for an outwardly-migrating southerner—a balancing act that he would, from that point on, work toward perfecting.

The Living Past Living In The Present

The appearance of “Almos A Man” in *Harper’s* was also coincident with a sudden need on Wright’s part to return South and “re-see and re-feel” his own southern beginnings. After spending the years since his move from Mississippi considering the meaning of black southern life from a northern distance, Wright had decided to re-engage with his southern past firsthand. In mid-June of 1940, Wright traveled by train from Mexico City, where he had been staying with his first wife, Dhimah, through Texas and Mississippi to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The ostensible reason for the trip was to meet with playwright Paul Green in Chapel Hill to collaborate on a dramatization of *Native*

⁷⁵ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 153-54.

Son,⁷⁶ but Wright decided to travel there through a slow and indirect route, and to stop off and meet with relatives (and with his estranged father) along the way.

Throughout the journey, Wright encountered segregation and prejudice on a regular basis, but he found that it was the southern black community towards which he felt a disconcerting sense of distance. Not surprisingly, given his earlier published denunciations of the idea of southern black culture, it was that culture that he struggled hardest to connect with. In a reflection on the visit written several years afterwards, Wright remarked that, once in Natchez, what he saw of black life left him feeling profoundly disturbed and alienated:

I spent my last Sunday in a dingy tavern, listening to the automatic phonograph grind out dance tunes to which nobody danced or listened. The customers drank round upon round of beer and talked. At dinnertime they went home, one by one, to eat. Later, they came back and talked some more. It was past midnight when I caught a train and headed toward the Atlantic coast, feeling numbed and lost.⁷⁷

Wright acknowledges here that there is a southern black culture all around him, and that those who engage with it find it valuable and necessary; *he* may not be drinking or listening to music in the tavern, but everyone else is. But the perspective on the South that he had developed while absent from it is difficult for him to reconcile with the persistence of southern life for the blacks he encountered there who had never left. Later on, Wright makes this dissonance even more explicit:

The disappointment that I felt made me wonder why I had wanted to

⁷⁶ According to Rowley, Wright left Mexico City on June 10th: “There was no question of traveling in the South with a white wife. And he wanted to be alone. With everything so uncertain—the state of the world and the state of the marriage—he felt he needed a journey into his past.” Rowley, *The Life and Times*, 206.

⁷⁷ Richard Wright, “How Jim Crow Feels,” in *Negro Digest* (January 1947): 49-50.

see and feel it all again. It took me but two hours to discover what I had been seeking by returning was in the far-off memories of my own childhood. True, the tall, moss-hung oaks were still there, but somehow they reminded me of cheap picture postcards. The broad, yellow Mississippi still flowed, but its majesty no longer impressed me; indeed, it looked like a big lazy ditch. Jim Crow was still Jim Crow and not a single racial practice had altered during my twenty-five year absence.⁷⁸

Wright's language here is a mixture of contrasting affirmations and denunciations—a parallel to the sorts of positive and negative southern contrasts he had earlier drawn in his fictions. He describes how “over the stench of outdoor privies came the sweet scent of magnolias. The cooking was heavy and greasy and stayed in one's stomach for an ungodly number of hours. . . . It rained and the damp smell of vegetation always hung in the air. By day flies hummed. At night mosquitoes sang.”⁷⁹ Those tensions, between the scent of magnolias in contrast to the stench of privies, or the smell of vegetation balanced against the humming and singing of insects, would become inescapable influences on Wright's published work. This journey back South seems to have spurred Wright to refocus his energies on black southern life, and to consciously experiment with a narrative form that would allow him to articulate the relationship between the dichotomies that that life illustrated for him. Wright's next publications would blur the line between nonfiction and fiction, and each would bring him closer to an articulation of regional and global intersections that he was calling for in “Blueprint for Negro Writing.”

⁷⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 49.

The most important of these was *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), a photo-documentary collaboration with Edwin Rosskam. Subtitled “A Folk History Of The Negro In the United States,” part one, “Our Strange Birth,” begins with a photograph of a field hand holding a plow, his face unseen, and follows with a photograph of an old black farm worker whose lined visage is framed with grey hair. But before the reader can place either picture into some safe, familiar frame of reference of what she imagines southern black life embodies, the text disrupts her familiarity with a dramatic warning: “Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem.”⁸⁰ Wright lets his reader know what he is in for—*we* are telling *you* to suspend your preconceptions about blacks—but also to see urban and rural black life as inextricably bound parts of the same whole: “Beneath the garb of the black laborer, the black cook, and the black elevator operator lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.”⁸¹ Those points of time and space and the way that they converge are what *12 Million Black Voices* attempts to explore. It is about the kind of identity that those “many points of time and space” work toward.

After Wright recounts, in the first section, the history of slavery and the massive disruption to African life that such uprooting engendered, he gives his readers an examination of southern black life in detail. *Lawd Today!*, *Uncle Tom’s Children* and

⁸⁰ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

“Almos’ A Man” had provided brief glimpses of that life; now, the second section of the book, “Inheritors of Slavery,” shows us a portrait that is self-consciously at odds with prevailing white racist myths about the South. Over a ten page section,⁸² the reader is presented with images of dignified black churchgoers, emotional religious meetings, and a photograph of a woman dancing at a Saturday-night gathering while her well-dressed friends look on, approvingly. The text shifts from plain text to italics, and provides us with an extended sermon to accompany the images of worship. The “we” of the text then returns, telling us that “we go home pleasantly tired and sleep easily, for we know that we hold somewhere within our hearts a possibility of inexhaustible happiness; we know that if we could be get our feet planted firmly upon this earth, we could laugh and live and build.”⁸³ The religious theme flows into that of the Saturday night party, and alongside the aforementioned photograph, there is a blues lyric: “Shake it to the east/Shake it to the west/Shake it to the one/You love the best...”⁸⁴ “We” then returns yet again, to affirm that “It is the capacity for joy that makes us hymn: I’m a stranger/Don’t drive me away/I’m a stranger/Don’t drive me away.”⁸⁵

There is little counterpart in this section in any of Wright’s previous work, and it may be that what facilitates this evocation of black folk life, the “capacity for joy” Wright designates here, is the “we” itself. Wright may have expressed personal ambivalence about black southernness in his nonfiction essays, but this experiment in point of view

⁸² Ibid., 67-77.

⁸³ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 75.

and photographic media seems to have freed him to construct a textual language through which to document black southernness from both a “close” and “distant” perspective— “we” are both within and without regional identification. Blacks “roam the woods, bareheaded and barefoot, singing and whistling and shouting in wild hilarious chorus a string of ditties that make the leaves of the trees shiver in naked and raucous laughter,” as Big Boy and his friends had done. Blacks also “doubt our songs” at times, because “they are not enough to unify our fragile folk lives in this competitive world.”⁸⁶ Both joy and doubt are part of those “fragile folk lives,” and it is the first person plural which encompasses both. But “this competitive world” is intimately connected with those lives, and *12 Million Black Voices*, as it develops, draws a portrait of a migratory experience which serves to bring that world and those lives into the same conversation.

12 Million Black Voices argues that the shifts of black populations from Africa to the South, and then from the South to the North (and ultimately to beyond the United States itself), are part of a series of movements that characterize the black diaspora overall, and that all these movements carry within them the trace of the particular. True, we are told that blacks had “already roamed the South”⁸⁷ looking for better farm conditions and better lives; going North, either because of the promise of better lives or because of “this slow death” that staying entails, is only the latest move. But that move, even if it seems to be a one-way journey towards some new, less parochial black

⁸⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 87.

consciousness, is one that Wright characterizes as one that is ultimately made known by recourse to a southern cultural referent.

In part three, “Death On The City Pavements,” Wright describes the massive break that southern rural to northern urban movement brought to the black experience: “Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone.”⁸⁸ But we should bear in mind, when Wright speaks of the “folk,” something that Wright had claimed about black identity in “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” There, Wright had exhorted black writers to “have in their consciousness the fore-shortened picture of the *whole*, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long, complex and (and for the most part unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again.”⁸⁹ The implication is that the southern black experience remained part of the “new whole” that black folk were integrating with their African past and northern present—and, as such, it is the nature of black folk culture to be in the process of formation, of migration, of transition, and to be in conversation with lines of history and culture that reach internationally. In this section of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright makes the rooted and unrooted identities of that folk even more explicit, saying that southern blacks “needed the ritual and guidance of institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose . . . we who had had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery had been turned loose shift for ourselves—we

⁸⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁹ Wright, “Blueprint For Negro Writing,” 47.

were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were, that threw us into the scales of competition to weigh our mettle.” Blacks had been “atomized” in the South, and now their atomization had been forced into contact with a world whose scales were themselves shifting back and forth.

But as unprepared as the atomized rural folk may have been for yet further disruption, it soon becomes clear that the new lives that they were experiencing in the North, though different, were not quite as different as they had first seemed to be. “Death on the City Pavements” presents us with evocations of the racial horror and deprivation that the new urban landscape asks blacks to face. The narrative transitions us from the white “Lords of the Land” in the South to the “bosses of the Buildings” in the North, and the accompanying photographs of slum kitchenettes, back-breaking manufacturing labor, and northern race riots are counterpoints to the images of farm drudgery and lynchings in the earlier sections of the book. This section also includes images of blacks in celebration, expressing an urban black folk culture in much the same way that they expressed southern folk culture earlier. Here, the black northern experience is in conversation with a southern one:

Just as in the South, in spite of the Lords of the Land, we managed to keep alive deep down in us a hope of what life could be, so now, with death ever hard at our heels, we pour forth in song and dance, without stint or shame, a sense of what our bodies want, a hint of our hope of a full life lived without fear, a whisper of the natural dignity we feel life can have, a cry of hunger for something new to fill our souls, to reconcile the ecstasy of living with the terror of dying...⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Ibid., 126.

Throughout this section, in fact, we are asked to see this northern stop on the journey as one that is intimately connected to blacks' previous southern lives, even as the North has the potential to "break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life."⁹¹ In the final section, "Men In The Making," Wright tells us that blacks are about to "shed our folk swaddling-clothes," and that "many white workers" helped blacks "step forth" and accept "the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free."⁹²

It may seem from Wright's conclusion that blacks must abandon southern regional connections, in order to move into what he calls "the sphere of conscious history,"⁹³ and several critics, particularly Farah Jasmine Griffin, see it in this way. Griffin argues that, because Wright's migrant characters fail to return back South once having left it,

for Richard Wright, a return to the South is a retreat into a dark and ugly history. The only positive movement is a progressive, linear one forward into the future, abroad to Europe, or to a final death on the city pavement. Even this latter option is preferred to a return South.⁹⁴

However, although Wright may be unable to depict a positive return South for migrant blacks in *12 Million Black Voices*, for him the issue is not whether or how blacks are to "return." It is how blacks can work through and make use of their complex regional

⁹¹ Ibid., 117.

⁹² Ibid., 144.

⁹³ Ibid., 147.

⁹⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin?": *The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 164-66.

connections and disconnections. Wright's depiction of what that "sphere of conscious history" would look like is telling: "the death of our old folk lives" is not the same thing as an abandonment of them. Wright's ultimate argument is that the "new consciousness" that blacks would take advantage of following a journey North is one that includes, but is not bound by, those folk lives:

We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*. If we black folk perish, America will perish. If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the *living* past living in the present, for our memories go back, through the black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land.⁹⁵

The "*living* past living in the present" is Wright's statement, however obscure, of the place of southern affiliation in a post-migration context, and it is one that puts Wright in conversation with Appiah and Peacock. Wright, it is true, does not argue for the North as an international gateway, nor does he make a case in *12 Million Black Voices* for post-migration blacks as "global citizens." But in his mixture of southern past and northern present, he points towards a destabilization, and a deterritorialization, of southern identity in a nation that would soon extend itself internationally in a coming postcolonial era. In making a case for the way in which blacks can make use of their southern folk lives when the southernness of those folk lives has become disconnected from specific geography, Wright articulates southern experience as a lens through which southern-born blacks can look at the larger world—no matter how large that world might become.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 146.

Making Southern Cosmopolitanism Personal

12 Million Black Voices represents perhaps Wright's most focused published treatment of what southern regional affiliation could mean for blacks, should they find a way to reconfigure that affiliation in terms of a broader cosmopolitan sensibility. In a December 1941 radio interview, Wright contended that the book was part of "a life work" of his, which would show "in a foreshortened form that the development of Negro life in America parallels the development of people everywhere."⁹⁶ But the decision to use first-person plural in this text was a deliberate one. In that interview, Wright mentioned that he had already been making "an outline for a series of historical novels telescoping Negro history in terms of the urbanization of a feudal folk" when Roskam approached him with the idea for the photo-documentary. But working on it seems to have altered his trajectory as a writer. He admitted that his plan for "a series of novels" was no longer viable, because

that form has been used too much already and, besides, I don't think it lends itself to what I want to say, nor do I want to show one character through several volumes. One of the reasons why I wrote *12 Million Black Voices* in the first person plural was because I was experimenting with the kind of form I would need for this future work.⁹⁷

Wright admitted that the problem of form puzzled him, and that, "frankly, I don't know quite what I want. I am hunting for some kind of cement to tie it all together."⁹⁸ It is

⁹⁶ Edwin Seaver, "Readers and Writers," in *Conversations With Richard Wright*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1993), 44.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

unclear exactly when Wright decided to compact the “we” of *12 Million Black Voices* into the “I” of his next work, the autobiography *Black Boy*, but that seems to be what happened. “An autobiography,” Wright would later say, “is the story of one’s life, but if one wants to, one can make it more than that and I definitely had that in mind when I wrote the book. I wrote the book to tell a series of incidents strung through my childhood, but my main desire . . . was to render a judgment on my environment.”⁹⁹ *Black Boy* was not *just* an autobiography, nor an extended version of one of Wright’s nonfiction essays, but the next stage in his search for the narrative form that would best contain and express his cosmopolitan “angle of vision” on black southern life.¹⁰⁰

In the edition of *Black Boy* that first reached the public in March, 1945, we can see another, more carefully considered version of what Wright had already attempted in *12 Million Black Voices*, albeit with Wright’s “I” now addressing the reader even more dramatically than his earlier “we.” Beginning with a quote from the Book of Job, *Black Boy* presents to us the almost biblical struggle of Richard Wright, a black southerner who would defy his family and friends as well as southern whites, and who would emerge from southern poverty and pain to make a new life for himself in Chicago. The narrator’s loving descriptions of southern pastoralism are juxtaposed with imagery that is as violent and disturbing as were the lynching photographs in *12 Million Black Voices*. Following

⁹⁹ Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations*, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Ellison argued that “so much of this autobiography . . . is exaggerated, I think, precisely because Wright was trying to dramatize—indeed because of its many fictional techniques he could with justice have called it a ‘nonfiction’ novel—the complexity of Negro American experience as he knew and had lived it.” Ralph Ellison, “Remembering Richard Wright,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 676.

the recounting of a series of events notable for their familial cruelty and Wright's own equally violent responses, Wright then interrupts his narrative to tell us that:

Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings. . . . There was the yearning for identifications 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 huddled 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.¹⁰¹

Wright's language here also reiterates the "heaven and hell" argument of *Lawd Today!*, but makes the juxtaposition of "good and bad" even more specific. By drawing parallels between "yearning for identifications" with an ant and the "disdain" he felt while "torturing" an innocent crawfish, or comparing the "aching glory" in the sight of clouds and the "liquid alarm" of a sunset's reflection, Wright contrives a linguistic representation of southern pastoralism as internally compromised. Every evocative reminiscence is in contrast with its equally disruptive counter-image.¹⁰²

But this internal contradiction is extended here to black southern life itself, and at times it is difficult to square Wright's denunciations of that life with his evocations of it in *12 Million Black Voices*. There, the problem was not the nature of black folk life itself, after all. "There are times when we doubt our songs," perhaps, but there is little question in that work that the songs themselves are a valid survival tactic with lasting cultural

¹⁰¹ Wright, *Black Boy*, 7-8.

¹⁰² Houston A. Baker, Jr., in reflecting on Wright's "extraordinary black southern engagement of the senses" in sections like the one discussed here, argues that Wright's work in parts of *Black Boy* is "a sensuous report of everyday Delta life chanted by a narrator whose body is plantation-bound by bleak expectations and lack." Houston A. Baker, Jr., *I Don't Hate The South* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 78.

value. The question in that work was how one can retain a consciousness of the southern regional origins of folk culture, while not being bound by that culture's regional parochialism. In *Black Boy*, though, we are confronted with one of Wright's most famous, and most controversial, passages, when he "broods upon" the "cultural barrenness of black life," and laments "the absence of real kindness in Negroes."¹⁰³

The problem here is not so much Wright's negative opinion of black culture as it is his refusal in *Black Boy* to counter that negative with the kind of equally positive evocation of black culture that he had expressed elsewhere. What are we to make of Wright's apparent fixing of black southern culture as innately flawed, in need of replacement by some injection of Western modernity? If Wright had argued earlier for black southern culture as "the *living* past living in the present," why does he now seem to relegate that culture so squarely to the *dead* past, and good riddance to it?

We can come to an answer to this question only if we consider this passage in the context of the rest of the book. For elsewhere, we see that Wright encounters "real kindness" from Negroes everywhere, but is unable to accept that kindness because of the regional origins in which it is embedded. One of the most telling passages along these lines is Wright's mixed shock and revulsion at his sudden acceptance into a complete stranger's household, once he moves from Natchez, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee.¹⁰⁴ Having arrived in the city, alone, he finds himself taken in by and "offered"

¹⁰³ Wright, *Black Boy*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-19.

Bess, the daughter of Mrs. Moss, the owner of a rooming house, simply because he seems like a decent person:

‘You like Bess, Richard?’ Mrs. Moss asked me suddenly.
I stared at her, doubting my ears.
‘I’ve been in the house a couple of hours,’ I said hesitantly.
‘She’s a fine girl.’
‘Now. I mean do you like her? Could you love her?’ she asked insistently.
I stared at Mrs. Moss, wondering if something was wrong with Bess.
What kind of people were these?
‘You people don’t know me. I didn’t exist for you five hours ago,’ I said seriously. Then I shot at her, ‘I could be a robber or a burglar for all you know.’
‘Son, I know you,’ she said emphatically.¹⁰⁵

Wright’s discomfort grows as the daughter attempts to seduce him, and he wonders if “she were demented.” In attempting to explain his rejection of her advances, he ascribes the situation entirely to his previously negative southern experiences, and acknowledges that his life to that point “had cut me off, not only from white people, but from Negroes as well.”¹⁰⁶ Later, he contextualizes the situation, as he had done throughout *Black Boy* with other examples, squarely in terms of environment: “Had I met Bess upon a Mississippi plantation, I would have expected her to act as she had. But in Memphis, on Beale Street, how could there be such hope, belief, faith in others?”¹⁰⁷

At this moment, Wright is acknowledging that “the South,” as he has described it and lived it until now, was his particular South, and that this South was one that was “impossible” for him to reconcile with. At the same time, he is implying that it was the lived experience of a Mississippi plantation, for all the serfdom, poverty, and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 212.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 219.

helplessness that such an experience engendered, which nonetheless allowed these two people to “instinctively embrace” him as they did, because they “found those same qualities in one of their race.”¹⁰⁸

In a sense, what Wright presents himself as struggling with in this scene is how to affirm others’ sense of regional belonging, how to acknowledge the power and strength that communities of color in the South can draw from one another, while simultaneously disparaging those negative, oppressive, restrictive and abject qualities that the region also embodied for blacks, and for himself. *Black Boy*, then, presents us with a narrator who both acknowledges the value of regional connection and who denounces that connection, who looks at other southern blacks as damaged by their regional heritage, but who also recognizes that regional heritage as a source of strength.

Black Boy ends with Wright leaving the South, and in its original incarnation it concluded with this departure. But Wright had originally planned a two-part autobiography called *American Hunger*, with the second part picking up where the southern section had left off. Instead of the “I knew I could never leave the South” coda, the first section, called “Southern Night,” was simply supposed to end, with the tale beginning anew in Chicago. In that section, “The Horror And The Glory,” Wright reflects on his initial alienation from the northern environment, his embrace of the communist party, and his subsequent abandonment of it (and its rejection of him). There are parallels in this section to the second part of *12 Million Black Voices*, and although “The Horror

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 214.

and the Glory” lacks much of the evocative description of place and affirmations of the persistence of southern folk culture that “Death on the City Pavements” shows us, there are hints throughout of an undercurrent of southern connection. Wright resists the dogmatism of his communist allies by reminding himself that “I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear”;¹⁰⁹ later, after announcing in a Party meeting his wish to resign his membership, he notes his ability to speak out as a contrast to his more diffident personality while in the South.¹¹⁰ But unlike *12 Million Black Voices*’ evocation of a cosmopolitan consciousness which turns on a regional underpinning, “The Horror and the Glory” ends with a more complex construction. Here, Wright speaks of building “a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.”¹¹¹ This final assertion about a “bridge of words” helps us to understand that the book we are reading is part of that bridge, an example of the connective tissue that Wright hopes will join his southern, northern, and international lives.

In a 1945 essay, Wright echoed his earlier “angle of vision” metaphor, when he explained that “living in the South doomed me to look always through eyes which the South had given me, and bewilderment made me mute and afraid. But after I had left the South, luck gave me other eyes, new eyes with which to look at the meaning of what I’d

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 344.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 361.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 384.

lived through.”¹¹² The autobiography reads as an exchange of “southern eyes” for “new ones,” with Wright now able to see the totality of his experience from the proper cosmopolitan distance.

In fact, this particular ending did not see the light of day until 1977, when “The Horror and the Glory” was published on its own as *American Hunger*. Although Wright had published excerpts from this section in different forms,¹¹³ it was not widely known that the autobiography was intended to stretch from the South to Chicago, and the public understood *Black Boy*, and Wright talked about it in interviews, as a memoir of his southern experiences. The story of the truncation of the original manuscript of *American Hunger* to the final shortened version that would be re-titled as *Black Boy* is complicated. According to most critics, Wright had always intended to write a narrative that drew upon his migratory experience as a whole. Upon submission of the entire manuscript to his editor, Edward Aswell, in December 1943, it was accepted for publication as such, with few deletions requested. It was only upon submitting the work to the Book Of The Month Club prior to publication that Dorothy Canfield Fisher, one of the Club’s judges, requested that Wright delete the final, Chicago section and conclude the work on a note of southern reminiscence. That final, truncated, and amended version was the standard text from *Black Boy*’s first publication in 1945 until its 1993 incarnation as a restored

¹¹² Richard Wright, “*Black Boy* and Reading,” in *Conversations With Richard Wright*, Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1993), 81.

¹¹³ “I Tried To Be A Communist,” in *Atlantic Monthly* in August-September 1944; “American Hunger” in *Mademoiselle* in September, 1945; and “Early Days In Chicago,” in *Cross Section* (1945). The latter was also published in *Eight Men* (1961), under the title, “The Man Who Went To Chicago.” In total, almost all of “The Horror and The Glory” was published in separate places, but not in a way that presented it as intimately tied to the rest of *Black Boy*.

Harper Perennial edition.¹¹⁴ But Wright's published conclusion to the shortened, southern-centric version of *Black Boy* is important to his overall autobiographical project. In this version, rather than announce that he is leaving the South without a qualm, he argues that although "the South could recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality," he would nonetheless take a part of the South "to transplant in alien soil." Though "bearing scars," he hoped that "if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars."¹¹⁵ While Wright defines southern black life largely in terms of "struggle" and "suffering" here rather than as equal parts "heaven and hell," what is important is the way that the vision he acquired from regional experience becomes bound to his later existence "living on earth." The angle of vision Wright projects on the South in this conclusion necessitates "seeing through" region—finding the distance from which one can recognize regional identity as a construct, a shared delusion that prevents its participants from recognizing their own powerlessness. But the distanced subject also understands what it means to see *through* region—that is, regardless of the delusion that a regional identity might entail, the legacy of that regional identity persists to help define and give meaning to the entirety of the journey.

The Cosmopolitan and the World

¹¹⁴ This edition has now become the standard text, and Wright's added ending for the original published edition has been relegated, rather ignominiously considering its content, to an endnote.

¹¹⁵ Wright, *Black Boy*, 414-15.

American Hunger/Black Boy marks Wright's most complicated attempt to articulate the tensions involved in negotiating regional connections and in a world rendered endlessly expansive by the experience of migration, and it is his last work to directly address the question of specifically southern rootedness and cosmopolitan rootlessness until his final novel, *The Long Dream* (1958).¹¹⁶ There, Wright returned to a direct examination of a southern setting, and now did so in a way that expanded on much of what he had begun previously. Rex "Fishbelly" Tucker, the Mississippi protagonist of the novel, contends throughout with his father Tyree's prominence, financial success, corruption, and exploitation of fellow blacks as an undertaker in their community in the "Black-Belt" of Clintonville. The community itself is as fraught as were the communities of Wright's previous work in southern settings, and the novel conflates flashes of black pastoralism with descriptions of white violence against blacks in much the same way as "Big Boy Leaves Home" and *Lawd Today!* But *The Long Dream* asks us, as few of Wright's previous works had done, to see its protagonist's ultimate international fate as a product of his regional experience.

Fishbelly is presented to us, for most of the novel, as a vessel who receives influences from others around him, but is unsure how best to process them. His father, Tyree, is both a loving father and a bowing and scraping clown, "performing" blackness

¹¹⁶ One year after *Black Boy's* publication and massive success, Wright would leave the United States to settle in Paris, and, at the same time, his reputation among both critics and the public would diminish notably. His next novel, *The Outsider* (1953), failed to find a wide American readership, and *Savage Holiday* (1954) was even less successful, receiving not a single contemporary notice from a book reviewer. Wright's nonfiction "travel" books, *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), and *Pagan Spain* (1957), though well-received by critics, remained generally unsold and unread.

to powerful southern whites in order to be perceived as nonthreatening. Many of his friends have their sights set on post-southern lives, planning to go to college or join the army, while Fishbelly is lured by the promise of remaining in Clintonville and taking over his father's thriving business. After Tyree is killed by corrupt police and Fishbelly is sentenced to prison for two years when he refuses to return to the police his father's evidence of their corruption, he plans his escape from the South, and from America as well.

