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Race and Technology in Southern Literature, Civil War to Civil Rights

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RACE AND TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE, CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS

by

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DEDICATION

To Jordan, who treats my wildest dreams like inevitabilities.

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With gratitude,

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the intersection of technology and race in the literature of the American South from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though narratives about technology in American literature often promise democracy, equality, improvement, and progress, the role of technology in southern literature is more complex and ambivalent. Literature from and about the South from the Civil War to the civil rights era, by Black and white southern authors like Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty reveals technology's ability to uphold and naturalize southern white supremacy, but also to subvert it. Southern literature traces a pattern of technological white supremacy that predates contemporary scholarly debates about technology and race and reveals both strategic and unconscious uses of technology to support white supremacy in reaction to the threat of an egalitarian future. My dissertation will argue that though study of technological apparatuses themselves can be revealing, the study of the representations of these apparatuses in literature will emphasize a collision between the use of these objects and their shifting social meanings. The chapters, which focus on literary representations of mills, electricity, automobiles, and camera, reveal a pattern of prototypical whiteness that has existed since the advent of technology in the South and has shaped southern literature. The strategies exposed by southern literature begin by naturalizing the subjugation of enslaved Black people and end by attempting to hide white supremacy in plain sight through the implementation of apparently neutral technological systems. If literary and cultural studies are to continue

examining the cultural narratives that led the nation to this technological moment, particular attention must be paid to a body of southern literature that explicates the contradictions, complexities, and latent white supremacy of narratives of technological progress.

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INTRODUCTION

RACE AND TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE, CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS

At the beginning of Eudora Welty's "Where is the Voice Coming From?" (1963), the white narrator tells his wife to turn off the television program on which a Black civil rights activist is speaking: "You can reach and turn it off. You don't have to set and look at a [Black man's] face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear. It's still a free country" (727). This challenging quotation, delivered in the voice of a white supremacist murderer, indicates the convergence of decades of social and technological change for the South. The narrator of "Where is the Voice Coming From?" applies his sense that the technological infrastructure of the South is designed in his favor to his interactions with race in Thermopylae, Mississippi. In the story, which Welty wrote shortly after news broke of Medgar Evers' murder but before the arrest of Byron de la Beckwith, the narrator's whiteness directs his engagement with progress, especially technologies analyzed in this dissertation like electricity, automobiles, and cameras. When he tells his wife that she can use the television to control the images that are allowed in their home, the action of physically manipulating the technological apparatus inspires the narrator to murder Roland Summers: "I reckon that's how I give myself the idea," he says (727). However, Welty's story insists on a philosophy of technology that suggests that the murderer did not give himself the idea, but that his violence was the

direct result of a belief, crafted by and embedded in technologies older than the television, that only white southerners had the right to engage with modernity and dictate southern progress.

Southern white supremacy's engagement with technology and industrial advancement has always been paradoxical: new innovations were adopted as evidence of the white European man's superiority and proximity to a creator God. However, technological advancements were also seen as a threat to the South's economy, regional uniqueness, and racial hierarchy, as Welty's narrator articulates through his refusal to allow even televisual Blackness into his home despite the many attractions of watching television (S Harrison 640). This paradox plays out in earlier literary narratives that created strict conditions for "southern" uses of technological tools—in novels like Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905), white southerners were threatened with poverty, murder, and rape if African Americans were allowed any influence in the political and economic progress of the South. In the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), the Agrarians resisted the evils they believed would accompany the machines intruding upon their region: "If a community, or a section, or a race, or an age, is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it must find the way to throw it off" (lii). The evils they predicted involved a loss of control over (white) southern art and culture, but industrialization and its potential to alter and extend the traditions of the South prevailed.

Early industrialization efforts, like the mills discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, were carefully negotiated for their economic and narrative impact on the continuation of white supremacy in the late nineteenth century South. The South's

resistance to and slow navigation of federal intervention, which might mean racial integration or the possibility that Black southerners would receive goods and services that white southerners wanted for themselves, also slowed the electrification of the rural South. Even in 1963, when the narrator sees the light that illuminates Roland Summers' garage, he marvels that a Black man can pay an electric bill. In response to efforts like Rural Electrification and the highway system, "southern leaders welcomed federal assistance, but opposed intervention that might erode the regional wage differential or threaten the system of white supremacy" (Schulman 15). Roads were carved into a landscape already burdened by racial oppression, and they extended the scale of that oppression—the South avoided many federal roadbuilding plans in favor of the convict lease system, which maintained the social order of slavery.