Even before his father's murder, however, Fishbelly recognizes that his life in the South, even if he were to inherit his father's business, is too limited and powerless an existence. Following the lynching of his older friend, Chris, for having sex with a white woman, Fishbelly recognizes that the borders of his black community were both comforting and confining:

He longed hotly for the sanctuary of his Black Belt, for the protection of familiar black faces; but, while yearning for his absent world, he knew that that world had lost its status and importance in his life. The world he now saw was the real one; that other world in which he had been born and in which he had lived was a listless shadow and already he was ashamed of its feebleness, of the bane of fear under which it lived, labored, hungered, and died.¹¹⁷

The Black Belt is a sanctuary, but it is unreal when weighed against the reality of white power. What gives Fishbelly the courage to finally leave is a global infusion into his southern existence: his friend Zeke, who has moved to France, writes him, and extols the possibilities that expatriatism can hold: "France ain't no heaven, but folks don't kill

¹¹⁷ Richard Wright, *The Long Dream* (1959; repr., Boston: Northeastern, 2000), 110.

you for crazy things. These white folks just more like real human beings than them crackers back there in Mississippi.”¹¹⁸ What disrupts that southern pattern is the idea of a remove from the South to Europe, in a letter that is itself a collision of local southern language and global consciousness.

In *The Long Dream*, leaving the South is, as in *Black Boy*, not an abandonment of regional ties but a reconfiguration of them. The novel’s conclusion, as Fishbelly flies across the Atlantic, echoes the mixture of regional belonging and global vistas that we saw in Wright’s earlier work:

From the plane’s window he saw night swoop down and swallow up his world and the world of the whites who sat about him. He shared their daily world, but his past made his world different from theirs. He had fled a world that he had known and that had emotionally crucified him, but what was he here in this world whose impact loosed storms in his blood? Could he ever make the white faces around him understand how they had charged his world with images of beckoning desire and dread?¹¹⁹

Fishbelly feels a “yearning to be at last somewhere at home,” but also recognizes that this yearning is conditioned by the regional knowledge and self-conception he derived from his particular southern experiences. Looking down from the plane, Fishbelly sees his southern world as implicated in the larger world; he has joined the world of these fellow global citizens, but his relationship to them is conditioned by a unique southern experience. The novel leaves us with the question of what Fishbelly will do with his cosmopolitan vision, as he prays that “a bright, bursting tyrant of living sun would soon lay down its golden laws to loosen the locked legions of his heart and cast the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 372.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 383.

shadow of his dream athwart the stretches of time.”¹²⁰ Fishbelly yearns to become “unlocked,” but the novel ends ambiguously; he takes the South with him, but has not yet had the opportunity to make use of it to inform his newly emerging identity.

Wright had begun work on a sequel, *Island of Hallucinations*, which would follow Fishbelly’s journey to Paris, but he died before he could revise the novel to his publisher’s specifications.¹²¹ In an unpublished summary that Wright made of *The Long Dream* shortly before his death in 1960, he returned once more to the question of perspective: “Fishbelly’s place in the society of the white American South compels him to see life from a unique angle of vision. *The Long Dream* deals with a black human plant that has to draw its nourishment from abnormal conditions of life.”¹²² Fishbelly, like Wright in *Black Boy*, comes to see life from a “unique angle of vision” because of his southern experiences, although we don’t see Fishbelly grow into the kind of “human plant” who can make use of that vision in other contexts.

Still, even if the argument for cosmopolitanism in *The Long Dream* is incomplete, we can see that, throughout his life, Wright struggled to demonstrate the ways that a regional experience could be both left behind and made use of in a post-migration identity. Although, as stated at the outset, Wright was not alone in challenging southern myth and white southern racial hierarchies in the 1930s and 40s, he was one of only a

¹²⁰ Ibid., 384.

¹²¹ Wright died on November 28, 1960. The short story collection, *Eight Men*, which Wright had prepared before his death, was published posthumously in 1961. *A Father’s Law*, a Chicago-based novel that Wright never completed, was published in 2008.

¹²² Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), 83.

very few who struggled to find a way for blacks to both acknowledge the abject nature of black southern life and also extol its pleasures; to disentangle themselves from regional boundaries while maintaining the idea of a regional “home” as a tool of resistance, a living cultural value, and an essential starting point for a cosmopolitan connection to the world.

Wright’s reconfiguration of southern identity in the service of a cosmopolitan consciousness was something that his fellow southerner, Carson McCullers also attempted. Wright himself recognized McCullers as a kindred spirit, and her major works of the 1940s make a claim for “rooted rootlessness” that takes stock of the global reach of a United States empowered by a world war. In my next chapter, I will examine McCullers as another exponent of southern cosmopolitanism, and demonstrate the ways in which she challenged contemporary readers to re-think their understanding of what counted as southern regionalism.

Chapter Two: “Caught and Loose”: Carson McCullers’s Cosmopolitan Vision

In December 1953, Carson McCullers returned to Georgia after having lived in Europe for several years. She had been commissioned to write an article about the state of her birth for *Holiday* magazine, a “glossy, lavishly illustrated” national travel publication.¹ McCullers’s mandate, according to Virginia Spencer Carr, was to “publicize Georgia and attract people to the state as a vacationland,” but the magazine ultimately rejected the finished piece because of “a prejudiced southern editor who refused to see the South as it was.”²

However, perhaps the editor was unable to see the South as McCullers saw it. At certain moments in the article, to be sure, what McCullers writes might serve as promotion for a tour of the “authentic South.” For example, she treats her reader to evocative descriptions of the Georgia countryside in the fall, where the mountains “blazed with yellow, russet, and autumn red.”³ Elsewhere, she notes: “the traveler is struck by the number of barbecue stands,” many of which serve “real barbecue which is well-seasoned pork that has been roasted over a spit and basted with spices and

¹ Karen Dubinsky, “Everybody Likes Canadians: Canadians, Americans, and the Post-World War II Travel Boom,” in *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumerism, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Shelley Osmun Baranowski and Ellen Furlough (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2001), 323.

² Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 422.

³ Carson McCullers, “Article on Georgia,” n.d. Carson McCullers Collection, Ms. Series 1, Box 1.4, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Univ. of Texas, 1.

condiments for a whole day.”⁴ But at other moments McCullers’s tone shifts, and she denounces some of the traditions and myths that white southerners hold most dear. For example, in the course of recounting a meeting with Ralph McGill, the progressive editor of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, she defends Sherman’s march through Georgia and burning of Atlanta during the Civil War—a signal event in white southerners’ self-conception as wronged victims of an oppressive North—with passages like this one: “Atlanta is one of the great geographical centers of the South and its burning was as necessary as in the last war the destruction of the Ruhr.”⁵

But it was not unusual for McCullers to celebrate southern regional particulars at one moment and compare the antebellum South to Hitler’s Germany at another. Much of McCullers’s work shows her reaching for a language that will allow her to articulate both her love for, and her antagonism against, the South of her birth, and doing so in the context of an emerging American global presence. When we examine the way in which McCullers negotiates among competing visions of what it meant to be “southern,” we see that her work points toward the kind of cosmopolitan tensions facing an increasingly transformed twenty-first century South. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), McCullers considers what such a southern cosmopolitanism might look like, were the South she knew ready to accept the expansive conceptions of race, gender, class, and place with which she increasingly identified.

⁴ Ibid., 10

⁵ Ibid., 28.

The South and The World

When we think about the South “from a global perspective,” we are likely to imagine a series of correspondences between the American North-South divide and broader contemporary tensions regarding the West and the “Global South.” Jennifer Rae Greeson, in *Our South*, makes the argument that such correspondences have been inherent to American narratives since the founding of the Republic. Indeed, she shows us the ways in which American writers from Thomas Paine to W.E.B. Du Bois have presented the South as an unreconstructed “other” within the United States, but an other whose presence serves to remind an expanding and globalizing nation that it “emerged out of the ideological matrices of New World empire.”⁶

It is these tensions, between the South as “the internalization in U.S. culture of that which is openly disavowed” and the South as the domestic space upon which American imperialism and conquest can be rehearsed, that have often prompted southern writers to draw parallels between what their South has meant in American history and what it continues to mean in the American present. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. examines the ways in which a number of southern writers, William Faulkner and McCullers among them, did exactly that by constructing fictions which located elements of European fascism within southern settings and which enacted the democratic struggle against fascism within those settings. In particular, Brinkmeyer argues that McCullers “used her

⁶ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), 289.

fiction to explore what she saw as both Fascism's dangerous psychology and its frightening manifestations within southern society."⁷

Although McCullers certainly recognized parallels between southern life and totalitarianism (as we can see in her *Holiday* article), the global turn she made was more complicated than that. Throughout her life, McCullers was more concerned with the meaning of southern identity in an era of American global expansion. As Leigh Anne Duck has argued, "provincial cosmopolitans" like McCullers and Richard Wright worked against the grain of regional parochialism in their texts and sought to make interventions in contemporary certainties about what counted as southern. In demonstrating global patterns of corresponding behavior and belief, these writers (Duck examines McCullers alongside Lillian Smith, Erskine Caldwell, and several others) were predicting a shift in southern identity that is endemic to the South's twenty-first century cultural moment. It is this shift that Martyn Bone designates as a "transnational turn" in contemporary southern life, one in which the South, transformed by global flows of capital, information, and people, is "no longer (if it ever was) the rooted, backward-glancing locus of Agrarian lore."⁸

But Duck and Bone are less concerned with proposing specific political or social structures of global citizenship than they are in attempting to articulate the impact of contemporary global flows of information, money, and people on the lived experience of those who have historically resisted modernity by recourse to a notion of regional

⁷ Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *The Fourth Ghost* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2009), 229.

⁸ Martyn Bone, "The Transnational Turn in the South," in *Transnational America: Contours of Modern US Culture*, ed. Russell Duncan and Clara Juncker (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2004), 233.

identity. Since the 1990s, as Mary E. Odem has pointed out, mass immigration from Latin America has given rise to “a new multiethnic South.”⁹At the same time, what Scott Romine refers to as “the balkanization of mediated space” in an environment of pervasive electronic media has caused the very concept of “southern” to become recontextualized.¹⁰ In such an environment, southerners are being forced to recognize their regional lives in comparison to, and at times in conversation with, the lives of others who would formerly have been invisible to them, or else kept at a comfortably safe distance.

Those others are often global others, and the mediated space that Romine speaks of is a space that, in the age of the global information network, knows neither state nor national boundaries. But the purpose of this chapter is not to map a shift of southern regionalism from a conflation of resistance and complicity to a more contemporary project of transnationalism. Rather, I want to argue for Carson McCullers as a writer who imagined and longed for such a shift in southern identity at a time when the South was on the cusp of the massive changes brought by the Great Migration, the Civil Rights movement, and contemporary global flows of people and information. McCullers’s work anticipates the effect on the South of such transformative events, and we can see in both *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and *The Member of the Wedding* a writer struggling to find a way to bring the regionally specific into conversation with, and perhaps confrontation with, an emerging sense of the globally different.

⁹ Mary E. Odem, “Latin American Immigration and the New Multiethnic South,” in *The Myth Of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 242.

¹⁰ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2008), 17.

McCullers's South

The Georgia in which McCullers spent her youth and adolescence was a state in which, as in many other southern states, white middle class people grew up learning a particularly unusual and contradictory set of social codes. But McCullers seems to have questioned the tension between southern myth and southern reality from an early age. If, like so many southern children, McCullers's major exposure to blacks had been to domestics such as her family's maid, Lucille, it was the experience of seeing those same blacks impoverished during the early years of the Depression that caused her to make an early radical turn away from what she had been taught:

Black and white people in those days rooting in garbage cans. People, kind, sweet people who had nursed us so tenderly, humiliated because of their color. I do not wonder now, as my father used to wonder, why I was a great believer in the Communist party when I was seventeen, although I never joined it, and eventually I became disenchanted with the workings of the Communists also.¹¹

For McCullers, living in the South meant trying to unpack, on a daily basis, this contradiction between what her neighbors told themselves about themselves—the myth of regional feeling, regional resistance, and regional exceptionalism that marked southern white life following the collapse of Reconstruction—and the realities of poverty, racial oppression, and racial violence that she saw around her. In a parallel with Wright, McCullers made her first attempt to look beyond the borders of her southern experience with an embrace of international Communism; but unlike Wright, her disenchantment

¹¹ Carson McCullers, *Illuminations and Night Glare* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 56.

came before she had invested any of her idealism in Party membership. But without an overarching political vision to help her make sense of the contradictions that she saw around her, McCullers was left with little that would prompt a clear model of a progressive southern future.

At the same time, the Roosevelt administration's New Deal programs were roundly opposed by many of McCullers's fellow Georgians. Arthur Raper, in his detailed study of Georgia in this period, *Preface To Peasantry* (1936) writes: "this most Democratic part of the nation is perhaps the least democratic part of the nation; from six to sixty times as much public money is spent for the education of the white as for the Negro school child; Negro officeholders are unknown; scarcely any Negroes register and vote in national presidential elections, almost none participate in local politics."¹²

Although Georgia was the southern state in which Franklin Roosevelt made his second home at Warm Springs, it was also run from 1933 to 1937, and again from 1941 to 1943, by governor Eugene Talmadge, perhaps FDR's most implacable opponent on the state level:

With rising intensity, Talmadge assailed relief, minimum wages, agricultural price supports, and the use of federal highway funds in Georgia. . . . The Roosevelt administration, in reaction to the hostility of Talmadge and other state officials, federalized Georgia relief operations in early 1934 and continued to provide them outside of state influence. To Talmadge this meant domination by 'foreigners' from North Dakota, Minnesota and elsewhere, and the Georgia House of Representatives resolved approval of the governor's position.¹³

¹² Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 5.

¹³ Numan V Bartley, *The Creation Of Modern Georgia* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1983) 173-174

Talmadge's disapproval of New Deal programs stemmed from a variety of causes; the attempt by the Roosevelt administration to establish race-blind hiring practices and minimum wages for federal jobs programs were certainly large parts of it. But the language that Talmadge used to oppose those programs was couched in terms of foreign relations between the South and the nation at large. Roosevelt, in making such an unprecedented expansion of government, was asking southern states to align themselves with the national economy and government in a way that clashed with southerners' sense of their regional difference from the nation. Indeed, the New Deal exacerbated a sectional reaction that southern spokesmen had already been stoking, even before any New Deal programs had been put into action. In 1933, Donald Davidson, one of the contributors to the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, made his own quixotic argument for a "sectional culture" to develop as a reaction to the "murk of modernism" and the "Leviathanism of New York"—a New York that McCullers was then looking to for her own salvation.¹⁴

The North and the World

In her 1948 essay, "How I Began To Write," McCullers remarked that it was an imagined New York City that became "the mise en scène of the first novel I wrote when I was fifteen years old," complete with anachronisms such as "ticket collectors on the

¹⁴ Donald Davidson, "Sectionalism in the United States," in *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, ed. Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2001), 63.

subway” and “New York front yards.”¹⁵ The city represented a gateway that would transport her from the “feudal society” of the South to the expansive world that she hoped to one day inhabit. In her mind, the “distant city of skyscrapers and snow” was no Leviathan waiting to swallow up the specialness of southern life, but a metropolitan platform from which she would be able to “make my mark in the world.”¹⁶

Louis D. Rubin summed up many critics’ readings of McCullers’s New York longings as an abandonment of a “provincial” South that she saw as irredeemable:

There were to be found the writers and artists and teachers and publishers, the people who understood, as she thought, what was really worthwhile in life. New York was the place of art, of culture, of fulfillment, where the dreams of the lonely provincial could come true. She wrote *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* for numerous reasons, and an important one was so that it might make her famous and enable her to move to New York and escape the dreariness of the provinces forever.¹⁷

But if McCullers’s early vision of New York was that it would “make her dreams come true,” the New York in her fictions appears not as the national end-point to an outward migration from “the provinces,” but as a symbol of a kind of international expansiveness that she wanted to interweave with her southern background.¹⁸ When we think of McCullers as having a “global” vision, we should consider that “global,” for McCullers, was a generalized sense of openness, freedom, and movement, and one that

¹⁵ Carson McCullers, “How I Began To Write,” in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith (Boston: Mariner, 2005), 251.

¹⁶ McCullers, *Illuminations*, 279.

¹⁷ Louis D. Rubin, “Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, (Spring 1977): 265-266

¹⁸ McCullers’s move to New York was one that she would accomplish only after a series of fits and starts: she first relocated to Manhattan at the age of 17 in the winter of 1934-1935, in a failed attempt to establish herself there in some way, before returning back home. Over the next two years she would return again to take writing courses at New York Univ. and Columbia, and would write her first novel in Fayetteville, North Carolina, before she made her final move North in the summer of 1940.

came into focus for her, for the most part, when she contrasted it with a regional experience that she identified as bounded, “caught,” and restricted, but also resonant, “sweet,” and resistant to homogenization. In McCullers’s work, the world tends to make an appearance in the South as a marker of destabilization—of racial categories, of gender categories, and of geographical boundaries—that serves to help southerners transcend the particulars of their regional identities, and begin to see themselves as partners in a larger conversation.

We can see the beginnings of McCullers’s particular global turn in one of her earliest short stories, written following her return to Georgia from her first, aborted New York excursion in the summer of 1935. “The Aliens” is the story of a Jew, Felix Kerr, who is embarked on a bus trip from New York to “Lafayetteville,” a city in an unspecified southern state. Exactly why the South is where he wants to “make my home” is never made clear, as he has no relatives there and he makes no reference to a house or job that awaits him at his destination. But we are also not told much about Kerr’s life in New York, except for the fact that New York was, for him, a way station on a journey from Europe to the South:

He was no denizen of the great city he had left behind him. The time of his journey would not be measured by hours, but by years—not by hundreds of miles, but by thousands. And even such measurements as these would be in only one sense accurate. The journey of the fugitive—for the Jew had fled from his home in Munich two years before—more nearly resembled a state of mind than a period of travelling computable by maps and timetables. Behind him was an abyss of anxious wandering, suspense, of terror and of hope.¹⁹

¹⁹ Carson McCullers, *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* (Boston: Mariner, 1987), 74.

For Kerr, New York, a city that was “a marvel of immensity and intricate design” was also “a city strangely hollow and unreal.”²⁰ It functions in the story almost entirely as a mid-way point between Europe and Lafayetteville, a way station for Kerr on his journey to his new southern home. But then the Munich from which Kerr originally came is also somewhat unreal; the specifics of his and his family’s plight in Germany are left to the reader’s imagination, and although Kerr’s grief for “the loss of his home, his security, and his content” in Munich implies a history of trauma and violence at the hands of the Nazis that readers of the time would have easily supplied from contemporary news accounts, we are given no glimpse whatsoever of what actually living in Munich looked like and felt like.

This story is not about where Kerr came from, it is about where he is heading, and the South that he encounters on his journey is made up of a mixture of people, some suffering from poverty and racial hatred and some supporting the system that engenders those conditions, but also of those with the potential to form common connections with one another and to extend those connections further. In “The Aliens,” Kerr first encounters an unnamed young white man, “carrying a brand new cheap tin suitcase.”²¹ Kerr offers him some of his food, and he remarks on the man’s accent: “He had a warm musical voice—with the vowels long drawn and the final consonants unsounded.”²² The narrator’s description of the landscape has this same languorous quality:

²⁰ Ibid., 71.

²¹ Ibid., 72.

²² Ibid., 73.

The summer twilight faded. The bus had left the dusty road and was travelling now on a paved but winding highway. The sky was a deep somber blue and the moon was white. The fields of cotton (belonging perhaps to some huge plantation) were behind them and now on either side of the road the land was fallow and uncultivated. Trees on the horizon made a dark black fringe against the blue of the sky. The atmosphere had a dusky lavender tone and perspective was curiously difficult, so that objects which were far appeared near and things close at hand seemed distant. Silence had settled in the bus. There was only the vibrant throb of the motor, so constant that by now it was scarcely realized.²³

This idyllic scene of pastoral beauty and distant plantations is matched by the young man's mention of his warm relationship with his family—he is on his way to visit his pregnant sister, who is almost due to deliver and whose husband is “cooking his tobacco. So I thought maybe I would come in handy.”²⁴ But the glow cast by these southern regional affirmations is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a poor black woman, who enters the bus just as the boy and Kerr are getting to know one another:

The Negro was of indeterminate age and, had she not been clothed in a filthy garment that served as a dress, even her sex would have been difficult at first glance to define. She was deformed—although not in one specific limb; the body as a whole was stunted, warped and undeveloped. She wore a dilapidated felt hat, a torn black skirt and a blouse that had been roughly fashioned from a meal sack. At one corner of her mouth there was an ugly open sore and beneath her lower lip she carried a wad of snuff. The whites of her eyes were not white at all, but of a muddy yellow color veined with red. Her face as a whole had a roving, hungry, vacant look.”²⁵

Kerr turns to the young southerner and asks what is the matter with the woman, and the young man replies: “‘Who? You mean the nigger?... Why there's nothing the matter with her,’ he said when he had completed this scrutiny. ‘Not that I can see.’”²⁶

²³ Ibid., 74.

²⁴ Ibid., 74.

²⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

Kerr's reaction is to bite his lip in embarrassment, to furrow his brow, and to sigh, and the woman then vanishes from the narrative as quickly as she entered it. But McCullers wants us to see the young man's reaction as indicative of the southern problem—he is unable to disconnect from his own sense of racial entitlement and see this woman's suffering *as* suffering, and thus begin to “embrace her humanity” as he embraces Kerr's. But all is not lost for him: when he discovers that Kerr is “a foreign man,” he enters into an exchange with him that, though incomplete, is significant. He asks Kerr if he has ever been to Paris, France, “one place I always wanted to go.” He wants Kerr to understand, though, that his longing to travel to Paris is “not because of the French girls you hear about.”

‘The buildings—the boulevards?’

‘No,’ said the young man with a puzzled shake of his head. ‘It’s not any of those things. That’s how come I can’t understand it. Because when I think about Paris just one thing is in my mind.’ He closed his eyes thoughtfully.

‘I always see this little narrow street with tall houses on both sides. It’s dark and it’s cold and raining. And nobody is in sight except this French fellow standing on the corner with his cap pulled down over his eyes.’ The young man looked anxiously into the Jew’s face. ‘Now how come I would have this homesick feeling for something like that? Why—do you reckon?’

The Jew shook his head. ‘Maybe too much sun,’ he said finally.²⁷

The young man's longing for Paris is “homesickness” because he is imagining a Paris that reveals the “real” South to him. Beneath the surface veneer of hospitality, manners, and family that this character references is a southern identity that is ultimately disconnected from itself, that is unable to see just how separate white and black southerners' lives are, despite their proximity to one another. The young man doesn't

²⁷ Ibid., 77.

long to actually visit Paris, but to have his sense of himself become unmoored from the regional environment to which it is fixed. He feels “homesick” for a place that is definitively *not* home because of his recognition of his common loneliness with this Parisian man, standing on a corner—a loneliness that he doesn’t seem to fully know that he feels.

It is this idea, of a foreign catalyst that will serve to unbind southerners from their fixed relationships to their places and to one another and that will help them become part of a different kind of imagined community, that is at the heart of “The Aliens.” McCullers’s point here is that southerners have the potential to dream beyond their own regional boundaries and destabilize their regionally-specific identities in the service of some new, cosmopolitan condition, and the presence of an “international” catalyst like Felix Kerr in the South marks the beginning of the process of that identity formation.

In this story, what counts as a “cosmopolitan condition” isn’t exactly clear; for that matter, Kerr doesn’t confront the young man with the realities of his trauma at the hands of the Nazis, nor does he speak out against the injustice of a southern apartheid that allows black women to fall into destitution and white men to blithely treat their misery as normal. But at the same time there is an implication that these kinds of conditions—the black woman’s decrepitude and the white southerner’s inability to recognize it—will change when the presence of foreigners like Kerr compels southerners to measure their identities in terms of some “larger world.” It is that regional negotiation with a larger

world, that sense of rising above one's environment while remaining tethered to it, that Kerr helps the young man to approach.

"The Aliens" portrays a South whose traditions and self-deceptions could be transformed by "outside forces" into something else, but McCullers's vision of the terms and contours of that something else was still coming into focus. Her personal living situation remained unsettled, as well: she returned to New York to attend courses at New York University for the 1935-1936 term, but due to her health and her husband Reeves's work, permanent settlement in New York eluded her for the time being. But as she relocated first to Charlottesville and then to Fayetteville, North Carolina over the next few years, the distance between McCullers's southern neighbors and her own increasing racial consciousness became more acute. Her Fayetteville neighbors

watched her engage blacks in earnest conversation, sympathize with them, and attempt to allay their suspicions, for they, too, wondered why she sought them out. Once the townspeople observed a black enter Carson and Reeves's apartment, and they felt certain he was there at Carson's invitation. Surely some secret insurrection was at hand. After news of the incident spread about the town, no one willingly socialized with her.²⁸

According to Carr, McCullers's Fayetteville experience necessitated a conflation in her mind between local racial injustices and international ones. At the same time as McCullers was testing the limits of southern racial apartheid, she "had become passionate about the European situation, zealous in her attack on fascism and Nazism, and indignant at racism and what she considered the gross mistreatment of blacks in Fayetteville and

²⁸ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 86.

her hometown.”²⁹ And there is little question that, as McCullers grew increasingly cognizant of the distance between southern myth and southern (and international) reality, she experienced a growing frustration at simply being in the South at all.

Although most reviewers and readers knew little of McCullers’s longstanding urge to emigrate North, the publication of *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* in 1940 seemed to herald the newly published author as one of a new breed of southern writers who painted the South as a sort of purgatory: a hot, desolate landscape of limited lives and antiquated beliefs. But the novel is far more than a farewell to a South that McCullers deemed beneath her; it represents an expansion of her ideas in “The Aliens,” and a more acute envisioning of just what a southern cosmopolitan identity might entail. As in that early story, *Lonely Hunter* begins with a traveler from the North coming into contact with a South that, at first, seems oppressively alien. John Singer, the deaf mute whom the reader is introduced to at the novel’s outset, had, at twenty-two, “come south to this town from Chicago,” although we aren’t told why, or given much information about his life before he left.³⁰ Although Singer had “immediately” become partners with Spiros Antonopoulos, his apparent lover, upon his arrival in this unnamed “town in the middle of the deep South,”³¹ meeting Antonopoulos also marked the last time he had “spoken with his mouth again, because with his friend there was no need for this.”

²⁹ Ibid., 84.

³⁰ Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* (1940; repr., Boston: Mariner, 2000), 11.

³¹ In “The Author’s Outline of ‘The Mute’,” (*The Mute* was the working title for the novel), McCullers described the town as “located in the very western part of Georgia, bordering the Chattahoochee River and just across the boundary line from Alabama.” Carson McCullers, “Author’s Outline of ‘The Mute,’” in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith (Boston: Mariner, 2005), 147.

Singer's meeting Antonapoulos allows him to be in the South but to remain disconnected from it—his common muteness with the Greek is both a comfort and a reminder that Singer has no need to measure his faltering speech against the local southern accent. In fact, it's difficult to see how Singer's daily life would have been significantly different had he remained in Chicago and met Antonapoulos there.

Although Singer sees “in the faces along the streets” that “there was a desperate look of hunger and loneliness,” such sights have little effect on him: “the two mutes were not lonely at all. At home they were content to eat and drink, and Singer would talk with his hands eagerly to his friend about all that was in his mind.”³² Singer and Antonapoulos exist happily in this displaced state for the next ten years, in the South but with no need to assimilate into it, and it is only when the Greek's mental and physical health deteriorates and he is placed in an institution that Singer is forced to “spend his evenings walking around the town . . . always silent and alone.”³³ It is at this point, when Singer is forced to come to terms with the environment that he has distanced himself from for so long, that he befriends a series of similarly estranged characters, all of whom use their relationship with the mute as opportunities to articulate their frustrations with the South that they know.

Those frustrations are all of a piece. Jake Blount, a misanthropic alcoholic with a self-education in Marx and Veblen, finds himself surrounded by “the don't-knows,” and can't consider what course of action to take to wake his southern neighbors from their

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Ibid., 12-13.

apolitical slumber: “When a person knows and can’t make the others understand, what does he do?”³⁴ Benedict Copeland, an educated black doctor obsessed with social change and depressed at his inability to effect that change in the southern black community, finds himself alienated from his family and patients the more he attempts to rally them. He hopes to lead a march of a thousand black people on Washington to expose racial oppression in the South, but “all that I get is blank misunderstanding and idleness and indifference.”³⁵ Mick Kelley, a thirteen-year old girl estranged from her peers, rejects southern conventions of female behavior and dress and longs to travel abroad, while nursing a growing sense of rage against the confines of her existence; she paints a series of pictures of the town being destroyed by various disasters: fire, an explosion at a boiler factory, and “the whole town fighting on Broad street.”³⁶

In her outline to the novel, McCullers explained that Copeland’s “great flaw” was that “he will not admit the racial culture of the Negro,”³⁷ and this “inflexibility” causes him to become alienated from his children and community. But this flaw can be extended to most of the other characters as well: so intent are they to educate their ignorant southern neighbors about the world that lies beyond those neighbors’ regional boundaries, so intent are they to transform their neighbors’ regional lives in terms of their own international ideas, that they fail to take into account the value of regional identity itself. Portia, Copeland’s daughter and a maid in Mick’s family’s boardinghouse, argues

³⁴ Ibid., 69.

³⁵ Ibid., 89.

³⁶ Ibid., 44.

³⁷ McCullers, “Author’s Outline of *The Mute*,” 133.

to Mick that her grandfather (Copeland's father-in-law), a prosperous black farmer, has found a way to survive and thrive, even in the midst of a southern system intent on his destruction. Portia is "a whole lot more fortunate than most colored girls," because her grandfather

and my uncles owns the whole place themselves. Fifteen and a half acre. They always plants four of them in cotton, some years swapping back to peas to keep the dirt rich, and one acre on a hill is just for peaches. They have a mule and a breed sow and all the time from twenty to twenty-five laying hens and fryers. They has a vegetable patch and two pecan trees and plenty of figs and plums and berries. This here is the truth. Not many white farms has done with their land good as my Grandpapa. Mick put her elbows on the table and leaned over her plate. Portia had always rather talk about the farm than anything else, except her husband and brother. To hear her tell it you would think that colored farm was the very White House itself.³⁸

But, that's exactly the point—that "colored farm" is "the very White House" to Portia and her family. Mick's inability to grasp the importance of Portia's grandfather's southern life when measured against her own frustrations with *her* southern life, is mirrored by Copeland's inability to ascribe value to his own children's limited southern existences. He tells Portia that he wishes he could find a few blacks "with spine and brains and courage who are willing to give all that they have"; if he could, then he might be able to bring about the kind of change to southern black life that he imagines. But Portia's response is a quite justified indignation: "'Willie and Highboy and me have backbone,' said Portia angrily. 'This here is a hard world and it seem to me us three struggles along pretty well.'" ³⁹

³⁸ McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

Jake, for his part, dispassionately examines the conflict between black and white patrons at the Sunny Dixie Show, a fairground that has become his place of employment, hungering for a strike for better working conditions to emerge, but he succeeds only in alienating himself further from the “don’t-knows” in his midst. He had tried to befriend two of his fellow white employees, “former doffers at one of the mills,” by inviting them for a drink to “talk to them and help them to see the truth. . . . But they were so dumb he couldn’t help them.” Later, he overhears them speaking of his “biggity” behavior, and after confronting them about the slight, “Jake treated the two men with angry contempt. Behind his back they jeered at him.”⁴⁰

Jake, like Copeland, sees his neighbors as broken machines that need to be fixed, and can’t understand why they refuse his aid. But the problem is that both are unwilling to see regional identities as worthy of affirmation in the face of what Leigh Anne Duck calls their own “transregional fantasies.”⁴¹ All the characters, in one way or another, see strict dichotomies between “the South” and “the world,” and the only way that they can imagine bridging those divisions is by forcing regional subjects into global molds. In the event, this failure to come to terms with the fact of their neighbors’ southern lives prevents all the characters from making change actually happen, and the novel concludes with the characters feeling frustrated and fatalistic about their own and the South’s future. Copeland, his spirit broken by his son Willie’s crippling at the hands of southern police and his own brief imprisonment when he attempts to complain about this injustice, retires

⁴⁰ Ibid., 284.

⁴¹ Ibid., 205.

to live on Grandpapa's farm. His insistence on "justice now" is occluded by Grandpapa's gradualist belief in "us struggling along and helping each other out," in the hope that "some day us will have a reward in the Beyond."⁴² Jake, driven deeper into cynicism by his witnessing of a violent race riot, resolves to continue his attempts at activism in the South, although where and how he doesn't know. Mick's future is similarly abstract. Music, which had been a symbol to her of escape from her stultifying condition into some global realm, is absent from her mind at the end of the novel, as she settles uneasily into a job at Woolworth's.

For Duck, this novel demonstrates "how perceptions of backwardness could intervene in attempts to imagine regional activism, as characters question whether their cosmopolitan impulses might demonstrate their own temporal divergence from their local peers."⁴³ However, I would argue that these characters' desire for "regional activism" is itself a misplaced one—the issue here is not that activism is so difficult to engender, but that the characters' "cosmopolitan impulses" must take the form of a conversation that will encompass both their global longings and their neighbors' regional lives. Until that conversation can take place, until Dr. Copeland can learn to speak to Portia in her own southern dialect and she can learn to accept his deliberate, mannered speech, until Jake can learn to speak to two white roustabouts over drinks without coming across as "biggity," until Mick can learn to play the blues as well as Mozart, no sort of activism is going to emerge.

⁴² Ibid., 336.

⁴³ Ibid., 178.

McCullers's Angle of Vision

At the time of her publishing success with *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers was thought of in some quarters as one of a group of new southern writers who held up the South to critical scrutiny—in good company with Thomas Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, and William Faulkner, all three of whom W.J. Cash lumped together in 1941 as members of the “hate-and-horror school” of southern writers.⁴⁴ But Richard Wright saw in her work a way of looking at the South that was unlike that of her literary contemporaries. In his August, 1940 review of that first novel, Wright argued that:

The naturalistic incidents of which the book is compounded seem to be of no importance; one has the feeling that any string of typical actions would have served the author's purpose as well, for the value of the writing lies not so much in what is said as in the angle of vision from which life is seen. . . . To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness.⁴⁵

More than a few critics have pointed to this review and those lines as evidence of McCullers's elevated racial consciousness,⁴⁶ as though Wright's praise simply authorized

⁴⁴ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 379. Such an assessment of McCullers has a parallel in Gregory's assertion that McCullers left the south because it was “too parochial for her bohemian sense of self” and that “she fled back to New York, vowing never again to live in the land of her birth, planning only to return to renew her ‘sense of horror.’” James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 186.

⁴⁵ Richard Wright, “Inner Landscape,” in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, ed. Michel Fabre (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1990), 222-223.

⁴⁶ “He admired her writing, particularly her deeply sensitive depiction of the Negro doctor in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,” in Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 196;

a white southerner like McCullers to write about blacks. However, Wright's choice of words is significant, for "angle of vision" was a phrase that he had used several years earlier, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." There, Wright called on black writers to recognize regionally based racial experience in terms of that experience's global context, and asked that his contemporaries come to see such experience in terms of its parallels to broader international, colonial, and postcolonial pressures. In saying that McCullers's "angle of vision" allowed her to "rise above the pressures of her environment," Wright was not simply commending McCullers for painting authentic sounding black portraits. Rather, he saw McCullers's novel as expressing a particular relationship to region.

In articulating that relationship, McCullers did not deny the value of regional experience; rather, she privileged a negotiation between regionally specific cultural expressions, beliefs, behaviors, and histories, and global influences. In Wright's view, McCullers does not abandon her environment in this novel—she is still writing "southern fiction"—but in taking an objective step back from the South, McCullers finds a vantage point from which to place southern black and white characters within a global sweep. In effect, she maps southern black and white relations onto what Arjun Appadurai describes as a broader "ethnoscape." Appadurai defines the term as the flow of human traffic in a postcolonial era and its influence on hitherto regionally bounded ethnic identities: "By

"Wright was curious. How could this white woman have been brought up in the South (which she surely must have been to write this book) and come away with such a profound understanding of black people?" in Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life And Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 229; "He hailed this young writer as the first Southern novelist capable of portraying a black character as easily and with as much accuracy as a white," in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press 1993), 208-09; "It was an unusual statement for an African American writer to make in 1940, and Carson's fellow authors at Bread Loaf looked forward to meeting the child prodigy who had been thus praised," in Sherill Tippins, *February House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 26.

ethnoscape I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.”⁴⁷

In McCullers’s first novel, her “landscape of persons” serves to paint a portrait of the South as a *contingent* regional space, one whose black and white characters have the potential to recognize one another as regional players in a drama with global implications, and to see their southern lives as a necessary basis for making connections to international others. But that novel, like many of McCullers’s early short stories, was one she wrote while still living in the South. McCullers’s first publication following *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections In A Golden Eye* (1941), was written prior to her relocation with her husband, Reeves, to New York in mid-June 1940, and was initially serialized in two issues of *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine.⁴⁸ The novel is a brutal satire of Fort Benning, the Georgia army base where McCullers frequently sought refuge while an adolescent, and in it she skewered the base and its inhabitants as embodiments of both institutionalized racism and sexual repression.⁴⁹ Although *Reflections in a Golden Eye* won some praise among northern reviewers, one of its major effects was to widen the

⁴⁷ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” in *Theorizing Diaspora*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 25-48.

⁴⁸ In the October and November 1940 issues.

⁴⁹ Stecopoulos reads the novel as very much influenced by current events. In particular, he brings our attention to the widely publicized lynching of African American Private Felix Hall at Fort Benning in early 1941, and asks us to see this event as indicative of the racially charged atmosphere of the time that may have contributed to McCullers’s depiction. See Harilaos Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing The World* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), 104-9.

distance between McCullers and her former southern neighbors. Upon a brief return to her family home in 1941,

an alleged Ku Klux Klansman called to say that he and his friends were going to get her that night. She had been a “nigger lover” in her first book, he said, and now she had proven herself “a queer,” as well. Carson’s indignant father waited all night on the front porch of their Starke Avenue home to greet the Klansmen with a loaded shotgun and was disappointed when no one attempted to carry out the threat.⁵⁰

McCullers’s growing prominence as a writer served to publicize the longstanding ideological gap between herself and Columbus, but it is difficult to overstate the effect that moving to New York from the South had on her. The United States was moving closer to involvement in the Second World War throughout 1940 and 1941, and McCullers’s move to New York coincided with that city’s transformation into a focal point for America’s rearmament. After her resettlement in a house on Middagh Street in Brooklyn during the autumn of 1940 following a separation from her husband, McCullers found herself in a New York whose international character was more apparent than it had been during her earlier forays to the city as a student. Sherill Tippins describes the New York that McCullers encountered in particularly lyrical terms:

That autumn of 1940, the Brooklyn waterfront had become an increasingly exciting destination. While the war had virtually ended the luxury liner traffic between Europe and New York, emptying many of Manhattan’s piers, Brooklyn’s docks served primarily cargo and were now benefiting from a frantic rerouting of world trade. African and South American freighters brought their aromatic spices, coffee, and other goods to Brooklyn instead of Britain or France, picking up American automobiles and manufactured goods for the journey home. . . . The few British and Dutch ships that arrived slipped into the docks with their guns and camouflage paint like harbingers of doom—the British freighters fetching food

⁵⁰ Carr, 136-37.

for their beleaguered homeland while the struggling Dutch maintained a single route between Brooklyn and the East Indies.⁵¹

As the city around her grew more central to world events than it had been in her earlier fantasies, McCullers's social life became increasingly diverse. The house she occupied in Brooklyn was part of a communal experiment she had dreamed up with George Davis, her editor at *Harper's*. The idea was to create a salon of sorts, "a sanctuary for themselves and others who were also, for financial, political, or any other reason, finding it difficult to focus on their work."⁵² Over the next year McCullers would share the house with the poet W. H. Auden, stripper-turned-writer Gypsy Rose Lee, Paul and Jane Bowles, Christopher Isherwood, and Richard Wright and his wife, Ellen, and their children.

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the New York Café had been a grim joke; the inviting name of Biff Brannon's gloomy gathering spot for lost souls was an ironic symbol of just how far from the bright lights of New York the town's residents actually were. But in the Sand Street bars of Brooklyn, McCullers found herself entranced by the "dancing, music, and straight liquor at cheap prices" that the transient dockworkers enjoyed, and was fascinated by "the vivid old dowagers of the street" who have "a stable list of sailor pals and are known from Buenos Aires to Zanzibar."⁵³

It may have been at this point that McCullers began to see conjunctions between behavior that violated social conventions and gender norms and the destabilizing and

⁵¹ Tippins, 78.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵³ Carson McCullers, "Brooklyn is My Neighborhood," in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith (Boston: Mariner, 2000), 218-19.

disruptive effects of global expansiveness. Having become part of the artistic and intellectual milieu that centered around her new dwelling in Middagh Street, McCullers ventured forth one night with Auden and Davis: “it was at a bar in [Sand] Street . . . that I saw and was fascinated by a remarkable couple. Among the customers there was a woman who was tall and strong as a giantess, and at her heels she had a little hunchback. I just observed them once, and it was not until some weeks later that the illumination of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* struck me.”⁵⁴ In McCullers’s head, this scene of freakishness performed so publicly seemed to epitomize the end point of her South-to-North journey. Returning back to Georgia shortly afterwards, McCullers imagined the giantess and hunchback couple as agents who would transform a South of alienation and isolation into one that embraced contingency and difference.

A Southern Cosmopolitan Ideal

The Ballad of the Sad Café (1943), originally published in a single issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*, begins with a description of a desolate southern town where “the winters . . . are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot,” and where “on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do.”⁵⁵ This is similar to the description of the town in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, where “the sky was a glassy brilliant azure and the sun burned down riotously bright.”⁵⁶ But in *Ballad*, the narrator does more than simply give a description. “When your shift is finished there is absolutely

⁵⁴ McCullers, *Illuminations*, 32.

⁵⁵ Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (Boston: Mariner, 2005), 3.

⁵⁶ McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 6.

nothing to do” we are told, and the unseen narrator also reveals that there was once a café in the town which, though it has “long since been closed” is “still remembered.”⁵⁷ And it is the narrator who remembers it, looking around at the town’s current desolation while also looking back towards its vanished glory. Quite unlike McCullers’s previous texts, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* announces itself as being *about* place, and about place as more than a backdrop against which estranged southern characters contrast themselves. What happens in this story is important, but where it happens is even more so.

The narrator tells us that at one time Miss Amelia Evans, a “dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man,” lorded over the town.⁵⁸ She thrived in it economically, but excluded herself and was excluded from the social life of her neighbors—not that they *had* much of a social life, as they were “unused to gathering for the sake of pleasure.” There was mill work and “an all-day camp meeting” on Sunday, but “though that is a pleasure, the intention of the whole affair is to sharpen your view of Hell and put into you a keen fear of the Lord Almighty.”⁵⁹ But the town’s poverty and religious fundamentalism changes when a hunchback named Lymon, who purports to be Amelia’s “double first-cousin,” arrives in town and begins a relationship with her. Once the two move in together, the hunchback, “scarcely more than four feet tall” and “with crooked little legs [that] seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders,”⁶⁰ transforms himself into a flamboyant dandy, and he and Amelia

⁵⁷ McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

convert her general store into a café, “the only place of pleasure for many miles around.”⁶¹ As their relationship develops the café flourishes, becoming a haven and refuge for “bachelors, unfortunate people, and consumptives.”⁶² But in every way it becomes a symbol for a new kind of southern identity, a place in which the freakish Amelia and Lymon share their difference with the mill workers and “old country couples”: “the new pride that the café brought to this town had an effect on almost everyone, even the children. For in order to come to the café you did not have to buy the dinner, or a portion of liquor. . . . There, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in this world could be laid low.”⁶³

The café represents McCullers’s southern cosmopolitan ideal, a space where the embrace of otherness she found in her communal situation in Brooklyn and saw enacted in the Sand Street bar became regionalized by its projection onto the Columbus of her youth. In other words, the café allows for a negotiation between these figures’ otherness and the sense of shared regional identity the townspeople earlier used to define themselves against the Amelias and Lymons in their midst. Rachel Adams argues that freakishness and queerness function in parallel in McCullers’s work, and that those characters in her fiction who challenge normative categories of identity and sexuality highlight the “tyranny of the normal” in a “repressive social order unable to recognize the

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

⁶² Ibid., 55.

⁶³ Ibid., 55.

queerness at its center.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Sarah Gleeson-White asks us to read Amelia’s refusal to adhere to conventions of southern womanhood as a direct threat to the social order of the town.⁶⁵ In *Ballad*, however, we see that repressive social order coming to terms with such challenges to normativity. The bond Amelia and Lymon shared may have seemed impenetrably other to some, but many in the town were more than willing to accept them and their alliance: “The good people thought that if those two had found some satisfaction of the flesh between themselves, then it was a matter concerning them and God alone.”⁶⁶

What is significant in the novel is not the lovers’ challenge to southern conventions of gender or behavior as such, but the effect the public display of Amelia and Lymon’s alliance of strangeness has on the town. Once they are established as a couple, their café becomes a space in which disruption of all safe assumptions becomes expected and even celebrated: “When [Lymon] walked into the room there was always a quick feeling of tension, because with this busybody about there was never any telling what might descend on you, or what might suddenly be brought to happen in the room. People are never so free with themselves and so recklessly glad as when there is some possibility of commotion or calamity ahead.”⁶⁷ And this, we might say, is what McCullers’s cosmopolitanism is ultimately all about. McCullers, while interested in what otherness

⁶⁴ Rachel Adams, “‘A Mixture of Delicious and Freak’: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers,” *American Literature* 71:3 (September 1999): 556, 557.

⁶⁵ See Sarah Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2003), 72-73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

actually meant, is even more fascinated with the way in which a confrontation with otherness served to throw the self-deception of normative white southerners into bold relief. More than heralds of social change, McCullers's freakish characters exist to force southerners to join in a larger conversation. It is worth mentioning, as I also did in the introduction to this project, Appiah's description of cosmopolitanism in terms of "conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else" that don't need to lead "to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that [they help] people get used to one another."⁶⁸ For McCullers, if southern society was going to change it would not be because intransigent southerners became reconstructed, but because they learned to find points of engagement with those whom they previously had ostracized.

In the novel's conclusion, however, McCullers's dream of placing her personal symbol of New York internationalism into engagement with her neighbors' southern regionalism collapses as quickly as she conjured it. The bleak finale of the novel, in which the café is destroyed when Lymon betrays Amelia and enters into an alliance with Marvin Macy, only underscores McCullers's certain knowledge that cosmopolitan interventions in southern regional identity could not persist in the South as it then stood. The selfish, acquisitive, materialistic agendas of people like Macy would win out over the sharing, exchange, and tolerance that the café symbolized and that McCullers dreamt of seeing in Columbus. At the novel's conclusion as in its beginning, bored, desperate

⁶⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Norton, 2006), 85.

creatures like the unseen narrator have “absolutely nothing to do in the town. Walk around the millpond, stand kicking at a rotten stump, figure out what you can do with the old wagon wheel by the side of the road near the church. The soul rots with boredom.”⁶⁹

The Ballad of the Sad Café is a frustrated lament for the impossibility, as McCullers then saw it, of southerners bringing their regional lives into conversation with global experience. Following the narrator’s admission of frustration, McCullers added a coda in which the narrator witnesses a chain gang, “just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county” sing a work song in unison: “the music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men of the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky.”⁷⁰ But it isn’t the work gang who recognize the relationship between the song and “the earth itself,” it is an alienated outsider like the narrator, saddened that the only choice is to recognize the latent but unrealized potential in white and black southerners to engage their voices with a chorus that spans the globe.

Southern Space, Cosmopolitan Self

The coda to *Ballad* asks us to see the shift in regional identity allowed by the café as both a missed opportunity and as a portent of things to come. McCullers’s New York move coincided with the beginning of the Second World War, and by 1946 she was contending with a South and nation that “through total war [had] reaped considerable

⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 70-71.

imperial rewards,” as Harilaos Stecopoulos puts it.⁷¹ Indeed, McCullers followed the progress of the war closely, as her husband Reeves was serving in the European theater from 1943 to early 1945.⁷² The war certainly transformed the nation, but it transformed the South as well. Eugene Talmadge had left the governor’s office in 1936, to be replaced by Eurith D. Rivers, a strong supporter of the New Deal. Although Talmadge came back into office in 1941, he was succeeded two years later by Ellis G. Arnall, another progressive. At the same time, wartime industrialization “completed the process begun by New Deal programs, releasing hundreds of thousands of black southerners from the paternalism and dependency of traditional ‘Negro work,’”⁷³ and the Supreme Court’s invalidating of Georgia’s white primary in 1944 lifted blacks’ hopes that the Jim Crow system was beginning to crumble.

In her next novel, *The Member of the Wedding*, a work she wrote concurrently with *Ballad*, McCullers continued to develop her project of imagining a cosmopolitan South. By 1946, the South’s white and black populations had been transformed by both the New Deal and the war economy, and McCullers’s novel is shot through with intimations that the South upon which she had projected her New York bar was on the verge of becoming something quite different all on its own.

⁷¹ Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing The World*, 125.

⁷² They divorced in late 1941, but would remarry shortly after Reeves’s return from the army in March 1945.

⁷³ Karen Jane Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 223.

The novel's protagonist, Frankie Addams, feels as though she is "an unjoined person,"⁷⁴ and longs to leave the South for just about anywhere: "Every day she wanted more and more to leave the town: to light out for South America or Hollywood or New York City. But although she packed her suitcase many times, she could never decide to which of these places she ought to go, or how she would get there by herself."⁷⁵ Frankie's wanderlust stems from a variety of sources: her sense of herself as somehow freakish because of her height and apparent gender ambiguity, and her sense that she is excluded, for unknown reasons, from the community of her peers. What seems to give Frankie a new sense of urgency to leave is her feeling that, just as the notion of normative gender is confining for her,⁷⁶ the borders of her southern world are artificially constrained when she measures them in light of the United States' increasing global reach:

It was the year when Frankie thought about the world. And she did not see it as a round globe, with the countries neat and different-colored. She thought of the world as huge and cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour. The geography book at school was out of date; the countries of the world had changed... . She wanted to be a boy and go to the war as a Marine... . The war and the world were too fast and big and strange. To think about the world for very long made her afraid. ... She was afraid because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, in *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* (Boston: Mariner, 1987), 257.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁶ Like so many of McCullers's outsider characters, Frankie looks and sometimes feels differently gendered. We are told that she had "grown so tall she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long. She wore a pair of blue track shorts, a B.V.D. undervest, and she was barefooted. Her hair had been cut like a boy's, but it had not been cut for a long time and was not even parted" (258). She also feels constrained by the need to enact a strictly normative gender role; in the world of her imagination, "she planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (338).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

Frankie's global yearnings are less an affirmation of the glories of war, though, than they are an acknowledgment of the way in which the war reveals that the boundedness of her southern existence is out of date. Listening to the radio, she hears "a mixture of many stations: a war voice crossed with the gabble of an advertiser, and underneath there was the sleazy music of a sweet band."⁷⁸ The globally unfamiliar is seeping into the regionally familiar, and Frankie cannot help but compare the restrictions of her southern life to what she imagines is a whole world of experience that lies elsewhere. Frankie's yearnings to escape the South soon settle on a fantasy involving her brother, Jarvis, her brother's bride-to-be, Janice, and herself. Jarvis is a soldier stationed in Alaska and Frankie fantasizes that he and his new bride will take her away with them to travel the globe:

We will just walk up to people and know them right away. We will be walking down a dark road and see a lighted house and knock on the door and strangers will rush to meet us and say: Come in! Come in! We will know decorated aviators and New York people and movie stars. We will have thousands of friends, thousands and thousands and thousands of friends. We will belong to so many clubs that we can't even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world.⁷⁹

Harilaos Stecopoulus sees Frankie's fantasy as an embrace of another kind of normativity—internationalism as an accomplice of approaching American triumphalism: "No doubt influenced by media accounts of the delighted welcome accorded U.S. soldiers in Italy and France, Frankie imagines that the wedding troika will receive an enthusiastic embrace from all the world's peoples, irrespective of their

⁷⁸ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 356.

particular attitudes toward the United States.”⁸⁰ But such a reading is not entirely fair: although it is clear that Frankie’s language suggests a touristic attitude, we need to acknowledge that her obsession with foreignness stems from a need to connect her southern experiences to those of others, rather than a desire to sample from a buffet of foods of all nations. Her idea of membership in a club of world peoples may be naïve, ignorant of the racial, economic, and class disparities of those who actually populate that world, but we need to give Frankie her due: her particular, embracing vision of global identity exists overwhelmingly to counter the kind of disconnected, confining life she sees in the South around her.

For Frankie recognizes that, as estranged from the townspeople as she is, those townspeople are also estranged from one another. Discussing her frustrations with Berenice, her family’s black house servant, she argues that her need to connect globally is a direct reaction to a fundamental problem with the way that her fellow southerners interact with one another: “You are walking down the street and you meet somebody. Anybody. And you look at each other, the eyes make a connection. Then you go off one way. And he goes off another way. You go off into different parts of town, and maybe you never see each other again. Not in your whole life.”⁸¹ Berenice acknowledges this sense of disconnection, telling Frankie that “we all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. But we caught anyhow.” As Berenice sees it, however, Frankie’s physical departure from the South as she envisions it is not going to

⁸⁰ Stecopoulos, 119.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

free her: “And maybe we wants to bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself.” And blacks in the South, Berenice reminds Frankie, are “caught worse than you is. ... Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. So we caught that first way I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also.”⁸²

It is clear to Berenice that Frankie’s solution to southern “caught-ness,” to leave, will not solve the essential problem of southern identity. Berenice recognizes that she, too, is caught, limited to playing the role of mammy for this white family and imprisoned in a system of restricted opportunities. Nonetheless, as she explains, “we try in one way or another to widen ourself free”—in her case, by resonating with an affirmative southern black community.⁸³ She had lived for a time in Cincinnati with her first husband but returned to carve out a tolerable life for herself in the South: “While Frankie was thinking, Berenice had changed into her Sunday clothes, and now she sat reading a magazine. She was waiting for the people who were due to meet her at six o’clock, Honey and T.T. Williams; the three of them were going to eat supper at the New Metropolitan Tea Room and sashay together around the town.”⁸⁴ Berenice loosened herself from the rigid confines of her southern social role, finding a place in the South in a way Frankie has not: “When Berenice said *we*, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her

⁸² Ibid., 357.

⁸³ Ibid., 354.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 278.

lodge, or her church.”⁸⁵ Frankie herself, skeptical of the rewards afforded by white privilege and unable to find a southern way to be the freak she sees herself to be, cannot identify with anything in the town and so can only dream of international journeys that take her as far from the South as possible.

The solution, it seems, is for Frankie to find a way to reorder her understanding of the relationship between the South and the world from the strict dichotomy of southern=bad, global=good of which she has convinced herself. In her discussion with Berenice, she admits that her longing to escape masks a deeper and more fundamental problem of identity:

“I believe I realize what you were saying,” F. Jasmine said. “Yet at the same time you almost might use the word loose instead of caught. Although they are two opposite words. I mean you walk around and you see all the people. And to me they look loose.”

“Wild, you mean?”

“Oh no!” she said. “I mean you don’t see what joins them up together. You don’t know where they all came from, or where they’re going to. For instance, what made anybody ever come to this town in the first place? Where did all these people come from and what are they going to do? Think of all those soldiers.”

“They were born,” said Berenice. “And they going to die.”

F. Jasmine’s voice was thin and high. “I know,” she said. “But what is it all about? People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don’t know what joins them up. There’s bound to be some sort of reason and connection. Yet somehow I can’t seem to name it.”⁸⁶

Frankie’s thoughts about being both “caught and loose” in the South and her need to find a way to name that condition are at the heart of the emerging, globally connected southern identity that McCullers had been working to articulate all along. In Frankie’s statement, there is an echo of Peacock’s contention that “as a world citizen, one identifies

⁸⁵ Ibid., 291.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 358.

with some kind of entity that claims global scope. One shares a sense of community and identity beyond national, geographic, or other restrictive boundaries. In so doing, one edges toward empathy, necessarily identifying somewhat with the other without become the other.”⁸⁷ And we might say that a cosmopolitan citizen doesn’t replace her sense of self with some new vision of being part of a global entity, so much as she expands the boundaries of her regional self to include exchanges, engagements, and intersections with people and ideas that carry global resonance.

In other words, Frankie needs to find a way to feel at home in the South but remain unencumbered by what she sees as its regional limitations. Frankie’s movement toward this end comes gradually as she finds new ways to connect with the town around her. Intending to pay a final farewell to the town before leaving with her brother and his bride, she finds herself seeing it as if for the first time. Passing the jail, she remembers that she “knew some people who had been locked up in jail, all of them colored.” But this reminder of the unforgiving nature of southern apartheid is soon replaced with an image of a thriving social life that exists alongside that racist structure: “voices sounded slurred and from a distance came the jazz of a piano and horn. Children played in alleyways, leaving whorled footsteps in the dust. The people were dressed for Saturday night, and on a corner she passed a group of jesting colored boys and girls in shining evening dresses.”⁸⁸ Earlier, Frankie had recalled going to the House of Freaks at the Chattahoochee Exposition where she had been particularly dazzled by the Half-Man,

⁸⁷ Peacock, 49.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

Half-Woman, and felt these physical and social outcasts reaching out to her in a gesture of common kinship.⁸⁹ But now the streets themselves “reminded F. Jasmine of a carnival fair. There was the same air of holiday freedom; and, as in early morning, she felt herself a part of everything, included and gay.”⁹⁰

Frankie is no less freakish than she was earlier, but her angle of vision on the South is changing. She now actively seeks out moments that will balance both her acknowledgement of the oppressive structures of the South and her engagement with its regional specifics. Following her violent self-defense against a sexually aggressive soldier—herself a symbolic rejection of her romance with American military power—she attends her brother’s wedding. Her fantasies of joining with the wedding couple are dashed when “she watched the car with the two of them driving away from her, and, flinging herself down in the sizzling dust, she cried out for the last time: ‘Take me! Take me!’”⁹¹ Embittered, she resolves to still “go into the world,” but “if she could not go in the way she had planned, safe with her brother and the bride, she would go, anyway.”⁹² She considers hopping a freight train to the North or, failing that, shooting herself, but is instead taken home by her father. While she awaits him in the Blue Moon Café (where she had her assignation with the soldier), Frankie “turned to the others in the room, and it was the same with all of them and they were strangers.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid., 272.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 368.

⁹¹ Ibid., 376.

⁹² Ibid., 381.

⁹³ Ibid., 388.

Frankie momentarily came to see that she might have a place in the town after all, but the emotional trauma of the wedding debacle drives her, at least temporarily, back to her earlier, embittered outsider-self. And following this tragedy she is treated to several more: Frankie's younger cousin, John Henry, dies after a bout with meningitis, and Honey Brown, Berenice's foster brother, high on marijuana and cocaine, is arrested and sentenced to eight years in a work gang after breaking into the store whose white owner had sold him the drugs in the first place.⁹⁴ But Frankie's tragedy and frustration seem to come to an end, even as the world around her deteriorates. Following her moment of estrangement in the Blue Moon, Frankie finds herself suddenly enmeshed in a new relationship which resolves her earlier sense that "the world was too far away, and there was no way any more that she could be included."⁹⁵ Her friend Mary Littlejohn and she have formed a close alliance, and Frankie now dreams of traveling the world with Mary someday.

At first glance, with Frankie suddenly comfortable with her life in the South while her brother passes away and Berenice's half-brother is sentenced to hard labor, we might see this conclusion as an indication of Frankie's embrace of the very structure of white privilege her earlier, freakish, self had resisted. Stecopoulos, in particular, argues that Frankie becomes, at the end, just another ally of America's post-World War II imperialist agenda: "Separated from her erstwhile companions, a thirteen-year-old Frankie embraces her new friend, Mary, and their gleeful plans to travel around the globe. The earlier desire

⁹⁴ Ibid., 389-90.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 387.

to join the world via the military gives way in this final turn to a new impulse: that of traveling as a moneyed American unconcerned with warfare.”⁹⁶ Brinkmeyer echoes this reading; in his analysis of Frankie as having degenerated from a kind of antifascist rebel into “a giddy adolescent,” he maintains that the novel’s conclusion shows Frankie as “happily accepting her designated place in the cultural order” and as one who now “mindlessly follows the ritual enforced by southern tradition.”⁹⁷

However, we need to see Frankie’s end as part of a complex series of events that McCullers compacts into the novel’s last few pages, and that lead us towards a very different reading. After all, rather than move to the suburbs with Frankie and her family, Berenice “had given quit notice and said that she might as well marry T.T.,” a sign that, as the war winds down, she, like many blacks in the South, has found even more resolve to live a life that is both economically and socially independent of this white family.⁹⁸ Although her foster brother has been sentenced to hard labor, we are also told that “Berenice had got a lawyer and had seen Honey at the jail.”⁹⁹ It may be quixotic for Berenice to fight the southern legal system, but it is telling that the novel ends with her resolved both to lead an existence independent of the Addams’s and also to use the legal tools at hand to fight for justice.

Mary Littlejohn, moreover, is not just Frankie’s new female friend, but someone who joins with Frankie in an alliance of estrangement. Because Mary is Catholic,

⁹⁶ Stecopoulos, 124.

⁹⁷ Brinkmeyer, 248-49.

⁹⁸ McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 388.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

Berenice is skeptical of the girl, but for Frankie this quality only adds to Mary's allure: "This difference was a final touch of strangeness, silent terror, that completed the wonder of her love."¹⁰⁰ It is not too much to say that Frankie and Mary's relationship represents at least a potential counter to the conformist structure of southern womanhood that Frankie continues to avoid. Adams sees the Frankie-Mary friendship in this light, when she argues that Mary's mother's refusal to allow Frankie and Mary to visit the Freak Pavilion together is less a sign that Frankie now rejects association with freakishness, and more an indication of the two girls' "recognition that the world is composed of freaks, that they no longer need to secure their own normality by exploiting a less fortunate Other."¹⁰¹ Frankie may no longer be embittered by her southern existence, may no longer long to leave, but she has also come to see a place in the South for freaks like her.

At the novel's conclusion Frankie simply sees less of a dichotomy between the larger world and her limited southern space, and McCullers is leading us toward that area of negotiation between global and southern. *The Member of the Wedding* is not the story of Frankie's accommodation to southern social conventions or postwar American imperial fantasies. It is a portrait of a southern cosmopolitan identity as McCullers imagined it, where freakish outsiders who dream of escaping beyond their southern geographical boundaries find a place for themselves within a peculiar regionalism that they now view from a global perspective.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 389.

¹⁰¹ Adams, 575.

This navigation between regional identities and global horizons is made clear to us in the novel's final paragraphs. After Frankie tells Berenice she received a letter from her brother in Luxembourg, she makes a particularly telling juxtaposition: "'There is a basement in the new house. And a laundry room.' She added, after a minute, 'We will most likely pass through Luxembourg when we go around the world together'."¹⁰² Frankie's language here is a jumble of "loose" and "caught" imagery: her description of the suburban southern life with which she is about to engage shifts to her thoughts of world travel with her female partner. Mary's arrival at the novel's conclusion is not an indication of Frankie's entombment within a normative structure, but a moment that speaks to Frankie's emerging ability to break down the distinctions between South and world, an ability further underscored in the novel's final lines. Earlier Frankie said, "I am just mad about Michelangelo," a statement that indicates her continued longing for a European otherness that could draw her away from where she lived.¹⁰³ But now the line is altered: "I am just mad about _____," she says before she is interrupted by "the ringing of the bell" as Mary comes to call.¹⁰⁴ The blank line may indicate that Frankie has relieved herself of her Michelangelo obsession, but it also implies that McCullers wants to grant Frankie the possibility of a new language, one that will be defined following Mary's entrance into her new domestic life.

Certainly, the ultimate implications of the new relationships into which McCullers has flung her characters remain unclear to us as the novel closes, and it is true that

¹⁰² McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 392.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 389.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 392.

McCullers offers no critique of the postwar United States and its enabling of neo-imperialism as the Cold War took shape. But McCullers is less interested in taking a political stance on America's role in a postcolonial world, and more in what happens to people who find themselves in a South whose illusion of exceptionalism is rapidly eroding. She shows what it might look like for a frustrated, globally focused southern outsider to find a space for herself that is both within and without the South, a space that both Michelangelo and her own doorbell can fill. And even if the South as it stood in 1946 didn't allow for very many examples of the southern cosmopolitanism that McCullers longed for, there is no question she saw them appearing on the horizon.

If, as Scott Romine puts it, the contemporary southern narrative is “an archive of improvisations grounded in space and time, a register of imagined relations to artificial territorialities” subject to prevailing “coded territorialities” which have been rendered unstable,¹⁰⁵ then it is useful to read McCullers as a writer who imagined a breakdown in southern certainties, mannerisms, and regionalisms under the impact of a globalization that, in her era, had only begun to exert its pressures. And as the war progressed, the crushed idealism McCullers expressed in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* gave way to the far more hopeful, if still ambiguous, anticipation of a more globally engaged, postwar southern identity in *The Member of the Wedding*.

The cosmopolitanism that McCullers reached for was an ideal, a shared conversation between region and world, and one she hoped would transform the South

¹⁰⁵ Romine, *The Real South*, 17.

she knew into some very different entity. We can see this ideal playing out as the twenty-first century South moves, uncertainly and imperfectly, into an era where what had counted as “southern” no longer applies, and where the freakish outsiders McCullers loved so much have begun to feel right at home.

It would take some time before either the majority of southern whites or northern-migrated blacks would be ready to share in that vision. However, as the Great Migration crested and some blacks considered returning to the South to make new lives in an altered political, social, and physical landscape, Ralph Ellison would take stock of both southern white and southern black histories, and craft narratives that articulated southern cosmopolitanism in new ways. In my next chapter, I will examine how Ellison made his own cosmopolitan interventions in southern regionalism and paved the way for an outward-looking southern identity that is still developing today.

Chapter Three: Ralph Ellison's "South-Southwestern" Identity

Oklahoma is not a southern state, and Ralph Ellison, despite the fact that he would become a charter member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers late in life,¹ often pointed out that he did not consider himself a southerner. In "Remembering Richard Wright," Ellison differentiated himself from the Mississippi-born Wright quite specifically in that regard:

I, by contrast, am an Oklahoman, and by geographical origin a Southwesterner. Wright grew up in a part of what was the old Confederacy, while I grew up in a state which possesses no traditions of chattel slavery. Thus, while we both grew up in segregated societies, mine lacked many of the intensities of custom, tradition, and manners which "colored" the institutions of the Old South, and which were important in shaping Wright's point of view.²

Ellison's self-image as a southwesterner was fundamental for him, and in 1953, following the publication of *Invisible Man*, he wrote to Albert Murray of his plans to "scout the southwest ... get real mad again, and talk with the old folks a bit," and write an "Okla. book."³ But when Ellison did characterize his "southwestern" point of view, he often spoke as though it carried within it the trace of a transplanted southern cultural experience—as though the "south" of the southwestern was a recognizable presence throughout his childhood and was fundamental to the way he came to know Oklahoma's frontier geography. In "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner," Ellison pointed out

¹ Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 555.

² Ralph Ellison, "Remembering Richard Wright," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 663.

³ Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Modern, 2000), 44.

that he came from “a region adjacent to” the Texas from which Lyndon Johnson came, but that his own region was one “where the American language was spoken—by whites, at least—with an accent much like that with which he speaks.”⁴ And in “An Extravagance of Laughter,” Ellison wrote of his move from Alabama’s Tuskegee University to New York City, and of his shock at the Jim Crow-free public buses there, as though there had been a continuum of southern experience in all of the places he had lived:

For given my Oklahoma-Alabama perspective, even New York’s forms of transportation were unexpected sources of education. . . . In fact, the subways were utterly confusing to my Southern-bred idea of good manners. . . .⁵

Ellison was not just designating his “southern-bred idea of good manners” as having emerged solely from his Alabama tenure, for he concluded the essay by praising the works of Erskine Caldwell for “easing the conflict that I was having with my Southern experience (yes, and with my South-Southwestern identity). . . .”⁶

Although Ellison took pains at times to distance himself from the kind of South that Wright had experienced, he also maintained that the southwest of his youth, “adjacent” as it was to the states of the former Confederacy, allowed him to see through “southern-bred” eyes, and to also recognize this southern perspective as one that, while it was available to him, did not define him, restrict him, or bind him.

In his fictions, Ellison made the case for a deterritorialized South, one that his Oklahoma vantage point had revealed to him; a South whose cultural and historical

⁴ Ralph Ellison, “The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 559-561.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 621.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 662.

particulars were fluid and capable of transplantation; and a South that blacks in the migration and post-migration period could make use of in the service of a larger, cosmopolitan sense of self. In Ellison's early story "Flying Home," in *Invisible Man*, and in elements of his final, unfinished writing project, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, Ellison was articulating the meaning of southern cultural legacies for a people whose geographical relationships were being transformed by migration and by the pressures of a global age. In so doing, Ellison was revealing the cosmopolitanism inherent in black history, and was paralleling the negotiation among regional histories and national and global horizons that both Richard Wright and Carson McCullers had attempted before him.

The South in the Southwestern

In a 1973 interview with Hollie West, Ellison argued that, "geography is fate," and that in Oklahoma "the people who went there were trying to determine their fate." Ellison's Oklahoma was a place of self-determination, and a place to which blacks had migrated "as a sanctuary for runaway slaves who sought there the protection of the Five Great Indian Nations," and later, after emancipation, because it represented a generalized "land of opportunity," one unencumbered by southern laws, legacies, and mythologies.⁷

⁷ Hollie I. West, "Ellison: Exploring the Life of a Not So Visible Man," in *Conversations With Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Gramahm and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), 254.

Certainly, Oklahoma had been a magnet for blacks from throughout the nation since the late 1800s.⁸ In 1888, Kansans William Eagleson and Edwin P. McCabe began earnestly promoting Oklahoma as a haven for blacks who wanted to start a life free from post-Reconstruction violence, segregation, and impoverishment. Quintard Taylor, in *In Search Of The Racial Frontier*, tells us how, in 1889, Eagleson, a black Kansas newspaper editor, founded the Topeka-based Oklahoma Immigration Association, “headquartered in Topeka but with agents in the major cities of the South, where he hoped to attract a hundred thousand black settlers.” In 1890, McCabe, a Kansas-born black politician, founded the all-black Oklahoma town of Langston City with Eagleson, and promoted black emigration in black newspapers throughout the South, proclaiming: “Here, the negro can rest from mob law, here he can rest from every ill of the southern policies.”⁹ The calls by Eagleson and McCabe were generally successful; Taylor tells us that, at its peak, “African American migration to the Twin Territories (Indiana and Oklahoma) produced thirty-two all-black towns” by 1900.¹⁰

This attempt to carve out all-black settlements from Indian land began with great promise, but the effort would not survive Oklahoma statehood:

When the Twin Territories became the state of Oklahoma in 1907, the Democratic-dominated state legislature quickly disenfranchised black voters and segregated public schools and accommodations. . . . Black men continued to vote

⁸ For a more thorough examination of Ellison’s Oklahoma influences, see Horace Porter, “Jazz Beginnings: Ralph Ellison and Charlie Christian in Oklahoma City,” *The Antioch Review*. 57:3: (Summer, 1999): 277-295.

⁹ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* (New York: Norton, 1998), 145

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

in town elections, but political control could not compensate for powerlessness at the courthouse or the state capital controlled by unsympathetic officials.”¹¹

Oklahoma had none of the historical baggage of the South, but it did have many new white residents who wanted to impose the structures of segregation that they believed their southern histories and southern legacy of racial hierarchies demanded. But at the same time, Oklahoma’s black residents recognized the value of *their* southern legacies. When Ellison talked about the influence that southern black culture had on him, his descriptions were often informed less by the “reality” of a black folk life that had its roots in the South, and more by the “use” to which he and his neighbors could put that folk life. Ellison acknowledged that he “had none of the agricultural experience of my mother, who had grown up on a farm in Georgia,” although “in twenty minutes you could move from Oklahoma City into deep farm country.” But he harbored some envy for his classmates who would, “during the fall cotton-picking season,” leave school to work with their parents in the cotton fields,

because the kids came back with such wonderful stories. And it wasn’t the hard work which they stressed, but the communion, the playing, the eating, the dancing and the singing. And they brought back jokes, our Negro jokes—not those told about Negroes by whites—and they always returned with Negro folk stories which I’d never heard before and which couldn’t be found in any books I knew about. This was something to affirm and I felt there was a richness in it.¹²

Ellison saw the legacy of black folk culture as an essential component in what it meant to be black in the southwest. In the same interview with West quoted above, he argued that the black folklore of Oklahoma was specifically southern and rural in origin: “I was just

¹¹ Ibid., 151.

¹² Ralph Ellison, “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: *An Interview*,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 66-67.

part of a community in which you had an extension of folklore patterns from the South into the Southwest. After all, many of the people came from Alabama, North Carolina, Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia. And they brought along stories.”¹³ There may be such a thing as an urban folklore, Ellison conceded, “but it isn’t a thing in itself. The traditions are modified in the city. . . . This tradition goes way back to the South, and some of it goes back to Africa.”¹⁴

Ellison also saw blacks in Oklahoma celebrating southern-based folklore amidst whites who were determined to draw upon their own, radically different southern legacies. The result was a clash over the meaning of transplanted southern culture within the frontier, a clash that, as Ellison recalled, often manifested itself in violence:

It caused conflict. But when you speak of something like tradition, you must remember that tradition is not something abstract. Tradition is within the attitudes of individuals, especially on a frontier. Say, in the South—the traditions of the slave South are inspired in buildings, patterns of movement about the cities, in manners, in signs, in monuments, in all kinds of things. . . . But on a frontier the tradition—at a given point—is apt to be more in the attitudes and memories of individuals. When you run into a person who has an antiblack tradition, and you meet some black who isn’t going to accept it, who has determined to confront it head on—then you have conflict. Certainly it made for a conflict, but what was good about it was the constant jockeying to assert a different pattern of relationships, and that was very, very important for the people that I grew up with.¹⁵

Oklahoma was, for Ellison, a place onto which both blacks and whites projected their memories and attitudes from elsewhere and from the South in particular, and it was a place where they fought over the ways in which their respective regional legacies would

¹³ West, “Exploring the Life,” 246.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 255-256.

take structured form. In effect, Oklahoma’s “frontier” relationship to the rest of the nation revealed regionalism to be an imagining—a series of myths that populations make use of in a given geographical space, but that are also subject to redefinition and reconfiguration. When black southerners came to Oklahoma, they carried with them cultural particulars that they could make use of for their own ends in this new space, and that they recognized as tools in the service of “a different pattern of relationships”—with whites and with one another.

The notion of a new pattern of relationships between whites and blacks, one that can emerge from a mutual recognition of southern identity as something capable of transplantation, was key to Ellison’s vision of the role of the South in the Great Migration period. In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Ellison argued that the “way of life” that southern whites held so dear was “more real on the level of myth, memory, and dream than on the level of actuality anyway.”¹⁶ But a version of southern myth was one that blacks also shared and contributed to in the service of the “stylized identities” with which they confronted southern whites: “much of the energy of the imagination—much of the *psychic* energy of the South, among both whites and blacks, has gone, I think, into this particular negative art form.”¹⁷ For Ellison, the “southern mystique” was a “work of the imagination” that could reinforce negative patterns of white racial superiority and

¹⁶ Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks For The Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 334. In his roughly contemporaneous review of Howard Zinn’s *The Southern Mystique*, Ellison developed the idea further: “For while the myths and mysteries that form the Southern mystique are *irrational* and even *primitive*, they are nevertheless real, even as works of the imagination are ‘real’. Ralph Ellison, “If The Twain Shall Meet,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 575-576.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 344-345.

violence, but one that was also the basis of black cultural and community values, and what mattered were the ultimately imaginative, and therefore adaptable, qualities that those mutually incompatible myths shared:

“There’s no Southerner who hasn’t been touched by the presence of Negroes. There’s no Negro who hasn’t been touched by the presence of white Southerners. And of course, this extends beyond the region. It gets—the moment you start touching culture you touch music, you touch dance attitudes, you touch movies—touch the structure anywhere—and the Negro is right in there helping to shape it.”¹⁸

In these statements, Ellison parallels Edward Ayers’s argument that southern blacks and whites, who never “failed to see the differences between themselves and those of other skin color” continued to have “influences running in both directions, sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes imperceptibly.”¹⁹ But Ellison was also making a case for the place of regionally-based cultural legacies for blacks in the post-war period, once they come to recognize how their southern cultural histories position them as central players in a postwar experience that “extends beyond region.” Kenneth W. Warren argues that Ellison had a commitment to a celebration of the southern roots of black culture, in large part because he saw those roots as a response to “the democratization and desacralization of life under the advance of late capitalism. The Negro remained ‘southern’ because both the Negro and the south signaled humanity’s capacity through culture to resist the

¹⁸ Ibid., 347.

¹⁹ Ayers, “What We Talk About When We Talk About the South,” in *All Over The Map: Rethinking American Regions*, ed. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, et al (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 75.

soulless advance of late-twentieth century technology.”²⁰ This argument, though, suggests that Ellison had an interest in southern culture because he saw such culture as aiding blacks in a resistance to modernity. I would argue that Ellison’s interest in southern culture was less about mitigating “desacralization” than it was about defining blacks as a people who, because of the fluidity of their southern as well as northern—and, to be sure, southwestern—experiences, were central to a reshaping of the cultural debate in an increasingly expansive nation.

Ellison’s Cosmopolitanism

Ellison rarely (if ever) used the term cosmopolitan to describe himself, but many critics have used the word to describe him. Cornel West saw Ellison as “a hero to me,” partly because “he was cosmopolitan, he was wise, he had the ability to connect the high brow with the so-called low brow.”²¹ Critic John S. Wright sees Ellison as connected to a “belletristic condition of cosmopolitan activism,” by which he means “a world of flux and contrariety and riddling codes of conduct” that emerged from Ellison’s polymath intellectual pursuits.²²

But Ellison was not just a cosmopolitan because he connected “high brow and low brow.” His South-Southwestern experience necessitated an outlook that was commensurate with a cosmopolitanizing nation. Black Oklahomans, as Ellison saw them,

²⁰ Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black And Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 67.

²¹ Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, 494.

²² John S. Wright, *Shadowing Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006), 23.

were engaged in a process of negotiating their southern regional legacies with all of their other influences—whether from Europe, from Africa, or from the nation as a whole. Oklahoma lent itself to that kind of negotiation precisely because its population of migratory southern whites and blacks revealed southern culture to be something whose meaning could be negotiated, and that could be put to use as a component in an identity that placed blacks as central players in a globally connected nation.

James L. Peacock critiques those who call for a “seamless global or cosmopolitan world culture in which locale shrinks in importance.” He argues instead for a “grounded globalism” in which “regional, national, and global identities connect in new ways.”²³ However, Peacock’s idea of the fluid interconnectedness of regional, national, and global influences is what cosmopolitanism, in its current theoretical manifestation, is really all about. It may be true that the word was historically allied with a “universalism” that forecloses the value of localities, but many contemporary theorists see cosmopolitanism as a “rooted” identity, a process in which local subjects bring their local resonances into engagement with global patterns and ideas. Arjun Appadurai, who is one of the theorists that Peacock castigates, argues that “today’s cosmopolitans” are those who “combine experiences of various media and various forms of experience—cinema, video, restaurants, spectator sports, tourism, to name just a few—that have different national and transnational genealogies.” And as “unrooted” by media as such cosmopolitans may be, they also have “complex local histories, and their translocal dialogue has a complex

²³ James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2007), 70.

history as well. . .”²⁴ As a result, Appadurai calls for an anthropology that will explain the ways in which “local historical trajectories flow into complicated transnational structures.”²⁵ We might say that it is the flowing between those locals and those transnationals that is what characterizes cosmopolitanism. “Grounded globalism” is what ultimately defines the term in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Ellison’s Oklahoma was “local” in the sense of “familiar,” “homely,” and “grounding.” It was also local to the extent that local spaces, particularly in the historic southern states, often serve as stages upon which regional ideas and tensions are explored and reconfigured. As valuable as the “locally specific” aspects of Oklahoma were to Ellison, they were really important because they presented a context for the reconfiguration of a series of cultural, genealogical, and informational flows. It was in Oklahoma that disparate ideas of regional culture and belonging, themselves diverse and fluidic, converged with one another and with larger concepts of nationhood, and became processed into a different, cosmopolitan, pattern of relationships. This is not to say that Ellison was particularly focused on “transnational” or global ideas and influences, although, like Wright, he recognized the place of African history, as well as European history, within both black identity and American culture as such.²⁶ For Ellison, the global,

²⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 1996), 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶ Ellison asserted in one interview: “I’ve had nasty things said about me because I say that I’m not an ‘African.’” Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Steve Cannon, “The Essential Ellison,” in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), 376. But he also lauded the fact that, by 1982, “Americans are much more aware now that American culture is part African.” Walter Lowe, “Book Essay: Invisible Man Ralph Ellison,” in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), 383.

like the southern regional, was important not because of the “real” international place to which it might lead, but because of the contribution such global ideas could make to an emerging cosmopolitan process.

When Ellison began using fiction to explore these ideas, he would ask his readers to recognize the South as he had seen it from his Oklahoma vantage point: as an ingredient within an emerging identity for post-migration blacks that was as cosmopolitan as was the South-Southwestern identity he had already come to know.

The South-Southwest goes North: Post-Migration Black Identity in New York

Ellison had lived in Alabama while attending Tuskegee University, and he found that, after he journeyed from there to New York in 1936, he initially “viewed New Yorkers through the overlay of my Alabama experience.” But he also wanted to come to terms with the relationship between “Northern freedom” and southern restrictions, because “otherwise I would remain physically in Harlem and psychologically in Alabama—neither of which was acceptable.”²⁷ He crafted some of his first written work at this time, most notably a series of nonfiction narratives constructed out of interviews with Harlem residents, which were part of Ellison’s assignments for the Federal Writers Project between 1937 and 1939. In the stories that Ellison collected from Harlem residents we can see a recurrent theme of a southern folklife that had travelled to New York from the South, but which black migrants were combining with their New York

²⁷ Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” 627.

experiences to form a new identity.²⁸ In one such profile, “Eddie’s Bar,” Ellison records the testimony of a Pullman porter from Florida who tells a series of rambling, drunken biographical stories. The tale begins in medias res, with the speaker asserting a refrain that he would continue throughout the tale:

Ahm in New York, but New York ain’t in me. You understand? Ahm in New York, but New York ain’t in me. What do I mean? Listen. I’m from Jacksonville. Been in New York twenty-five years. I’m a New Yorker! But I’m in New York an New York ain’t in me. Yuh understand?²⁹

The only reference to the South that the speaker makes (here and elsewhere in the brief profile) is that he is “from Jacksonville.” Only that place-name and the cadence of his dialect mark him as somehow southern. But the subject describes New York, even after twenty-five years, through the eyes of one who is both a newcomer to the city and a long-time resident; he is both “in” and “not-in” New York, as he claims: “Ah come here twenty-five years ago. Bright lights. Pretty women. More space to move around. Son, if Ah had-a got New York in me Ahd a-been dead a long time ago. What happened the other night. Yuh heard about the shooting up here in the hill. Take that boy. Ah knowed him!”³⁰

The speaker has remained in transition, neither in Jacksonville nor firmly in New York. As a result, he is able to acknowledge the value of urban space, while also able to

²⁸ Although they remain obscure, five such profiles have been reprinted, alongside similar work by Dorothy West, Vivian Morris, and several others. See Lionel C. Bascom, *A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an American Community* (New York: Avon, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

navigate through that space as though he was just passing through.³¹ The corrupting influence of the city is an issue for the speaker—he remarks that his brother was killed by “a wop” in the act of collecting protection money from him—he has remained above such temptations because, as he says once more, “Ahm in New York, see? But New York ain’t in me!”³²

We can see hear Ellison’s capturing of a particular “transitional” perspective in the above profile. The speaker in “Eddie’s Bar” makes no direct reference to black folk culture, but his vernacular and repeated references to place mark him as one is determined to retain his Jacksonville perspective no matter how long he remains in New York. On the other hand, it is that very Jacksonville perspective that allows him to be both “within” New York and without it: he is able to use his regional particulars as a survival strategy within his present urban location.

In another profile, “Sweet The Monkey,” Ellison recounts a tale by a man named Leo Gurley of an acquaintance in Florence, South Carolina who could become invisible and outwit the white police. “Florence is one of these hard towns on colored folks,”³³ Gurley says, but the only story he tells of the town is the magical and triumphant tale of “the boldest black son-of-a-bitch ever been down that way.”³⁴ Sweet’s power allows him to disappear and also break out of handcuffs, until the police trap and kill him. However,

³¹ We should note that, in *Invisible Man*, Ellison would put the speaker’s sentiment into the mouth of Mary Rambo, as she warns the southern-born protagonist to avoid being “corrupted” by Harlem. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; rept., New York: Vintage, 1980), 255.

³² Bascom, *A Renaissance in Harlem*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

“They never did find his body and right after that I come up here. That was about five years ago. My brother was down there last year and they said they think Sweet done come back. But they cain’t be sure because he wont let hisself be seen.”³⁵

Recorded one month after “Eddie’s Bar,” “Sweet the Monkey” contains no references at all to New York. But the speaker presents the North as a place to bring empowering folk tales like this one, and the South as a place to occasionally return and pick up the story from where it had left off. In both profiles, the South remains a consistent component in black migrants’ lives, a place from which to leave but also one whose cultural presence remains an essential part of the language that those migrants use to define themselves.

Robin Lucy contends that this early period in New York marked the emergence of “Ellison’s theory of the black folk” one that focused on “what they were *becoming* and not on what they must necessarily leave behind in the urban environment... .”³⁶ But Ellison had already begun to develop such a theory in Oklahoma itself. His move from there to Alabama and then to New York helped him to articulate the way that folk culture “travelled,” and the uses to which migrating blacks could put it.

These profiles illustrate that black folk culture and its southern referent were travelling commodities, but neither piece is particularly clear about just what migrating southern blacks were transforming into, nor exactly what they were making of their pasts and presents. The questions that these profiles raise—what the speaker of “Eddie’s Bar”

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid., 264.

was “in” and what sensibility Leo Gurley would serve with his *Sweet the Monkey* story—Ellison would begin to answer when he began his first fictional experiments.

Flying Home To A Shifting South

Ellison’s most celebrated early story, “Flying Home” (1944),³⁷ shows a migration from the opposite perspective of the New York migrants in Ellison’s WPA profiles. In “Flying Home,” Ellison’s protagonist is forced into a backward migration from North to South, and finds himself having to arrange the pieces of his northern and southern experiences in ways he had not contemplated. In the story, a black pilot-in-training, Todd, crashes his plane on a southern plantation and finds himself having to deal with the place of a rural black southern heritage within his new role as a pilot.

Ellison wrote a number of editorials for the journal *Negro Quarterly* as he was crafting “Flying Home,” and his final one, for the Winter-Spring issue of 1943, illustrates some of the tensions that inform the story. The period of Ellison’s work for the journal, from 1942 to 1943, spanned an especially turbulent period in American race relations. Although Roosevelt’s 1941 Executive Order 8802 mandating non-discrimination in defense industries was a major victory for emergent Civil Rights leaders, race riots broke out in major cities throughout the country in 1943; the Belle Isle, Detroit riot in June and

³⁷ Although Ellison wrote a number of fiction “experiments” during the 1940s, few were published prior to *Invisible Man*, and most were generally unknown before the posthumous collection, *Flying Home* (1996). “Flying Home” was one of the few that actually reached the public, and its appearance in the 1944 anthology *Cross-Section* brought Ellison a good deal of critical attention. See Lawrence Patrick Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* (New York: Wiley, 2002), 296-297, and Rampersad, *A Life*, 173-174.

the Harlem uprising in August were only the two most prominent examples of an especially violent year.³⁸ In this atmosphere, support for war service among blacks was hardly universal. While many in the black press championed the victory-at-home-through-victory-abroad “Double V” campaign, this strategy was challenged by a continuing feeling among many blacks that they were being asked to risk their lives as second-class citizen soldiers, relegated largely to support positions, in a white man’s war.³⁹ Ellison’s final editorial for *Negro Quarterly* had castigated the Tuskegee Airmen program as so much “window dressing.” In his view, the program gave a few select blacks the chance to achieve military glory while the armed forces within which they served remained entirely segregated, and their successes were being “palmed off on the American people as the real thing.”⁴⁰

Such cynicism is clearly part of Todd’s outlook. In “Flying Home,” Todd wonders whether, by training to fly, he is striking a blow against racism or participating in a game that whites had engineered. Lying on the ground, injured, he recalls his lover’s ambivalence about his service: “Anyone with brains can learn to fly, but then what. What about using it, and who will you use it for? ... I sometimes think they’re playing a trick on us. It’s very humiliating...”⁴¹

³⁸ See Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 68.

³⁹ Sandler gives extensive information about the campaign, 63-65; 180. See also Christopher Moore Paul, *Fighting For America* (New York: Ballantine, 2005), 30; Harvard Sitkoff, “African American Militancy in the American South,” in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Oxford: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1997), 74-75.

⁴⁰ Ralph Ellison, “Editorial Comment,” *Negro Quarterly* 1.4 (Winter/Spring 1943): 299.

⁴¹ Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 150.

It is unclear exactly where Todd's lover is writing from, but her language highlights the fact Todd is doing his training somewhere down South. It is his location that causes Todd to really question the value of his service: "What does she know of humiliation? She's never been down South. Now the humiliation would come. When you must have them judge you, knowing that they never accept your mistakes as your own but hold it against your whole race—that was humiliation."⁴² Todd's problem with being in the South stems not just from his fear of white southerners, but from his discomfort with southern blacks. For Todd, southern blacks provide far too great a contrast to his new role, and far too great a reminder to him of the precariousness of his leap into modernity.

In "Flying Home," the South is only "contrast"—it represents what Todd is not, and what he flies away from both symbolically and literally. As the story progresses, the tension that he feels between his present training and the southern setting in which that training takes place only grows. Todd is injured, lying on the ground and waiting for rescue, and lamenting that his accident had "knocked me back a hundred years."⁴³ An old black man, Jefferson, approaches him in the company of Teddy, a young boy, to offer assistance. Initially, they are surprised at Todd's blackness; lying groggily, he overhears one of the two saying, "I coulda sworn he was white."⁴⁴ They attempt to help him get to town for medical attention on the back of an ox, "old Ned," but the prospect of going from plane to farm animal, especially here in the South, is too grim for Todd to bear:

⁴² Ibid., 150.

⁴³ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147.

“Thoughts of himself riding an ox through the town, past streets full of white faces, down the concrete runways of the airfield, made swift images of humiliation in his mind.”⁴⁵ For Todd, the South, along with the agrarian lifestyles that southern blacks lead, means humiliation. This humiliation grows the closer his proximity to southern blacks.

Reflecting on his earlier training days in the area, Todd remembers that

such old men often came to the field to watch the pilots with childish eyes. At first it had made him proud; they had been a meaningful part of a new experience. But soon he realized they did not understand his accomplishments and they came to shame and embarrass him, like the distasteful praise of an idiot. A part of the meaning of flying had gone, then, and he had not been able to regain it.⁴⁶

As ambivalent as Todd is about his relationship to flying, he nevertheless sees flying as his only alternative to the lives that Jefferson and Teddy are forced to endure. Staring at his wrecked plane, he feels “naked without it,” as though it were “a suit of clothes you wear” that affords him “the only dignity I have.”⁴⁷ His hope is that, once he becomes a pilot, he will be able to free himself from both “ignorant black men” and the “condescending whites” who are his officers. It will be the enemies against whom he will fly missions who would, at the very least, “recognize his manhood and skill in terms of hate....”⁴⁸

Todd’s self-conception as an ethnic subject and as an American are in a state of becoming, and as the story progresses he begins to find a way to make the southern culture that Jefferson represents part of a new identity, one that he had not considered

⁴⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 151-152.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 152.

prior to his accident. While they wait for Teddy to return with Mister Graves, the plantation owner, Jefferson asks Todd if he and the other pilots “ever sit around and swap lies.” He proceeds to tell Todd of the time “when I was up in heaven,” and discovered that heaven had both black and white angels. The black angels told him that they “had to wear a special kind of harness,” which made flying twice as hard. Jefferson refused to wear his, and flew so acrobatically and outrageously that Saint Peter “rushed me straight to them pearly gates and gimme a parachute and a map of the state of Alabama... .” But before being exiled back to earth, he makes sure to tell Saint Peter that “while I was up here I was the flyin’est son-of-a-bitch what ever hit heaven!”⁴⁹

Initially, Todd recognizes the tale as one he heard in his own youth: “It’s an old tale, Todd thought. Told me years ago. Had forgotten. But at least it will keep him from talking about buzzards.”⁵⁰ It was indeed an old tale: William Alexander Percy, in *Lanterns On The Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son* (1941) relates how his black servant, Ford, told him a variation of the tale. The value of the story for Percy and for paternalistic southern whites like him was that it confirmed blacks’ inherent childlike simplicity: “Since the thirteenth century, no one except Ford and his kind has been at ease in heaven, much less confident enough of it to imagine an aeroplane stunt there.”⁵¹ Todd’s initial reaction to the story is more humiliation—Jefferson reminds him of a folk past that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 160.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁵¹ William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns On The Levee: Recollections Of A Planter’s Son* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 293. Also, see James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History Of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 160.

emerged out of servitude to the Percys of the world. He angrily tells Jefferson: “Go away. Go tell your tales to the white folks.”⁵²

However, Jefferson maintains that “I wasn’t tryin’ to hurt your feelings...,”⁵³ and the exchange reminds Todd of two scenes from his childhood, both of which now serve as catalysts for his ultimate reconciliation with the world in which Jefferson lives and the rural life that his stories evoke. We are not told exactly where Todd lived, and there is no indication that he has either a southern or an especially rural past. But the life he lived was in contact with the kind of southern black culture that Jefferson’s story illustrates and with the brutal racism with which Jefferson is surrounded.

In the first such reminiscence, Todd tells us of a time when he was four and a half and fascinated by toy airplanes that only “rich little white boys” could afford. At the time, he “vowed that, rich or poor, some day I would own such a toy.” Then one day during “a beautiful spring,” Todd saw a plane flying overhead: “some little white boy’s plane’s done flew away and all I got to do is stretch out my hands and it’ll be mine!” Reaching out to grab it, he tripped and fell, and discovered that what he had thought was a small toy was actually a real plane, one he perceived as small because of its distance. Injured from his fall and confined in bed for a week with a fever, he continued to imagine reaching out and grabbing the plane, all the while hearing his grandmother warning, “Young man, young man/Yo arm’s too short/To box with God...”⁵⁴

⁵² Ellison, *Flying Home*, 161.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

The story serves as a reminder that Todd's present role of technologically connected flyer has its roots in a desire for the "toys" that white privilege affords, but also that such desire can lead to pain, a pain that he can overcome with the healing power of black religious verse. But the song that Todd remembers is also one that was codified by James Weldon Johnson in the poem "The Prodigal Son," one of seven verse poems that Johnson published as part of the collection *God's Trombones* (1927). The rest of the poem is not referenced in the story (the quoted verse precedes the actual poem in Johnson's text), but it tells the tale of the son who leaves behind "the rough furrows behind my father's plow" for the women, gambling, and crowds of Babylon. Eventually he comes to his senses, remembers that "my father's house has many mansions," and returns home to a rich and friendly welcome.⁵⁵

Having finally achieved his goal of learning to fly an actual plane, Todd has somehow lost touch with the combination of black folk language and modernist aspirations that his childhood was suffused with. He has also forgotten the value that the tales told in that language had for him. He has come to see the launch into modernity that flying symbolizes as a one-way journey from a rural past to a technological present, and all the experiences that he associates with his original dream of flight have come to seem like so much baggage that he must get rid of.

As he awakes from his reverie to the sound of Jefferson's voice, Todd is told that Dabney Graves, the owner of the farm on which he is lying, has just flown overhead

⁵⁵ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 21-25.

himself, and that Graves has killed a number of blacks in the area. Jefferson can't leave because, as he tells Todd, "you have to come by the white folks, too" and that he has "nowhere to go," in any case.⁵⁶ But Jefferson's warning about the violent Graves who "don't give a hilla beans for nobody—but hisself," reminds Todd of another childhood memory of flight, this one much darker than the first. He remembers "a day and age he had long forgotten," when he encountered a plane overhead dropping cards on himself and his mother. The cards read "Niggers Stay from the Polls," and came emblazoned with "the eyeless sockets of a white hood."⁵⁷ The memory of the cards had remained buried all these years. But now he recalls his reaction to the plane, "spiraling gracefully," that had rained down on him such a threat: "And seeing it soar he was caught, transfixed between a terrible horror and a horrible fascination."⁵⁸

The incident was one that Ellison remembered reading on a leaflet in Oklahoma City in his youth, "dropped by the thousands from a plane that circled over the Negro community."⁵⁹ The idea that something as potentially symbolic of freedom as flying could be used to enforce such restrictive ideas on earth was not lost on him. In "Flying Home," the incident becomes a catalyst for Todd to recognize just how similar his life has always been to Jefferson's. Lying broken in this southern field, Todd now sees the parallels between Jefferson's life in the South and the life he led as a child, "going

⁵⁶ Ellison, *Flying Home*, 168.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁹ Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 200.

mysteriously with his mother through empty streets where black faces peered from behind drawn shades” as fellow blacks hid from whites seeking to suppress their votes.⁶⁰

But the memory has also prompted Todd to realize how his training as a pilot has not rendered him any less “caught” between the “fascination” and “horror” of his southern experiences. Todd realizes that he will need to reconcile those traces of black folk culture and racial trauma in his own past with his contemporary aspirations to fly, to fight in the war, and (one assumes) to return to his lover outside the South. That is, Todd must find a way to bring the spirit of southern black community, whose struggle against racist violence and transmission of folk culture he feels a renewed kinship with, with him into the cockpit.

When Graves arrives, he places Todd in a straightjacket, arguing that “You all know you caint let the nigguh git up that high without his going crazy. The nigguh brain ain’t built right for high altitudes...”⁶¹ But it is Jefferson and Teddy who rescue Todd, as he finds himself “realizing and doubting at once that only they could release him from his overpowering sense of isolation.”⁶² At the end, as Jefferson and the boy carry Todd back to his base:

a new current of communication flowed between the man and boy and himself. ... For a moment, the whole afternoon seemed suspended, and he waited for the horror to seize him again. Then, like a song within his head he heard the boy’s soft humming and saw the dark bird glide into the sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁶¹ Ibid., 171.

⁶² Ibid., 172.

⁶³ Ibid., 173.

The buzzard that had caused Todd's fall to earth has now become a symbol of his possible transformation. As Robin Lucy puts it, Todd finds "in the laughter at the core of Jefferson's tale a self-immolating, transformative energy," that, if he can engage with it, will grant him "the ability and will to improvise upon the given, to create something new, that expresses both a black *and* American identity."⁶⁴

It is in "Flying Home" that Ellison first uses fiction to point readers towards that "something new," a vision of black identity in which all that blacks had experienced in the South become central components in their post-migration lives. Like Todd, whose own regional background is left ambiguous, post-migration blacks could make use of all that blacks had experienced, in the South and elsewhere, as they prepared to fly into a global present.

Invisible Man and the Language of Migration

In the eight years following the publication of "Flying Home," Ellison would embark on his most famous literary project and only finished novel. It was a long process, but *Invisible Man* shows Ellison making an even stronger case for the South as integral to a post-migration cosmopolitan identity. "Cosmopolitan" is not a phrase that we normally associate with this novel. However, Adam Bradley makes the case that "Leroy's journal," an embedded text that Ellison included in early manuscripts of *Invisible Man*, helps us to see that "the concept of cosmopolitanism" was one that was an

⁶⁴ Ibid., 276.

important early theme of Ellison's. The conceit of the Leroy's journal passages (which are interspersed throughout the novel's later chapters) is that the narrator is reading a journal left behind in Mary Rambo's boarding house by the unseen Leroy. The journal presents the character of Leroy as an ideologue who, at one point, "offers a bold revisionist assessment of Frederick Douglass, taking him to task for relying on words instead of deeds."⁶⁵ But elsewhere, Leroy makes an important declaration of his own beliefs: "it is my nature, my internal compulsion, to be a man, a member of a culture, a civilization, a citizen of the world. I am morally stronger than the most vicious mob because I believe in this idea."⁶⁶

These elements were removed at the suggestion of Ellison's editor, and parts of the journals were put into Invisible Man's own mouth in the final published novel's epilogue—though not the phrase "citizen of the world."⁶⁷ If we hang on to the idea of cosmopolitanism as implying "global citizenship," we might find it hard to reconcile, as Bradley does, Leroy's assertions of "a global worldview that connects his own personal identity to a human network that extends well beyond national borders"⁶⁸ with what we often think of as Ellison's "outwardly hostile suggestions that blacks had any greater connection to people of color around the world than to their fellow citizens."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Adam Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 188.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁷ According to Bradley, the "Leroy's journal" elements were interspersed in the original manuscript "around chapters 12, 14, and 16 in the published novel." *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

However, Ellison's cosmopolitanism is less about forging actual connections to actual international others than it is about identifying black identity as a process of negotiation among various geographies and geographically embedded cultural particulars and histories. If Ellison excised such a passage and never returned to its ideas later, it may be because the cosmopolitanism that he did embrace was far more complicated than a mere rejection of national borders in favor of global citizenship. Cosmopolitanism in *Invisible Man* is a *rooted* rootlessness, a flight into the atmosphere in which the flyer never completely leaves the ground behind. At the conclusion of the published novel, the protagonist comes to acknowledge that his ultimate identity is the product of both his southern background—"the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me"—and the "infinite possibilities" that blacks in the post-migration era like him may be ready to embrace.⁷⁰

In order to reach such a conclusion, *Invisible Man* goes through a remarkable journey from South to North and to a basement underground, from which he imagines what his future might hold. At the beginning of *Invisible Man*, we are told that the narrator is "the smartest boy we've got there in Greenwood"⁷¹—a possible reference to the section of Tulsa, Oklahoma that whites had violently destroyed in 1921. However, just what state *Invisible Man* is from is left unclear. The "Battle Royal" section of the novel certainly speaks to a black experience at the hands of racist, dehumanizing whites that is in no way confined to any particular American locality or region.

⁷⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 579.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

But the protagonist begins to recognize region, and the South in particular, as both something to break from and something to engage with once he begins attending a university in the South, where he has his encounter with the incestuous “peasant farmer” Jim Trueblood. While driving Mr. Norton, a wealthy patron of the narrator’s Tuskegee-like institution, he finds himself being forced to reveal Trueblood’s sinful, pedophilic, and poverty-stricken existence to Norton. Trueblood had been a barely-tolerated entertainer for the elite blacks of the college, brought up when “special white guests visited the school” to sing spirituals and tell “the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive.”⁷² But the narrator and his colleagues “hated the black-belt people, the ‘peasants,’ during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down.”⁷³ Indeed, Trueblood’s real transgression, at some recent point, was to father children by both his wife and his daughter, and he had gone from being merely a source of anxiety about the near-presence of black poverty and folk life to a “disgrace upon the black community.”⁷⁴

The Trueblood “incident” is a signal event in the novel’s early section. It serves both to illustrate the narrator’s initial discomfort with Trueblood’s “disgrace,” and also to point out the tense relationship between Trueblood’s “abjection” and the persistence of uniquely black folk language. Trueblood tells his story in a way that presents him in the most positive possible light: he claims that he somehow penetrated his daughter, Matty Lou, without meaning to, while he was asleep next to her. On the other hand, just before

⁷² Ibid., 46.

⁷³ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 46.

he dozed off, he believed that she was encouraging his advances: “But I’m realizin’ that she’s a woman now, when I feels her turn and squirm against me and throw her arm across my neck, up where the cover didn’t reach and I was cold. She said somethin’ I couldn’t understand, like a woman says when she wants to tease and please a man.”⁷⁵

Upon waking and realizing he had already begun having intercourse with her while he was dreaming, Trueblood felt that he had no choice but to carry it through to its ultimate conclusion: “But once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain’t much he can do. It ain’t up to him no longer. There I was, tryin’ to git away with all my might, yet having to move without movin’.”⁷⁶

Upon discovering his crime, Trueblood’s wife, Kate, threatens him with a shotgun and strikes him in the head with an axe. The local black community has little but contempt for him afterwards, but he responds by turning the experience into song:

Finally, one night, way early in the mornin’, I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin’. I don’t mean to, I didn’t think ‘bout it, just start singin’. I don’t know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I ends up singin’ the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sang before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself and ain’t nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen.⁷⁷

The narrator, for his part, isn’t sure how to take the story. While appalled at Trueblood’s actions, he finds that the story itself leaves him “torn between humiliation and fascination.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 68.

Trueblood's appearance in the novel has left readers with similarly mixed reactions. Indeed, in 1952, black novelist John O. Killens, reviewing the novel for Paul Robeson's journal, *Freedom*, was particularly angered that "the thousands of exploited farmers in the South [are] represented by a sharecropper who made both his wife and daughter pregnant... [The novel] is a vicious distortion of Negro life."⁷⁹ However, Houston A. Baker, Jr. has defended Ellison's portrait of Trueblood as a needed example of the kinds of pathologies that inspired southern blues; in particular, Baker sees in Trueblood's story about himself as "an affirmation of a still recognizable humanity by a singer who has incorporated his personal disaster into a code of blues meanings emanating from an unpredictably chaotic world."⁸⁰

This seems to be how Ellison intended the character to be read. In a 1974 interview, he argued that "[Trueblood's] tragedy became a kind of entertainment for Mr. Norton and an embarrassment for the narrator. I put it up to the reader to take his own choice as to the quality of Trueblood's action, and I am hoping that more and more readers will understand there was a little bit of the hero in this fellow, who was right in the center of the context of irony in which the whole action of that part of the book unfolded."⁸¹ Of course, should we see the character as a "hero" or as affirmative of "a still recognizable humanity," we would be eliding the ramifications of the "tragedy" itself—in

⁷⁹ Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Oxford, 2004), 87.

⁸⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," in *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington D.C.: Howard, 1987), 337.

⁸¹ Arlene Crewdson and Rita Thomson, "Interview with Ralph Ellison," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), 271.

particular, the fact that this “tragedy” was ultimately one in which black women are the real tragic figures.⁸²

Ellison was not asking the reader to come to terms only with the “reality” of Trueblood’s situation, nor to see the real pathologies and male violence that punctuated southern black life as robbing Trueblood’s song of all value. Like the story that Jefferson tells Todd in “Flying Home,” Trueblood’s story is both “fascinating” and a marker of “humiliation” at the same time. As it was for Todd, the end-point of the narrator’s journey is to find a way to make both the “loved” and the “unlovable” in the South into components of a new post-migration identity. At the novel’s conclusion, after the narrator has come to New York, become disillusioned by communism, and alienated from the Harlem community, he comes to see Trueblood’s language as a tool that will help him take stock of his situation. As part of his tale, Trueblood had related his inability to defend his actions to being “just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung til he’s paralyzed—but still alive in his eyes and he’s watchin’ ‘em sting his body to death.”⁸³ As the narrator retreats underground, he collapses into a reverie and draws on Trueblood’s imagery to help him make sense of his newfound “betweenness”: “It was a state neither

⁸² Ellison’s marginalization of female characters into stereotypical roles of “mothers” and “whores” is difficult not to notice. For a discussion of female agency within *Invisible Man*, see Claudia Tate, “Notes On The Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” in *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Oxford, 2004), 253-266. Also: Anne Folwell Stanford, “He Speaks For Whom? Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*,” in *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 115-126.

⁸³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 63.

of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between, in which I was caught like Trueblood's jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes."⁸⁴

The state of "betweenness" that the narrator arrives at may be between dreaming and waking, but the phrase also fairly describes his sense of being between South and North, and not entirely in either. Initially, the narrator saw himself as coming to New York only so that he could return South one day, armed with newfound wealth and knowledge, "to head the college."⁸⁵ He saw the dichotomy between the urban North and the rural South to be a necessary one, and a split that he intended to take advantage of for his own personal benefit: he resolves to "slough off my southern ways of speech" while in New York, so that he "would have one way of speaking in the North and another in the South."⁸⁶ However, several experiences serve to catalyze his transformation from what he had been to what he was becoming. Among them are his encounter with the blues singing Peter Wheatstraw⁸⁷; the southern sense-memories that are evoked when he happily consumes "Car'lina yams" from a street vendor;⁸⁸ and, perhaps most significantly, the "strange memories awakening" that come to him when he sees a mixture of folk medicines, magical charms, and manumission papers among the household items of the evicted Provo family.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Ibid., 568.

⁸⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 166.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 176.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 263-267.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 271-273.

This final moment is particularly relevant because it shows the narrator coming to terms with southern and northern black experience—first as pieces of discarded refuse, and then, as he contemplates the scene, as pieces of own experience:

...this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed within me with more meaning than there should have been: *And why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother hanging wash on a cold windy day, so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned and hung stiff on the line, and her hands white and raw in the skirt-swirling wind and her gray head bare to the darkened sky—why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects?*⁹⁰

Kenneth W. Warren argues that this scene points out “the challenge of southernness for the Negro” which requires “moving from denial, through painful acknowledgment, and finally to a reintegration of the shameful within oneself.”⁹¹ But those elements are not just “shameful” southern legacies; they are also reminders of both racial trauma and cultural particulars—all unbound from their specific southern ground, yet essential parts of a new whole. Duck makes this point, reading the Invisible Man in this scene as “able, for the first time, to imagine and articulate affiliations—with his mother and grandparents, with the Provos, and with other blacks in both North and South.”⁹² Those affiliations become realized for him in a language that he imagines newly arrived migrant blacks speaking, as he witnesses many of them milling about on a subway platform:

For the boys speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams. ...

⁹⁰ Ibid., 273.

⁹¹ Warren, *So Black And Blue*, 67.

⁹² Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2006), 241.

Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten... But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it.⁹³

It is useful here to recall again Wright's line, at the end of *12 Million Black Voices*, that migrant blacks in the North, having brought their "living" southern pasts with them into the present, were moving into "the sphere of conscious history."⁹⁴ Ellison had made a direct reference to that work in the novel, when the overly-dogmatic Brotherhood leader, Brother Jack, mentions "*Death on the City Pavements*"—the title of part three of Wright's book—as "the title of a detective story or something I read somewhere."⁹⁵ For dogmatic politicians like Brother Jack, the aim was for migrants like Invisible Man to "shed that self, that old agrarian self" and "throw it off completely and emerge something new."⁹⁶ But we can see, as Invisible Man begins to see migrant blacks as bearers of a "transitional language," that the novel is building on what Wright began. We might say that, for Ellison, the southern past has become part of the inbetweenness that blacks have access to, if they learn to recognize the value of bringing "the same old ancient dreams" into their newly transitional lives.

The embodiment of those transitional thoughts is Rinehart, the combination numbers-runner, pimp, and "spiritual technologist" for whom the narrator is mistaken when he impulsively puts on dark sunglasses and a white hat and walks the streets of

⁹³ Ibid., 441.

⁹⁴ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 146.

⁹⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 290.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 291.

Harlem. Wearing this simple disguise causes ordinary Harlem-ites to see the narrator as Rinehart, and as he discovers just how many identities and roles Rinehart plays within the black community, he begins to see Rinehart as illustrative of the cosmopolitan potential that lies latent within all blacks: “His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which he lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was home.”⁹⁷ This fluidity is not restricted to “rounders” like Rinehart, but is ultimately illustrative of a kind of migratory vantage that all blacks have access to.

It is this migratory vantage that the narrator ultimately comes to occupy, one from which the world is revealed as “one of infinite possibilities,” and in which his southernness is part of the language he will use to make those possibilities become manifest. In the novel’s epilogue, he feels “the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me.”⁹⁸ For him, the world now “seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility.”⁹⁹ It was that possibility of a black post-migration identity that *Invisible Man* tends towards.

Three Days Before The Shooting and the South-Southwestern Imagination

Ellison’s affirmation of an unboundedness that was as intimately connected to southernness as it was to all other experiences reminds us of Bhabha’s assertion of

⁹⁷ Ibid., 498.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 579.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 499.

“cultural globality” as figuring “the in-between spaces of double-frames.”¹⁰⁰ Bhabha spoke of an era in which “the Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*.” This narrative is one constructed by people who deploy “the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to translate, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity.”¹⁰¹ In the manuscripts that formed Ellison’s unpublished final novel, we can see him arguing for a “native narrative” that both destabilizes fixed notions of “national identity,” but that also asks migrant blacks to see themselves as capable of extending their regional “fluidities” in a way that renders the nation as “unbounded” as they are.

In 2010, Ellison’s literary executor John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley brought to publication *Three Days Before The Shooting*, a collection of writings that Ellison worked on from the publication of *Invisible Man* until his death in 1994. Although dating the material is not possible to do with complete accuracy, Callahan contends that the two longest pieces, which he refers to as “Book I” and “Book II,” were essentially completed by the early 1970s, although Ellison continued to revise Book II “until at least 1986.”¹⁰² The manuscripts remained unpublished until 2010, although Ellison did arrange for several excerpts from both sections to reach the public in a variety of outlets.¹⁰³ We can

¹⁰⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 309.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰² Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 233.

¹⁰³ In all, Ellison published eight pieces from his planned novel between 1960 and 1973. They are: “And Hickman Arrives,” *The Noble Savage 1* (New York: Meridian, 1960), 5-49; “The Roof, The Steeple and the People,” *Quarterly Review of Literature* 10:3 (1960), 115-128; “It Always Breaks Out,” *Partisan*

see both Books I and II as a record of the ideas that Ellison began developing in the 1960s and 70s, and it is important to consider these texts in terms of their historical context. As Isabel Wilkerson notes, 1970

was the year that demographers called the turning point in the exodus of black Americans out of the South. It was the year that the revolutions of the 1960s began to bear fruit and black children were entering white schools in the South without death threats or the need for the National Guard. The people from the South continued to go north in great waves because nobody told them the Migration was over, but fewer were leaving than in previous decades and nearly as many blacks in the North and West, particularly the children of the original people of the Great Migration, began to contemplate or act upon a desire to return South, now that things appeared to be changing.¹⁰⁴

At the same time that this turning point in the Migration was taking place, Ellison was finding his reputation coming under attack. Child psychologist Robert Coles, writing in 1971 about his work as a civil rights organizer in the early 60s, emphasized the dim view that his fellow activists held of Ellison's work:

In 1964, when by the hundred we went south to Mississippi, the emphasis was on setting free a cruelly oppressed people. Again and again the black man's plight was analyzed, his suffering emphasized. . . . At that time a writer like Ralph Ellison—who for years has insisted upon the rich culture that Negroes have created for themselves—was summarily dismissed by 'liberators' who could not imagine they had a lot to learn from the victimized rural blacks of the South."¹⁰⁵

By 1970, this kind of sentiment was widespread. Bradley argues that Ellison was “an author under siege” in that year, with an entire issue of *Black World* devoted to attacking

Review, 30:1 (Spring 1963): 13-28; “Juneteenth,” *Quarterly Review of Literature* 13:3-4 (1965): 263-276; “Night-Talk,” *Quarterly Review of Literature* 16 (1969): 317-329; “A Song of Innocence,” *The Iowa Review* 1:3 (Spring 1970): 30-40; and “Cadillac Flambé,” *American Review* 16 (1973). In addition, “Backwacking, A Plea to the Senator,” *The Massachusetts Review* (Autumn 1977): 411-416, is often considered part of the unfinished novel. All of these pieces are included as appendices to *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

¹⁰⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 413.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Coles, *The South Goes North* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 587.

him for having taken a destructive intellectual and ideological path. Leading black intellectuals such as Larry Neal claimed that his work was irrelevant to the “new breed” of black activists, and a host of others imagined Ellison as “a capitulator, assimilationist, and Uncle Tom.”¹⁰⁶ James Alan McPherson, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1970, related the story of a lecture Ellison made at Ohio’s Oberlin College in April of the previous year, and quoted a student using the Uncle Tom epithet against him because of *Invisible Man*’s apparent rejection of revolutionary struggle in favor of a celebration of the centrality of black culture within American life.¹⁰⁷

Ellison, for his part, continued to argue for that centrality. His 1970 essay “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” was “written against the backdrop” of the “ideology of black separatism and nationalism,” and it shows Ellison making what Bradley calls “a kind of manifesto... about the essential importance of black Americans to the nation’s culture and democracy.”¹⁰⁸ At the same time, though, Ellison was continuing his work on his unfinished novel, and it was here that his real manifesto—about the way in which blacks’ migratory language was coming into play in the post-migration period—would take shape.

Book I of *Three Days Before the Shooting* is the story of the attempted assassination of the racist Virginia Senator Adam Sunraider by a white gunman; of the efforts by the black Georgia preacher Alonzo Z. Hickman to offer prayers and

¹⁰⁶ Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, 60.

¹⁰⁷ McPherson, James Alan, “Indivisible Man,” in *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1987), 18.

¹⁰⁸ Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, 67.

condolences to Sunraider while he lies in a coma; and of the difficulty of a white reporter, Welborn McIntyre, to make sense of Hickman's relationship with a Senator who should be, by all appearances, his enemy. Hickman and a delegation of black congregants had travelled to the nation's capital "three days before the shooting" on an unspecified mission and with an intent to seek out the Senator. When Sunraider is shot, Hickman takes it upon himself to hold a prayer vigil by his bedside until he recovers.

The section is told from the point of view of McIntyre, and as he contemplates the meaning of the Hickman/Sunraider relationship he finds himself recognizing the racial intersections that have marked his own life. In particular, McIntyre reexamines his relationship, decades earlier, with a black woman in Harlem with whom he fathered an illegitimate child. Her mother refused to allow them to marry, and he had somehow blocked the entire incident from his memory. His attitude toward race had, since that time, become increasingly impersonal, and he remained silent when a reporter from the South, McGowan, had spouted racist clichés and asserted his belief that "the nigras are moving up North in keeping with a long-range plan to seize control of the American Government."¹⁰⁹ But as he stands in the hospital waiting to interview Hickman, McIntyre's memories of his interracial relationship return: "it was all back and ripping me apart." Key to those memories is the fact that, while he and the woman were together, she had helped him recognize something about Harlem that he had not previously imagined:

¹⁰⁹ Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, 54.

Loving her, I'd lost myself in Harlem for a highly intense time, had surrendered to its fascination as to some great foreign city... And Laura had taught me to see the life there as not exotic but as extensions of her own life (a life quite different from that of which McGowan ranted) in the South. And through my fascination with language—languages are best learned in bed, it is said—I had come to see its speech idioms and its slang as extensions of Southern speech modified and amplified by the exciting contrasts of the Harlem melting pot. Ever concerned with children, Laura had even taught me to understand the games played and danced by kids in the streets as versions of the games and jingles which she had played and sung in Georgia.¹¹⁰

In his grief over losing her, he had forgotten all of this, “substituting instead the theories and definitions of sociologists and politicians. I had accepted their formulas as a means of ordering that sense of chaos which had been released in me by my loss of love.”¹¹¹

Ellison uses the white McIntyre to emphasize that the southern legacy of black post-migration life has been buried, lost in a haze of sociology, and in dire need of recovery. In this, Ellison was reacting most clearly to the 1965 report co-authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In “What America Would be Like Without Blacks” Ellison argued that Moynihan “has recently aggravated our social confusion over the racial issue while allegedly attempting to clarify it” by insisting “that the American melting pot didn't melt because our white ethnic groups have resisted all assimilative forces that appear to threaten their identities.” This is not exactly what the report insisted on; Moynihan argued that white and black communities had grown increasingly isolated from each other in the post World War II

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 135-136.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 136.

period, not that whites and blacks did not share cultural histories with one another.¹¹² But Ellison interpreted the report as one that elevated sociology over culture, and that reduced people of color to pathological “problems” in need of solving. McIntyre’s revelation is that his physical separation from his black family has caused him to forget that, as Ellison put it, “most American whites are culturally part Negro American without realizing it.”¹¹³

But this section of the novel is just the preliminary to Ellison’s real point. Book I shows a “forgetful” white man recovering the familial relations with blacks that lay dormant within him. Book II makes a case for just what black culture—a culture that extends from South to North and back again—really means for both blacks and whites. In Book II, the McIntyre narrator disappears, and the reader is plunged into a series of shifting perspectives between the now wounded and semi-conscious Sunraider, who is revealed to have started life as Bliss, a mixed-race boy preacher, and Hickman himself.

After Hickman witnesses the assassination attempt on Bliss/Sunraider, he attends the hospitalized Bliss at his bedside while Bliss finds himself revisiting many of the episodes from his cross-racial and cross-regional life. As Ellison put it in a note to the published excerpt from Book II, “Night-Talk,” the hospital scenes take place “circa 1955,” and in them the senator is passing through alternate periods of lucidity and delirium: “The men have been separated for many years, and time, the conflicts of value,

¹¹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” March 1965, Accessed April 17, 2010, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

¹¹³ Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 584.

the desire of one to remember nothing and the tendency of the other to remember too much, have rendered communication between them difficult.”¹¹⁴

Of course, “the conflicts of value” over the meaning of black folk culture was an issue with which Ellison had been working since “Flying Home.” But Ellison’s aim for Book II was more ambitious than anything he had attempted to date: it was, in effect, an attempt to create a literary language of cosmopolitanism, a series of dialogues, remembrances, sermons and dreams that, knitted together through the frame of the Bliss and Hickman story, would represent the kind of America that he believed was emerging from the tensions over place and race that the Great Migration had engendered. In a letter to Albert Murray just prior to the publication of “And Hickman Arrives,” the first published excerpt from the novel, Ellison articulated where he saw “Mose”—his and Murray’s affectionate term for the twentieth century black subject—going:

When you start lifting up that enormous stone, the Civil War, that’s kept so much of the meaning of life in the North hidden, you begin to see that Mose is at the center of a junk pile as well as in the center of the cotton boll. All the boys who try to escape this are simply running from the problem of value—Which is why those old Negroes whom I’m trying to make Hickman represent are so confounding, they never left the old original briar patch.¹¹⁵

Solving this “problem of value” was what Ellison believed to be the central question in post-war American life, and this final novel was an attempt to force readers to come to terms with the necessity of bringing black cultural experiences into conversation with blacks’ increasingly migratory selves. Ellison lays out his intentions most clearly in an episode of Book II that was also excerpted, in 1965, under the title “Juneteenth.” Here,

¹¹⁴ Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, 1065.

¹¹⁵ Murray, *Trading Twelves*, 206.

Bliss reminisces about a revival meeting that he attended as a boy and at which, under Hickman's teachings, he began to develop the oratorical skills that he would later incorporate into his racist and segregationist demagoguery. Lying wounded, Bliss finds himself going back to one particular Juneteenth celebration, when "a bunch of old fashioned Negroes" were celebrating "an illusion of emancipation, and getting it mixed up with the Resurrection, minstrel shows and vaudeville routines."¹¹⁶ Hickman's sermon begins with a reminder to his congregants that "We come over here out of Africa son," the descendents of kings, warriors, farmers, and musicians.¹¹⁷ Blacks were brought here "in chains... ...And they marched us into swamps... ...And they set us to work draining the swampland and toiling in the sun... ." ¹¹⁸ But following the middle passage, blacks not only brought African legacies with them; they also translated the South into a set of symbols that were definitively theirs:

Ah, but though divided and scattered, ground down and battered into the earth like a spike being pounded by a ten-pound sledge, we were on the ground and in the earth and the earth was red and black like the earth of Africa. And as we moldered underground we were mixed in with this land. We liked it. It fitted us fine. It was in us and we were in it. And then—praise God—deep in the ground, deep in the womb of this land, we began to stir!¹¹⁹

Hickman tells the crowd that once here, blacks were "rebirthed from the earth of this land and revived by the Word," commanded to be "a new kind of human," who will be driven "hither and yon around this land"¹²⁰ But blacks are not merely "enduring"

¹¹⁶ Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, 314.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 316-317.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 320-321.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

of the oppression that white society has forced them to face. Hickman asserts that “This land is ours because we come out of it, we bled in it, our tears watered it, we fertilized it with our dead... They laugh but we know who we are and where we are, but they keep on coming in their millions and they don’t know and can’t get together.”¹²¹ And the “new human” that each will become is one who “keep[s] to the rhythm” with which they have all “throbbed in time together.”¹²²

The sermon makes few claims for where blacks will go from here; all that is certain is that black future, black southern present, and African past are all intertwined, all part of the same rhythm that binds the community with one another. In many ways, this excerpt dismisses “back to Africa” black nationalism, while also asking American blacks to see all of their experiences, from Africa to the South and beyond, as essential to their ultimately American identities. “Africa,” here, is not a place to return to, but another current that serves to inform a black identity that is based on “knowing who we are” and “where we are.”

Bliss recollects this sermon while lying in his hospital bed, and he hears Hickman at his bedside reminding him that the Juneteenth celebration included migrants from all over the South, “all the way from Atlanta, Montgomery, Columbus, Charleston and Birmingham, just to be there and hear the Word.”¹²³ Just as McIntyre in Book I had forgotten his love for a black woman, Bliss had somehow forgotten his mixed-race southern upbringing, and it is in Book II that he is made to recognize the way that that

¹²¹ Ibid., 323.

¹²² Ibid., 323.

¹²³ Ibid., 324.

upbringing remains an essential component for him, whether he adopts the pose of a white racist senator or not.

In some ways, the Bliss character is a kind of Rinehart gone wrong—someone whose heritage of “fluidity” allows him the power to adopt different roles when he feels he needs to, but who has forgotten the regional and racial particulars that are the basis of that fluidity. Indeed, in his 1958 essay, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Ellison had asserted that Rinehart’s initials, B.P., stood for “Bliss Proteus,” and that he was so named because he “is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation.”¹²⁴

Christopher Z. Hobson argues that Ellison’s turn from the latent potential for transformation that Bliss Rinehart represents to the racial sell-out of Bliss/Sunraider shows Ellison losing his optimism about the black migration story as the political atmosphere of the 60s became increasingly polarized: “Ellison’s work-in-progress implied a society teetering on the edge of chaos primarily because of the bad faith and historical amnesia of its governing elite.”¹²⁵ Callahan agrees, arguing that, as Book II progresses, Ellison shows us an image “of the chaos of American society with which he had more of a passing acquaintance during the 1960s and 1970s.”¹²⁶

Hobson’s and Callahan’s readings of the novel are based largely on a scene late in Book II that shows an hallucinating Bliss imagining himself assaulted by three black

¹²⁴ Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern, 1994), 110.

¹²⁵ Christopher Z. Hobson, “Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, and African American Prophecy,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 51:3 (Fall 2005): 639.

¹²⁶ John F. Callahan, “The Lingering Question of Personality and Nation in *Invisible Man*: ‘And could politics never be an expression of love?’,” in *Ralph Ellison and The Raft of Hope*, ed. Lucas E. Morel (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2004), 228.

men, who interrupt his enjoyment of a pleasant upper-class afternoon at a fashionable party.¹²⁷ The three men, each speaking in a different variation of African-American dialect, are driving a car that “was no Cadillac, no Lincoln, Oldsmobile or Buick,” but “an arbitrary assemblage of chassis, wheels, engine, hood, horns, none of which had ever been part of a single car!”¹²⁸ What is more, the car is decorated with a hodgepodge of racial, regional, and technological signifiers, including an American flag, a coon’s tail, radio antennae, a Confederate flag, and a mash-up of black nationalist sloganeering written on “the image of an open switchblade” on its trunk: “WE HAVE SECEDED FROM THE MOTHER!/HOORAY FOR US!/TO HELL WITH CHARLEY!”¹²⁹

Bliss is both fearful and fascinated by the vehicle, and it seems to symbolize for him a mixing up of race and region that he been unable to imagine himself: “They have constructed it themselves, the Senator’s mind went on, brought the parts together and gathered in conspiratorial secret like a group of guerrillas assembling the smuggled parts of a machine gun!—And they’ve made the damn thing run! ... It’s a mammy-made, junkyard construction and yet those clowns have made it work, it runs!”¹³⁰ Ellison draws the scene with intimations of violence and revolutionary upheaval, as the car’s three

¹²⁷ Callahan chose to end his published version of Book II, which he called *Juneteenth* (1999), with this scene, although the manuscript continues for another 30 pages afterwards. Callahan argues that those pages “appear considerably less revised and polished—less settled on—than pages 1 to 319.” It was at the point that the manuscript began to appear “less revised and polished” that Callahan chose to conclude the published version. Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*, 233.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 411.

black occupants threaten to “Kick him ass!,” before dragging Bliss into the car in order to “give his butt a little ride.”¹³¹

However, I disagree that this scene, and this novel, are merely pessimistic reversals of the hopeful cosmopolitan vision that Ellison had been working towards beginning in the 1940s. In fact, even if the Blisses of the world will not be part of the coming revolution, it is clear that the car’s “junkyard construction” hearkens back to Ellison’s argument to Murray about the state of black America as being engaged with both “the junk pile” and “the cotton boll.” Book II argues that the “problem of value” now threatens those who, like Bliss, lost their way after moving North. But Ellison is not prophesying “chaos” here so much as an inevitable, and possibly “revolutionary” showdown between regionally-specific pasts and contemporary realities. Bliss may be about to get his ass kicked by the drivers of this “mammy-made junkyard construction,” but it is also implied that its drivers are headed somewhere, and that their machine is going to continue to run “in the defiance of the laws of physics, property rights, patents—everything.”¹³²

This is not exactly a parallel to Todd-the-pilot’s journey towards reunification with black folk culture, nor is it quite like the Invisible Man’s hoped-for reconciliation with all that was “loved and unlovely” in the South. But Ellison’s final work shows an ongoing preoccupation with the need for post-migration blacks to put their southern and

¹³¹ Ibid., 412.

¹³² Ibid., 411.

northern sensibilities into accord with each other. It is also a call for the “transitional language” that the migration had fostered in blacks to become a language they recognize as definitively theirs, and one that is essential to the language of a cosmopolitan nation. As the Great Migration began to ebb, southerners and northerners, both black and white, began to recognize that the Migration was less a linear movement from rural areas to urban centers than it was an act of circulation, a back-and-forth process that reconfigured the South, and revealed blacks to be bearers of a cosmopolitanism that that the nation needed to seize at its own.

As Ellison struggled with his manuscript, revising and re-writing without ever quite finishing it, Albert Murray, Ellison’s friend, correspondent, and contemporary, put into focused form what Ellison could not. In my final chapter I will examine the way in which Murray’s treatise *The Omni-Americans* (1969) and his novel *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974) extended this developing cosmopolitan vision, and set the stage for theories of a transnational South that predominate today.

Chapter Four: “As Cosmopolitan As Possible”: Albert Murray and the Post-Migration South

In his collection of writings on blues, jazz, and black culture, *The Blue Devils of Nada* (1996), Albert Murray focused on the improvisatory nature of the “blues statement.” In this late work, Murray continued the argument he had been making for the previous few decades about the ways in which blues and jazz artists such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong made “special use of the break” in their musical statements. For Murray, “the break” in blues and jazz—interruptions and stops-and-starts in the course of blues and jazz compositions—represented “grace under pressure, creativity in an emergency, continuity in the face of disjuncture.”¹ Fred Moten echoes Murray’s formulation, when he argues for the improvisatory qualities of a Billy Strayhorn recording as illustrating “the quickened disruption of the irreducible phonic substance, which is where universality lies. Here lies universality: in this break, this cut, this rupture.”²

But Murray emphasized “continuity in the face of disjuncture” in music because he saw post-Migration black life as characterized by its own breaks and interruptions, and by an “improvisatory” response to them. In his earlier *The Hero and The Blues* (1973),

¹ Albert Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 95.

² Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 39. Moten contends that Murray “wouldn’t understand” that avant garde jazz music “is a black thing,” and he wants to “disturb the borders of Murray’s conception of blackness” (32-33). The two do not disagree on the nature of improvisation; rather, Moten wants to extend Murray’s argument about improvisation in Ellington and Louis Jordan to other artists, such as Eric Dolphy and Cecil Taylor, that Moten sees Murray disregarding.

Murray makes clear that the “improvisation” that he defines as “infinite alertness-become-dexterity” and the “ability to swing (or to perform with grace under pressure)” was in no way confined to music, but was a generalized attitude toward resistance, conflict, and change. It is “the art or improvisation” that will both “enable contemporary man to be at home with his sometimes tolerable but never quite certain condition of *not* being at home in the world,” that will “also dispose him to regard his obstacles and frustrations as well as his achievements in terms of adventure and romance.”³

In his 1978 address at the Howard University Honors Convocation, “Academic Lead Sheet,” Murray made clear what had caused this “unhomely” condition that necessitated such improvisation, when he called the attention of his audience of black undergraduates and academics to

the problem of the rootlessness that is such an obvious and widespread result of twentieth-century technological innovations. Homesteads, for example, do not mean what they used to mean. Bulldozers wipe them out in no time at all. Homesteads, hometowns, and many other traditional landmarks as well. As rootless as the pioneers or even the captive Africans were, contemporary mankind in the world at large may well be in a predicament that is basically worse. Naming all of your ethnic ancestors back to Ham or even Adam and Eve is not likely to do very much to help you cope with the contemporary instability nearly so well as a blues-conditioned disposition to remain perpetually resilient and alert to the ongoing need for improvisation.⁴

Murray’s examples imply that he is talking about both the strip mall-ization of rural areas throughout the United States and the transformation of the American South from a primarily rural to an increasingly urban landscape. But he is also making reference to the parallels between those kinds of disjunctures and the flows of people, capital, and culture

³ Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 107.

⁴ Albert Murray, *From The Briarpatch File* (New York: Pantheon, 2001), 23.

that characterize contemporary globalization. Even though blues and jazz improvisation emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means of coping with very different kinds of instabilities, Murray thought that the improvisatory qualities that blacks had brought to the music were even more essential for the beginning of the twenty-first. Black life in the United States always required a degree of improvisation, but the kinds of breaks that blacks had incorporated into musical structures, breaks which were a musical analogue to the interruptions and breaks in their migratory and diasporic histories, had become increasingly mirrored by the “rootlessness” of “contemporary mankind.” Blacks had already learned how to improvise on the breaks in their own lives. In a national and global landscape characterized by rapid technological change and the redefinition of what counted as a “hometown,” a talent for improvisation had become essential for *everyone’s* survival. Given their unique history of improvisation, blacks were uniquely positioned to make their way in a world characterized by disjunctures that paralleled those they had always known.

Murray was clear about just what it meant to improvise one’s way through a rootless world. In the same 1978 address, he drew connections between the southern regional foundations of black history and the possibilities of a more “cosmopolitan” future:

Sentimental provincialism is out! Your ambition should be to become as cosmopolitan as possible. Now, you reach the universal or the cosmopolitan through the particular. So obviously you do not abandon your idiomatic roots. Indeed the more you dig down into yourself and deal with your personal problems against the richest possible background (and thus in the broadest context), the more

universal the implications of your most casual personal gesture is [sic] likely to become.⁵

For Murray, “cosmopolitanism” is defined by what you do—and in particular, by what you do with “idiomatic” regional knowledge in a nation and a world in which disjuncture has become so widespread. In this final coda, I will argue that, as blacks in the early 1970s took stock of what they had gained and what they had lost over the course of the Migration period, Murray, in his treatise, *The Omni-Americans* (1969) and in his first novel, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), made the case for cosmopolitanism as practice. In both of those texts, Murray continued the navigation through regional and global tensions that Wright, McCullers, and Ellison had embarked upon before him, and he argued for a cosmopolitanism that was rooted in a fluid and improvisatory regional experience—a cosmopolitanism well-suited, I argue, to a South and a nation disrupted and reconfigured by migration, modernity, and global intersections.

Murray’s Regional Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitanism that Murray gestured towards in *The Blue Devils of Nada* reminds us of Appiah’s argument that a “tenable cosmopolitanism” is one that “must take seriously the value of human life, and the value of particular human lives, the lives people have made for themselves, within the communities that lend significance to those lives.”⁶ Appiah’s cosmopolitanism is a philosophy in which one marries the particulars and “partialities” of one’s lived experience in “conversations among cities, regions,

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 222-23.

classes, genders, races, sexualities, across all the dimensions of difference.”⁷ For Appiah, the value of the cosmopolitan conversation is that it is the kind of conversation best suited to “our increasing interconnectedness” within a series of globally-based physical, biological, electronic, artistic, literary, and musical webs.⁸

We might imagine that Murray evokes “the world at large” in this sense—that he is calling on blacks to recognize transnational intersections between themselves and members of the black diaspora across the globe, and to recognize in black cultural products a means of forging alliances with a globally-dispersed African population. Brent Hayes Edwards makes an argument for just such alliances in his study of several Harlem Renaissance writers whose work sought to articulate those sorts of interconnections while also celebrating “black modern mobility.” In particular, Edwards takes as an example the “cosmopolitan cabaret” that Langston Hughes evoked in his 1924 poem “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret.”⁹ Hughes apparently wrote the poem while living as an expatriate in Paris, and in it he presents jazz as a music that can unite black communities in America and Europe: ““Play it, jazz band!/You’ve got seven languages to speak in/And then some./ Even if you do come from Georgia.”¹⁰ For Edwards, this section, along with several others by Hughes, speaks of the mobility that is inherent in both the Parisian performance space of jazz and “in the music as well, mirrored in jazz’s ability to change

⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁸ Ibid., 216.

⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

its affective implications, to ‘laugh and cry at the same time.’”¹¹ Thus, “the possibility of black internationalism is heard to be a matter of music.”¹²

Murray’s focus on the value of the disjunctures and improvisations in both jazz and black life lends itself to this kind of transnational argument. But Murray is ultimately less concerned with articulating a cosmopolitan language that can unite diasporic African communities than he is in locating a cosmopolitan process that is engendered by black history specifically. Hughes’s mention of Georgia asks us to see the southern legacy of jazz as the provincial starting point for an ultimately global journey. But for Murray, blacks’ southern histories, as well as their journeys from their southern places, are the very things that allow them to speak in multiple languages and to celebrate with an audience of European cabaret patrons.

Murray and The Great Migration Out and Back

Murray was arguing for the cosmopolitan value of southern regional particulars, and in order to understand that argument we must first recognize that his work was grounded in what he saw emerging as the Great Migration of blacks from rural South to urban North was beginning to ebb and ultimately reverse. The massive event that was the Migration was not just an historic movement of people, but a period in which what it meant to be southern was reconfigured. When we look at the movement of southern blacks from South to North between the 1940s and the 1970s, it is useful to think of this

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² Ibid., 68.

period as James N. Gregory does, as one of “circulation” rather than of “resettlement.” By the beginning in the 1970s, when Murray wrote the two texts under consideration, more people, both black and white, moved into southern states than migrated out of those states, and many of those who moved southward were former southerners who were returning to the region in which they had been born:

Long a net exporter of population, the South had become a net importer. And a portion of those immigrants were former southerners now returning home. At least 210,000 black expatriates and 897,000 white expatriates joined the flow of people into the southland in the last five years of the 1970s, 26 percent of the total. Some of the rest were children and grandchildren of the diaspora.”¹³

Gregory argues that a southern economic resurgence in the 1970s lured many with the promise of expanding opportunities in manufacturing and a growing “New South” industrialization.¹⁴ But others ask us to recognize that the southern economic picture was, in many ways, little different from the growing “urban underclass” life that many northern blacks were increasingly living. Nicholas Lemann chronicled the migration of Ruby Haynes to Chicago and back to Mississippi over the course of the post-World War II period, and he points out that the Clarksdale that Ms. Haynes returned to in 1979 was increasingly as welfare-dependant, crime-ridden, and poverty-stricken as was the Chicago housing project that she had fled.¹⁵ Jacqueline Jones makes much the same argument in her study of national trends in poverty: “By the late 20th century the rural

¹³ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 322.

¹⁴ Although it should be noted that the South to which many returned was becoming an increasing manufacturing rival to the North, West, and Midwest: “Southern states would see nonagricultural employment increase by 46 percent in the 1970s, including more than a million manufacturing jobs. The Northeast and North Central regions between them lost close to the same number. . . . In the 1980s, the northern states would suffer through massive deindustrialization while the South continued to gain jobs and people.” *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁵ See Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 336-39.

folk of both races who had been left behind by their migrating kin faced a form of hardship that increasingly resembled the way of life in the urban North.” As an example, Jones points out that “in the late 1980s, with one-seventh of the [Mississippi] Delta’s people receiving food stamps (three times the national average) and more than one-quarter without work, the area rivaled any Northern city in terms of its deep and persistent (if not geographically concentrated) poverty.”¹⁶

But if a return South was not prompted entirely by returnees’ realization that economic opportunities had improved in the South since they left, then what was the reason? Carol Stack, in her study of black return migrations to North Carolina in the 1970s and 80s, points out, as Lemann does, that many southern-born blacks left poor, crime-ridden southern towns in the 1930s and 40s; moved to northern urban centers that later became islands of “urban underclass” destitution by the late 1960s; and subsequently returned to many of the same rural towns that they had originally left, places which were often marked by the kinds of social pathologies that had come to characterize much of northern urban black life.¹⁷ But Stack also argues that what had changed for many southern-born blacks over the migration period was the narrative of southern black identity itself. As she puts it: “what people [who return] are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to *create* a

¹⁶ Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 286-87.

¹⁷ Carol Stack, *Call To Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 197-98.

home.”¹⁸

The South, for some, had come to seem like a place of possibility in a way that it had not before, precisely because, in the wake of out- and in- migrations, the region now seemed at once static and fluid, a place to leave *and* a place to return to. Some of the economic and political realities of the South had changed, and some had not, but for many it was now a region whose fluidity of population had revealed it to be a place characterized by fluidity as such: the Great Migration had transformed the South into a place that was at once bound to its past and at the same time capable of real social change. It is that potential for transformation that Baker spoke to, when he argued that the contemporary South was not only increasingly characterized by “a ‘red state’ of conservatism, religious fundamentalism, international capitalist incorporation, exploitative immigrant labor relations, and an assumed ‘regional’ white supremacy,” but also by “a generation of scholars in ascendance and a progressive political and activist presence in regions below the Mason-Dixon line that seem to promise to make a new family of us all.”¹⁹

For Murray, who had been born and raised near Mobile, Alabama, being southern meant that one needed to be able to improvise in the midst of oppression. In his 1989 essay, “Regional Particulars and Universal Statement in Southern Writing,” Murray wrote that he was not “primarily concerned with recording what it is like or what it means

¹⁸ Ibid., 199.

¹⁹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *I Don't Hate The South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 189.

to be a Southerner or even a down-home grandson of slaves.”²⁰ But on the other hand, this was not to say that he was “not at all or even only a little concerned with being a Southerner, for it is precisely by processing the raw materials of my southern experience into universal aesthetic statement that I am most likely to come to terms with humanity as such.” Those “raw materials” are what Murray called “regional particulars—the idiomatic details, the down-home conventions, the provincial customs and folkways” that in his writings could be “processed into artistic statement, stylized into significance.”²¹ In the late 1960s, as Murray began publishing his work in earnest, he would make a case for the ways in which contemporary southern blacks could make use of their history of “unboundedness” to come to terms with a “rootless” late twentieth century American experience.

Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that Murray is one of several “latter-day writers,” Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Ernest Gaines among them, who “see the South as a place to stay because it has changed. For these writers the South is a site of racial memory and redemption.”²² But while Murray certainly kept company with those who were articulating a “southern-turn” in black literature at the same historical moment, he was also making an argument about what counts as regional identity in a post-migration world. Inherent in southern regional particulars, Murray explained, were the

²⁰ Albert Murray, “Regional Particulars and Universal Statement in Southern Writing,” *Callaloo* 38 (Winter, 1989), 3. The article is prefaced with the information that it was based on a talk that Murray gave in 1983. It was later reprinted under the title “Regional Particulars and Universal Implications” in *The Blue Devils of Nada* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 11-17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²² Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin?” *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 146.

ingredients of “the fully orchestrated blues statement,” which was “a highly pragmatic and indeed a fundamental device for confrontation, improvisation, and existential affirmation: a strategy for acknowledging the fact that life is a lowdown dirty shame and for improvising or riffing on the exigencies of the predicament.”²³

It is this “blues-conditioned disposition” that Murray argues emerged from specific conditions of oppression, violence, and the legacy of Jim Crow and slavery that characterized black southern life, but that also emerged from conditions of community, celebration, and cultural vibrancy. R. Douglas Hurt makes this point, when he argues that, even as the Jim Crow system sought to “control workers both on and off the job,” it was in both blues performance and in the “rural bars, juke joints, and house parties” where the music was played that “African American laborers claimed control over their bodies” and “rejected, at least symbolically, the values of their white employers.”²⁴ In emphasizing the cosmopolitan value of “regional particulars,” Murray was arguing not just that blacks need to “embrace” their southern roots, but that those southern roots are not quite so “rooted” as many might believe—that, in fact, southern “regional particulars” are fluid, varied, and as such lend themselves to an “improvisatory” set of attitudes and outlooks. And Murray wanted to make clear that blacks could and should make use of those improvisatory attitudes no matter where they happened to be.

In so doing, he was showing that, as Carolyn M. Jones puts it, the southern “homeplace” had become “in the modern world, more a mode of consciousness—down-

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ R. Douglas Hurt, *African American Life in the Rural South: 1900-1950* (Columbia, Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003), 203-204.

home southern consciousness—than, finally, a place.”²⁵ The deterritorializing of the South that Jones sees in Murray when he connects regional particulars with improvisatory consciousness is also, for Tania Friedel, a cosmopolitan move. In her study of twentieth century African American discourse, Friedel defines cosmopolitanism as a position that “implies an overarching concern for humanity,” one that “requires an acknowledgement of the important particularities of local identity claims. Grounded in cultural multiplicity and democratic principles, cosmopolitanism respects difference while asserting a common ground of equality that mediates between the particular and universal.”²⁶ Friedel reads Murray as illustrating this notion of cosmopolitanism in his own work. Because Murray’s argument about southern identity “integrates his own idiomatic roots and particularities, most prominent in echoes and metaphors of porch or fireside chats, church services, and blues and jazz music, with literary traditions,” it also “illustrates how interconnected the particular and universal actually are and, more specifically, how the particularity of African American culture informs American national identity.”²⁷

However, the “particulars” that Murray writes of, although they emerged from specific black southern cultural manifestations, are by their nature fluid, improvisatory, and subject to change given the necessary circumstances. Cosmopolitanism is about what happens when southern blacks make use of their southern cultural legacies in the service

²⁵ Carolyn M. Jones, “Race And Intimacy: Albert Murray’s *South To A Very Old Place*,” in *South To A New Place*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2002), 75.

²⁶ Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

of “universal” identities, but it is also what happens when regional particulars stand revealed as the meeting point of numerous national and international streams.

In Murray, regional particulars can travel as consciousness, but they also *have* travelled. Becoming “cosmopolitan” does not mean grounding oneself with a southern “real” that will balance the “unreal” of the “rootless” contemporary world. It means recognizing that the southern narrative has become, as Scott Romine puts it, “a site of negotiation and mutual navigation.”²⁸ As the Great Migration revealed the fluidity that had always characterized the South, Murray argued that blacks should embrace improvisatory nature of their regional particulars, and make use of those particulars as tools for survival in a rootless world.

The Omni-Americans and Murray’s Mobile, Alabama

This was a point that Murray began making at the beginning of his published writing career. In his first major work, *The Omni-Americans*, Murray made the case for a conception of American culture that is “patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto.”²⁹ But in arguing for a multicultural, “Omni-American” identity, Murray was also arguing for the fundamentally improvisatory nature of the black experience that contributed to that identity. Here and throughout his career, Murray would argue for the “blues idiom” as “a major cultural achievement” of African-

²⁸ Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2008), 236-37.

²⁹ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans* (New York: Avon, 1970), 39.

Americans, one whose structure, performance, and reproduction “turns disjunctures into continuities.”³⁰ The blues-idiom dancer “is not disconcerted by intrusions, lapses, shifts in rhythm, intensification of tempo, for instance; but is inspired by them to higher and richer levels of improvisation.”³¹

And the blues practitioner’s facility in turning “shifts in rhythm” into recognizable and usable musical and physical statements has preconditioned those practitioners to cope with a post-migration American landscape: “For the rest, sensibilities formed in the blues tradition seem uniquely equipped to withstand the dislocation traumas that usually result from such an abrupt and radical shift in environment and mode of existence.”³² For Murray, the fundamental improvisation of “the blues statement” emerges from a specifically southern black experience, but that southern black experience resonates through the lives of black people wherever they live: “Negroes in general continue to function in terms of extensions and elaborations that enabled their ancestors not only to endure slavery but also to sustain an unexcelled sense of human worth and possibility in the process.”³³ And though the blues took shape as a reaction to the experiences of slavery and Jim Crow, the “blues idiom” is a cultural expression that “can be extended from the cotton fields and the railroad through the megalopolis and into outer space”—something that Murray notes “many white composers, unlike most white social technicians” were

³⁰ Ibid., 90.

³¹ Ibid., 91.

³² Ibid., 95.

³³ Ibid., 94.

coming to realize.³⁴

When Murray wrote of the South and of the southern black experience that bred these “extensions and elaborations,” he used his own background in Alabama as an illustrative example. Born in Nokomis, Alabama in 1916, Murray grew up in Magazine Point, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Mobile itself.³⁵ It was in Mobile that Murray claimed he was “in touch with a pretty cosmopolitan atmosphere” from his early childhood, partly because of the educational opportunities he received within Alabama’s segregated school system: “When I got to the third grade and had a geography book, I could see it. It wasn’t like I was outside of the world. I was a part of the world.”³⁶

Murray’s designation of Mobile as a foundational place for his own cosmopolitan thinking—his realization that he was “a part of the world” while remaining engaged with his Mobilian-ness—might seem surprising, if only because the state of Alabama epitomized for many in the Civil Rights era the most retrograde, parochial, and violently racist aspects of the South. Many of the signal events of the modern Civil Rights movement took place in Alabama amidst a backdrop of violent white resistance, and Alabama’s Governor George Wallace came to symbolize southern white racial paranoia, resistance to change from without, and defiance in the face of racial progress.

In making the case for a South that was there for blacks to claim, Murray was turning a city in Alabama into the symbol of a new kind of South. Unlike those parts of

³⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁵ Barbara A Baker, “Cosmos Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation,” in *Conversations With Albert Murray*, ed. Roberta S. Maguire (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1997), 58.

³⁶ Roy Hoffman, “Albert Murray’s House of Blues,” in *Albert Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation*, ed. Barbara Baker (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2010), 139.

Alabama—Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma—that had come to represent southern white resistance to and violence towards the Civil Rights movement, Mobile’s own Civil Rights history had captured relatively little national attention. Although the city had the very same Jim Crow structures of segregation in public facilities and Klan activity that characterized the rest of Alabama, Mobile had desegregated more quietly and with notably less open violence than its more famous Alabamian urban brethren. In 1953, two years before the city of Montgomery had rejected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s proposals to desegregate its public transit system (and prompted the Montgomery Bus Boycott), Mobile had quietly desegregated its own buses in response to a lawsuit.³⁷ In 1954, two years before Tuscaloosa’s University of Alabama had refused the induction of its first black student, Autherine Lucy, Mobile’s Spring Hill College had voluntarily accepted its first black co-ed with no protests from whites and with little attention from the state or national press.³⁸

This is not to say that Mobile was somehow a bastion of racial harmony in which whites and blacks worked out their problems with a minimum of fuss. Richard A. Pride, in his study of public school desegregation in Mobile, argues that the push for Civil Rights there, while quieter and accompanied by fewer acts of white violence than elsewhere, met with a great deal of legal and political resistance on the part of white

³⁷ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa, Univ. of Alabama Press, 2004), 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

middle class parents and voters.³⁹ But in claiming to see a series of “improvisatory intersections” between the South and the globe within the black community in Mobile, Murray was asking black and white readers to recognize that there was more to Alabama, and to the South, than they thought they knew. In one of the final sections of *The Omni-Americans*, “Black Pride in Mobile, Alabama,” Murray argued that, while Mobilians were often given to the same expressions of black pride and the same emphasis on celebrations of black history as were Black Studies professors in New York, educators in Mobile tended to argue for the place of black studies in educational forums in a way that was more expansive than their Northern counterparts: “They do not want black heritage courses to be either extracurricular or elective. They not only want them required but required of all pupils. As some of them see it, the problem of improving the Black Image has as much to do with teaching white school children to honor Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner as with anything else.”⁴⁰ For Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Murray’s “integration” of black culture within the national construct “wasn’t an act of accommodation” so much as an act of “introjection”:⁴¹

For generations, the word ‘American’ had tacitly connoted ‘white.’ Murray inverted the cultural assumption and the verbal conventions: in his discourse, ‘American,’ roughly speaking, means ‘black.’ So, even as the clenched-fist crowd was scrambling for cultural crumbs, Murray was declaring the entire harvest board of American civilization to be his birthright.⁴²

³⁹ Richard A. Pride, *The Political Use of Racial Narratives: School Desegregation in Mobile, Alabama, 1954-1997* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2002), 18.

⁴⁰ Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 280-281.

⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “King of Cats,” in *Albert Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation*, ed. Barbara Baker (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2010), 26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

That birthright was one that Murray argued was symbolized by the “mobility” that he argued was characteristic of Mobile, and in *South To A Very Old Place* (1971), Murray took his Mobilian focus a step further. The book is a sort of blues-riff memoir, an elliptical travelogue in which Murray-as-narrator traces his own journey from New York, through to Tuskegee and Mobile, and on to parts farther south still. Begun as an assignment for *Harper’s*, *South To A Very Old Place* is a consideration of the meaning of “home” for a South-to-North migrant, but it is also an examination of how the South functions, and should continue to function, in the identities of black Americans who were coming to see themselves as potentially at home anywhere.

Jones argues that in this book, “Murray, crossing north to south and back, covers and maps the territory, the territory of his own existence and ours: that intimate place where we belong and from which we are exiled—the land and the American soul.”⁴³ The book performs this mapping in a supposedly linear journey, as Murray-as-narrator sets out from Harlem. He points out that the Harlem he has come to call home, although it houses “the very oldest of all good friends, to be sure,” is also one that finds him not grounded but unsettled, and “in the very midst of some snarled-up situation from which you have always wanted to be long gone forever.”⁴⁴ Murray’s task as narrator of *South To A Very Old Place* is to attempt to “unsnarl” the “snarled-up situation” that being southern-born and living in New York has somehow produced. He does this less through

⁴³ Carolyn M. Jones, “Race And Intimacy: Albert Murray’s *South To A Very Old Place*,” in *South To A New Place*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2002), 75.

⁴⁴ Albert Murray, *South To A Very Old Place* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 6.

declarative assertions and more through quoted dialogue from various people—southern blacks, white intellectuals and newspaper editors, passersby that he encounters—who help to stitch together his argument about the post-migration meaning of southern identity.

In the chapter called “Mobile,” Murray arrives back in the city of his birth, “a place of very old horizon-blue dreams plus all the boyhood schemes that are, after all, as much a part of achievement as of disappointment.”⁴⁵ Although he remarks upon some of the physical changes that the city has undergone—much of his neighborhood that “was the center of the world” in his youth has “been razed, completely industrialized” to make way for a Scott Paper Towel Company factory⁴⁶—it is the residents who knew him as a child that Murray allows to take center stage. Murray quotes their language and the inflections of their voices lovingly, allowing their blues-riffing to illustrate a connectedness, with one another and with him, that he needed to travel back South to recapture. But he also lets these residents make a case for the South as a place of global intersections, in a direct challenge to contemporary back-to-Africa idealism:

‘And don’t forget old Reverend Joyful Keeby. Talking about Africa, I bet you one thing. I bet you ain’t nobody going to catch nobody like Plute Keeby talking about going back to his kinfolks somewhere over in no Africa, and old Plute and them can trace their African blood right back to that old hull of the *Crowtillie* out there in the mouth of the Chickasabogue.’⁴⁷

The speaker is making a reference to the *Clotilda*, the last ship to transport slaves

⁴⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 168

from Africa to the United States.⁴⁸ In 1860, in an effort to get around the ban on international slave trading that had been in place since 1808, a prominent Mobile businessman, Timothy Meaher, had arranged to build, outfit, and disguise (as a merchant vessel) a ship to transport a cargo of slaves from the Bight of Benin in West Africa to Mobile Bay. The Africans on board, who were freed along with all American-born slaves following the Civil War, never entirely integrated into the local black community, and instead created a small enclave of their own on the outskirts of Mobile called African Town. They and their descendents maintained a complicated relationship with American blacks until the early twentieth century, occupying an unusual place in both slave history and African American identity.

Murray would make much more of the *Clotilda* later in *Train Whistle Guitar*, but as the reference to “that old hull of the *Crowtillie*” implies,⁴⁹ the *Clotilda* incident left a profound impression on him and on black Mobile in general. Here, he uses the example of the slave ship as a means of arguing against contemporary trends in black consciousness that romanticized an abstraction of “Africa,” when Mobile offered direct legacies of the middle passage itself:

Some of our kids now seem to think that heritage is something in a textbook, something that has to be at least a thousand years old and nine thousand miles across the sea. Something you can brag about. Some fabulous kingdoms of ancient African tyrants for liberation-committed black U.S. revolutionaries to be snobbish about! And yet few would regard themselves as antiquarians. Ordinarily,

⁴⁸ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 24. Many sources spell the ship as the *Clotilde*, but I will rely upon Diouf’s spelling, *Clotilda*, which she has verified through historical records.

⁴⁹ Although its captain attempted to scuttle it, Diouf reports that “her hull remained visible at low tide for three quarters of a century, as if to remind everyone of the Africans’ ordeal.” Diouf, 5.

they're the last people in the world to be messing around with something that is the least bit out of date.⁵⁰

It was these sorts of attacks on the younger generation that left many readers mistaking Murray for a curmudgeon, and both *The Omni-Americans* and *South To A Very Old Place* as conservative diatribes against the Black Consciousness movement. Gates refers to *The Omni-Americans* as “a book in which the very language of the black nationalists was subjected to a strip search,”⁵¹ and much of *South To A Very Old Place*—the Mobile chapter in particular—extends that strip search even further. But the *Clotilda* reference, coming as it does amidst a plethora of “don’t forget your roots” riffing and evocations of “down-home consciousness,” allows Murray to touch on what would become his larger point in later projects: that southern black history is not closed, but open, and that an examination of southern roots can expose the “global” that resides, and has always resided, within the southern regional particular. The mistake is to think that to journey “down home” is to go “backwards”; Murray wants to make the case that the truly radical gesture is to recognize how complicated the “down home” actually is.

Train Whistle Guitar, The Clotilda, and Murray’s Cosmopolitan Turn

This was a point that Murray worked harder to articulate immediately following the publication of *South to a Very Old Place*. In *The Hero and the Blues* (1973), Murray argued that it was “the disjunctures as well as the continuities of black experience” that all American writers needed to identify with, precisely because that experience lends

⁵⁰ Murray, *South To A Very Old Place*, 175.

⁵¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “King of Cats,” 18.

itself to an “omni-American fiction.” It is those improvisatory qualities that condition the hero of that fiction to “be at home with his sometimes tolerable but never quite certain condition of *not* being at home in the world.”⁵² We might say that, in *Train Whistle Guitar*, Murray writes of a hero who is at home *and* not at home at the same time. In turn, the fictional town of Gasoline Point, Alabama—a stand-in for Murray’s own Nokomis—is the place that carries within itself both improvisatory regional particulars and that demonstrates the value of those particulars for cosmopolitan explorations. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Scooter, the novel’s protagonist, through his observation of the town from his perch within the branches of a chinaberry tree. The Scooter who tells us the story is reminiscing about his boyhood from some adult perspective, and he remembers that, from his chinaberry-tree vantage point, much is *not* visible: not the post office flag, not the waterfront, “nor any part of the downtown Mobile, Alabama skyline, not even with binoculars.”⁵³ But what he *could* see was

the sky above Bay Poplar Woods fading away into the marco polo blue horizon mist on the other side of which were such express train destinations as Birmingham, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee, and Cincinnati, Ohio, and Detroit Michigan, plus the snowbound Klondike of Canada plus the icebound tundras of Alaska plus the North Pole.⁵⁴

From the beginning, Scooter sees Gasoline Point, which he tells us is “perhaps even more of a location in time than an intersection on a map,”⁵⁵ as a place that has local landmarks within it, but that is also an entrance to the rest of the nation and the rest of the

⁵² Ibid., 107.

⁵³ Albert Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

globe—when he looks at it from the right angle. The point here is that the South is not a starting point, but a vantage point; Scooter’s chinaberry tree, rooted in Alabama, allows him a perspective from which he can measure his rootless potential.

Train Whistle Guitar then unfolds as a series of set pieces, some not immediately connected with one another; the first is a clever inversion of the South-to-North migration journey. Scooter and his friend, Little Buddy Marshall, are obsessed with going north:

we were also reminding ourselves of the inevitability of the day when we too would have to grab ourselves an expert armful of lightning special L & N freight train rolling north by east to the steel blue castles and patent leather avenues of Philamayork, which was the lodestone center of the universe.⁵⁶

It is not because the two boys have any particular distaste for Gasoline Point that they feel the “inevitability” of the move north; rather, the idea of the north as a “central space” from which to embrace the globe is something that they simply understand as a given. As it does for Dave in Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Was Almost A Man,” moving north implies to them a quick ticket to maturity; as Little Buddy Marshall argues, “Goddammit, when I come back here to this little old granny-dodging burg, boy I’m going to be a goddamn man and a goddamn half... .”⁵⁷ But Scooter finds himself unsure of exactly how moving north will, in and of itself, provide an “adult” alternative to Gasoline Point. He imagines himself coming back from the northern promised land “carrying two leather suitcases” and “a money belt and an underarm holster for my special-made .38 Special,” while wearing “tailor-made clothes and hand-made shoes from London,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

England by way of Philamayork.”⁵⁸

But these material representations of “worldliness” are revealed to be simplistic reductions of cosmopolitanism to touristic products that you can buy; they are as disconnected from a genuinely cosmopolitan experience as the portmanteau “Philamayork” is from the actual Philadelphia, Massachusetts, and New York. Indeed, we are shown that it is Gasoline Point that provides the boys’ most valuable experiences “on the ground.” Closing his eyes, Scooter imagines “the barbershop and them talking about baseball and boxing and women and politics with the newspapers rattling and old King Oliver’s band playing ‘Sugarfoot Stomp’ on the Victrola in Papa Gumbo’s cookshop next door.” Scooter finds it difficult to reconcile the material success that he believes he can achieve in the north with the richness of the down-home culture and community that he knows so well, and his confusion leads him to question the “inevitability” of leaving: “and I said I want to and I don’t want to but I got to, then I won’t have to anymore either and if I do I will be ready.”⁵⁹ The life that Scooter knows in Gasoline Point serves to “ground” him in a way that the north, which in his mind is a “Philamayork” babble of place names that have all blended together, cannot. In fact, the promise of wearing imported British clothes is meager when arrayed against the diversity of foodways, music, and social commentary that the South can offer to Scooter right now.

Murray reveals the “transformation” that migration to the north can offer to be a hollow exercise in posturing and stylization when compared with the richness inherent in

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

Scooter's own southern experience. To underscore that point, Murray uses Luzana Cholly, who had inspired Scooter to leave home in the first place, to be the novel's prophet of the "down-home." Scooter informs us that, from his earliest days, he remembered the comings and goings of this blues-playing trickster figure, someone who was "as rough and ready as rawhide and as hard and weather worthy as blue steel," and who was always "either going somewhere or coming back from somewhere... ." ⁶⁰ Luzana Cholly exists both within and without the black community of Gasoline Point, arriving intermittently to tell tales, play guitar, and then move on. He personifies the improvisatory qualities of Murray's blues hero, and he inspires Scooter profoundly. On one hand, his very "fluidity" implies a "migratory" stance: we are told that his voice "was as smoke-blue sounding as the Philamayork-skyline-blue mist beyond steel railroad bridges." ⁶¹ On the other, Luzana Cholly defies racial hierarchies and categorizations: "the idea of going to jail didn't scare him at all, and the idea of getting lynch-mobbed didn't faze him either... . Whitefolks used to say he was a crazy nigger, but what they really meant or should have meant was that he was confusing to them." ⁶²

In some ways, Luzana Cholly is a southern version of B.P. Rinehart, the con man and wearer of multiple hats for whom Ellison's *Invisible Man* finds himself mistaken. Rinehart, who lived in "a vast seething, hot world of fluidity," ⁶³ opens the *Invisible Man*'s eyes to the improvisatory qualities that South-to-North migration has revealed as lying

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶³ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 498.

latent in black culture, and initially Luzana Cholly has that same kind of effect on Scooter. Taking their cue from Luzana's ability to remain perpetually in motion socially and geographically, Scooter and Little Buddy plan their own escape to the north via freight train. But when Luzana discovers their plan, he is quick to talk them out of it:

The main thing he wanted to talk about was going to school and learning to use your head like the smart, rich and powerful whitefolks. . . He said the young generation was supposed to take what they were already born with and learn how to put it with everything the civil engineers and inventors and doctors and lawyers and bookkeepers had found out about the world and be the one to bring about the day the old folks had always been prophesying and praying for.⁶⁴

Luzana ends his speech with an exhortation that the young boys' wanderlust can be satisfied without any actual wandering; should they stay put, they will be "*going further than old Luze ever dreamed of. Old Luze ain't been nowhere. Old Luze don't know from nothing.*"⁶⁵ His point is not only that the younger generation needs to study hard and make their parents proud. Luzana also wants the boys to understand that finding a point of engagement with what they "were already born with" is a more radical act than migrating northward, and one that allows for an even greater engagement with "worldliness." He is asking Scooter to recognize that a connection to the world doesn't require migration, so much as a new understanding of the expansive potential that lies latent within the South that he thinks he knows.

Over the course of the rest of the novel, Murray illustrates what it means to "go farther" while staying in a southern place. Following his aborted migration and his subsequent decision to stay put in Gasoline Point, Scooter explores the swampy environs

⁶⁴ Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar*, 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

of the L&N railroad tracks (the very tracks that he had imagined transporting him to Philamayork), because “being also explorers and discoverers” he and Little Buddy Marshall knew that “going through Chickasabougue Swamp was an expedition in itself.”⁶⁶ As they venture further in, Scooter recognizes that the L&N Bridge “was also the gateway through which the Chickasabogue, which was really a tributary, flowed out into the Mobile River which led down into Mobile Bay which spread out into the Gulf of Mexico which was a part of the old Spanish Main which was the beginning of the Seven Seas.”⁶⁷

In some ways, this is a reiteration of the chinaberry tree moment that we’d seen earlier in the novel, when Scooter “saw Alaska from his house.” But this moment also serves as an introduction to the kind of narrative about the South that *Train Whistle Guitar* is ultimately constructing for us. Just as he recognizes, once more, that Gasoline Point is a central “gateway” to the world beyond it, Scooter and Little Buddy come upon the body of a dead white man floating in the swamp, “something which stopped everything.”⁶⁸ The body had apparently been “dead long enough to be bloated,” and had also been partially devoured by wildlife. Scooter and Little Buddy then see two whites carrying rifles through the woods who proceed to submerge the dead person’s belongings and send the body further downriver, until “it didn’t look like anything but a piece of driftwood, and then it was nothing at all.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 47.

The incident is not returned to again in the novel, it serves to highlight what Gasoline Point has come to signify for Scooter in the aftermath of his decision to remain in the South. Scooter's and Little Buddy's discovery took place while they were playing hooky from school, ostensibly to watch sailors working on the dry docks and see the international traffic of barges and cargo in and out of the bay. Throughout their journey into the Chickasabogue Swamp, both boys heard the faint sound of the school bell in the distance, and Scooter contrasts the body with what he had been thinking about just prior to discovering it:

So that was what I was thinking about when what happened happened this time, but before I could get to what I was going to say about seeing the places on the map and the people I had read about in Geography, we came upon something which stopped everything. I don't remember even blinking but it happened so suddenly that it was as if I had just shut my eyes and opened them and found myself in another place on another day.⁷⁰

The "education" that this moment presents to us is an education that is specific to Gasoline Point, and it consists of two kinds of geography lessons, each conflated with the other. In school, Scooter can learn about places on the map and the geographical relationship between Gasoline Point and "the Seven Seas." But his other geography lesson concerns the complexity of the stories that lie just out of sight in the swamp, a short walk from the schoolhouse and its rituals of "lining up at the flagpole" to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.⁷¹ As Scooter and Little Buddy reflect on what they have seen, the two boys speculate on the significance of the dead man and his phantom white accomplices, imagining that the entire incident has something to do with a hidden

⁷⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁷¹ Ibid., 38.

bootlegging ring:

I wonder why they shot him?

I don't know. Maybe because he was a revenue agent.

Maybe so, he said. Maybe he was trying to follow them and they faked him on up into one of the slews and waylaid his ass.

Man, if he was a *Yankee* revenue agent them peckerwoods been watching his ass ever since he crossed the Mason-Dixie.⁷²

Roberta S. Maguire considers this incident's contrasting of schoolhouse ritual with swamp mystery an example of the way in which "vernacular experience and formal schooling" combine for Scooter in Gasoline Point.⁷³ In *Train Whistle Guitar*, "the informal experience of sneaking out to the shipyards and the formal experiences of school, no matter Scooter's boyhood desire, remain intertwined."⁷⁴ This is certainly true, but it is also true that Murray is asking us to see this particular place as teaching a geography lesson of its own. In thinking about this dead body in terms of a federal government representative crossing the Mason-Dixon line, Scooter and Little Buddy implicitly recognize the South as a place replete with departures and arrivals, comings and goings. It is a place in which a traveler can come from North to South, die, be buried in the swamp, become uprooted again, and be sent floating out to sea. Gasoline Point is a gateway to the Seven Seas, but it is not just a fixed point from which people leave and to which they return; rather, it is a place in which categories and definitions tend to shift from moment to moment. This is the southern geography lesson that *Train Whistle Guitar*

⁷² Ibid., 48.

⁷³ Roberta S. Maguire, "Dewey's Pragmatism Extended: Education and Aesthetic Practice in *Train Whistle Guitar*," in *Albert Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation*, ed. Barbara Baker (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2010), 108.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 107.

wants to present to us—that the South is a place built on an unstable foundation, and that learning to absorb and resonate with that instability is what a down-home consciousness is all about.

Nowhere is this point more evident than in the novel's reference to the *Clotilda*. Murray's mention of it in *South to a Very Old Place* held up a ship's descendant as a living connection to Africa, one whose continued place in the community was a marker of that community's ability to value difference within its regional identity. *Train Whistle Guitar* expands on that brief moment, and here Murray elaborates on the idea of the *Clotilda* and of its descendants to show the entire story as symptomatic of the cosmopolitan implications of regional particulars. Sylvianne A. Diouf, in her extensive study of the *Clotilda* and its legacy, argues that, unlike Plute Keeby in *South to a Very Old Place*, whose position as reverend implied a close integration with American-born blacks, those who had been forced into slavery aboard the *Clotilda* had a tense relationship with their African American neighbors, particularly in the immediate post-Civil War period:

The teenagers and young adults from Atakora, Banté, Bornu, and Dahomey could have become Americans after spending four times longer in Alabama than in their homelands, but they made a point not to do so. They viewed and called themselves Africans and willfully maintained this identity with all the attendant manners, languages, behaviors, and practices that sustained it.⁷⁵

The settlement that the *Clotilda* slaves founded after the Civil War was not the first settlement founded by blacks in the United States, but it was also not intended to be a

⁷⁵ Diouf, *Dreams of Africa*, 232.

“black town.” It was “an enclave of foreign nonwhites” and “a refuge from Americans,” regardless of their ancestry: “To establish and name an African Town was not only an act of self-affirmation that reflected its founders’ attachment to their cultures and modes of living; it was also an act of self-segregation.”⁷⁶ Although many in the settlement intermarried with local African Americans, their relationship with the southern black community that surrounded them was tense. Diouf points out that, in 1909, Booker T. Washington would speak of the *Clotilda* descendants’ insistence on preserving their languages and some of their customs as an attempt to “cling to the memories and traditions of their savage life in Africa.” Contrasting the African Town residents with “men who have made a lasting impression upon the history of this country” such as the painter Henry O. Tanner and the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Washington saw the *Clotilda* descendants as occupying the lower-end of “the limits, the boundaries, of negro progress during the last half century.”⁷⁷

In *Train Whistle Guitar*, the *Clotilda* is represented by one of its former passengers, Unka JoJo the African. Scooter recalls that, in his first memories of Unka JoJo, he seemed to be “the most venerable local embodiment of all biblical prophets, apostles and disciples,” and his “magical African biblical words” about the Middle Passage seemed to Scooter to be obscure ways of relating bible stories. Scooter had no idea that Unka JoJo was actually *from* Africa, and that the African Hill Neighborhood in which he lived was founded by other *Clotilda* descendants:

⁷⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁷ Booker T. Washington, “Negro Four Years Hence; Booker T. Washington Takes a Look Ahead,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1909, SMA4.

Because as many times as I had tapped my imaginary walking stick and made my voice tremble mimicking the abba abba geechee talk of Unka JoJo saying All the time free in the old country, I still didn't realize that he was talking about coming all the way across the Atlantic Ocean from another continent and another hemisphere until I learned to use the globe for Miss Lexine Metcalf.⁷⁸

Scooter had originally seen Unka JoJo as a local character, one more eccentric thread within the rich Gasoline Point tapestry. But his teacher and his education within the black community allows him to see both the place that Unka JoJo has within his southern community as well as the links to Africa that he represents. But Scooter's discovery of the transnational space that Unka JoJo occupies does not encourage him to make a return journey to Africa himself; it helps him recognize just how transnational Gasoline Point is because of Unka JoJo's presence.

That Unka JoJo and Africa are both within and without Gasoline Point is a lesson that Scooter fully realizes when he overhears the adult black residents around him weigh in. In the barbershop, Papa Gumbo Willie McWorthy gives his own version of Washington's disdain for African Town, as he expresses his anger and contempt towards the arrogance he perceives in Unka JoJo and his fellow separatists: "Deliver me from all that old abba abba bullshit about them Hill niggers being some kind of pure-blooded Africans. Because if that ain't trying to play the dozens on everybody down here I sure would like to know what is."⁷⁹ Another barbershop fixture, Soldier Boy Crawford, weighs in as well. He relates his experience with Germans when he served in the U.S. Army in World War I, who were "talking about Nigger where your tail at." He responded then by

⁷⁸ Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar*, 82.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

telling them

up your mama's ass motherfucker, and this goddamn cold steel bayonet right here up yours. Because that's what I say. Don't make a goddamn bit of difference to me if my goddamn granddaddy was a goddamn tadpole, LET'S GO... And that's exactly the same thing I say when another one of them Hill Africans comes trying to make out like his granddaddy used to be sitting on a solid gold diamond studded stool somewhere on the left-handed side of the Zulu River with his own niggers waiting on him. I say that's all right with me. LET'S GO."⁸⁰

Murray does not gloss over the tensions that existed between the African Town residents and the local blacks in Mobile—indeed, he even translates those tensions into the southern vernacular “barbershop” language that Scooter drew on to remind himself of the richness of his Gasoline Point experience. But the scene also serves as an illustration of what happens to Africa when it comes to Alabama. Both McWorthy and Crawford, in recognizing the African-ness of Unka JoJo, seek to make his African-ness “down home” at the same time as it remains “foreign.” After continuing his story with an account of his service with Senegalese troops in France, Crawford then returns to the subject of Gasoline Point's own African resident, this time pointing out that it is the local African Hill neighborhood that characterizes them for him, much more than does their African heritage:

Now talking about somebody black, he said, Old Unka JoJo supposed to be pure blood African, but that just go to show you because he ain't all that black at all. Hell, he more rusty brown than even chocolate colored. But, gentlemens, them goddamn Senegaleese sure enough black. And I'm talking about when you so black you blue-black. But you want to know something the blackest som'iches I ever seen in my life wasn't even no Africans at all. I seen some goddamn Hindu Indians blacker than everybody up there on African Hill. Gentlemens, I seen some goddamn Hindu Indians in Paris, France blacker than hair!⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁸¹ Ibid., 84-85.

The entire *Clotilda*/Unka JoJo episode takes us on another one of Scooter's learning curves, one not unrelated to his earlier geography lesson in the swamp. First, we see the way that Scooter relates to Unka JoJo as another local fixture—part of the fabric of the Gasoline Point vernacular. We then see how his schooling provided him with the kind of geographical context that allowed him to see Unka JoJo as representative of an African past that he can learn about and access from his southern educational experience. But the barbershop provides Scooter with yet another context for understanding Unka JoJo—as a foreigner to be mocked or disdained, but also as a “local African,” one more “close to home” than the Senegalese troops that Crawford remembers, and thus a Gasoline Point fixture once more. Ultimately, Unka JoJo's African-ness means multiple things to the adults of Gasoline Point, but his presence serves to remind Scooter that the *Clotilda* and African Town are symbols not of the shameful legacy of slavery nor of an Africa that needs to be reclaimed, but of an “Africa in Alabama” that is an integral part of a fluid and improvisatory *southern* story.

Unka JoJo and the *Clotilda* are also reminders that “cosmopolitanism,” which in Murray's case is what post-migration southern blacks need to be engaging with, is not an “end point,” but a process of continuous negotiation and re-negotiation among various aspects of regional, national, and international identities. In *Train Whistle Guitar*, it is the fact that the *Clotilda* narrative is shared among Unka JoJo, Scooter, and the barbershop customers that counts towards the cosmopolitan process in which Scooter is engaged. If we see *Train Whistle Guitar* as an example of the way that Murray “stylizes into

significance” the cosmopolitan nature of regional particulars, we might think of the novel as a narrative about southern narratives in a “disjunctive” age, in age in which, as Romine puts it, the deterritorialization that has accompanied migration has foregrounded “the heterogeneity of narrative paths” that have always been endemic to the southern story.⁸²

Following the *Clotilda* scene, the novel takes a turn away from the story of Scooter’s education and coming-of-age and into a series of chapters that read like disparate memories, one of which includes an extended Gasoline Point-based retelling of the blues classic, and modern African American myth, “Stagger Lee.” As Maguire puts it, the novel as a whole reads like “a series of riffs and ‘little stories’ lacking in traditional narrative links,” but whose pieces remain connected with “an element of one being picked up by the next, much in the way the instruments of a jazz ensemble respond to each other.”⁸³

But if the breaks and resumptions within *Train Whistle Guitar* make it read like a blues improvisation in novel form, it is also a work that is directly engaged with the idea of the South as having been altered by in- and out-migrations over the course of the twentieth century. And the *Clotilda* section, more than any other, stands as the moment when Murray asks those migrants to recognize that the most cosmopolitan consciousness they could adopt was one that was located in the down-home.

Towards The Transnational South

⁸² Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2008), 17.

⁸³ Maguire, “Dewey’s Pragmatism,” 111.

But the novel also anticipates a broader move in southern consciousness, in which what is down-home comes to be seen as essential for any understanding of an increasingly transnational America. Barbara Ladd writes that, “with the movement of people back and forth across increasingly permeable boundaries (borders permeable not only by bodies but by economic and political and cultural transactions),” regions have become “more and more provinces that surround not a national but a transnational center, or a multicultural crossroads.”⁸⁴ The South in the twenty-first century is certainly vastly changed from the South of Richard Wright’s, Carson McCullers’s, and Ralph Ellison’s, youths, and those changes have had a major impact on the fiction that southern writers, both black and white, have produced. But even before the “facts on the ground” of the South actually lent themselves to a southern cosmopolitan conversation, Wright, McCullers, and Ellison imagined what that conversation would look like, and they worked to construct fictions in which that cosmopolitanism made itself known. Albert Murray, looking back on the early decades of the twentieth century as a post-migration America headed towards that century’s end, made a case for a cosmopolitan practice that all southerners could and should engage in. But from all these writers’ angles of vision, cosmopolitanism was a southern legacy, waiting to be made use of by black and white

⁸⁴ Barbara Ladd, “Dismantling the Monolith,” in *South To A New Place*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2002), 55-56.

southerners alike. For these writers, southern regional identity, impacted by the experience of migrations back and forth, was fluid enough to embrace a cosmopolitanism that had always been theirs to claim.

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