The narrator of "Where is the Voice Coming From?" also resents the civil rights era request for equal time on television, invoking a century of narratives about who and what can be captured on camera in a white supremacist South. Before southern broadcasting networks rejected the pleas of activists like Welty's fellow Jacksonian Medgar Evers (Bodroghkozy 63), southerners were known to gatekeep the simple act of portraiture by forbidding itinerant photographers at the turn of the century to photograph Black citizens (Henninger 35). Though these are not the only reasons for the South's slowed industrial development, they represent a framework for understanding the deep belief in white ownership of southern space and technology that dictated so many southern narratives of technology. Welty's story, written to expose the "time and place" that could have produced such violent racism (Welty 829), emphasizes the long,

interwoven history of technologies that would, to her readers and characters, have reinforced the natural logic of southern social structures.

In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin suggests that "race itself is a kind of technology – one designed to separate, stratify, and sanctify the many forms of injustice experienced by members of racialized groups, but one that people routinely reimagine and redeploy to their own ends" (36). Because race and technology have been so influential in the formation of American spaces, as Simone Browne notes in her study of the relationship between racialized technology like branding and modern biometrics, no special sophistication is required to leverage the "technology" of whiteness in America. Welty's narrator, unsophisticated as he is, assumes what Browne calls "prototypical whiteness," or a cultural logic that presumes whiteness in both the development and use of technology (26). Following this pattern, the narrator feels morally and physically threatened by Roland Summers' engagements with technology. According to Suzan Harrison, "The assassination of Roland Summers thus marks the narrator's attempt to restore the racial hierarchy in which he has potency and power by virtue of being white in relation to powerless nonwhites" (641). The narrator, clinging to the assumptions of prototypical whiteness despite his own economic disadvantage, wants to defend against a misuse of technology that he characterizes as a physical invasion.

The narrator's belief that he has been robbed of a technological birthright specifically for white Americans initiates his quest to cut off the stream of power perforating white supremacist spaces in Thermopylae. When he arrives at the home of Roland Summers, he is appalled to discover that Summers' home is connected to the electrical grid and that Summers and his wife can afford to use electricity: "And there

was his light on, waiting for me. In his garage, if you please" (727). Using electricity to reveal the narrator's criminality, Welty troubles American literature's long-established associations with lightness and darkness. The white narrator, who believes both his moral superiority and literal light have been stolen by Summers, becomes the criminal waiting in the dark to end a life. Though he assumes that both darkness and light serve him (by hiding his presence and illuminating his victim), the text reveals the angelic darkness of Summers, who, exposed by the light of his own garage, grows wings of blood: "Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down. He climbed up once, like a man under bad claws, and like just blood could weigh a ton he walked with it on his back to better light" (728). Where religious and moral associations with light and dark abound in southern literature (Morrison 64), Welty and others in this dissertation resist simple simile and craft texts that include the metaphorical dimensions of light as well as its potential for surveillance and exposure of centuries of racist narratives about Black southerners. Even covered in blood in the light of his garage, Summers appears as a paragon of moral virtue in contrast to his killer. The light that the narrator extinguishes thwarts the hopes of Summers and his family for equal access to southern space, but the text maintains that Summers' antiracist virtue will remain in the light, first in the yard and later by his public funeral.

The story's emphasis on location situates roadbuilding and automobility as issues directly connected to race. When the narrator searches for Summers' home, he demonstrates his familiarity with and sense of ownership of Thermopylae:

> So you leave Four Corners and head west on Nathan B. Forrest Road, past the Surplus & Salvage, not much beyond the Kum Back Drive-In and Trailer Camp,

> not as far as where the signs starts saying "Live Bait," "Used Parts," "Fireworks," "Peaches," and "Sister Peebles Reader and Adviser." Turn before you hit the city limits and duck back towards the I.C. tracks. And his street's been paved. (727)

At every turn, the narrator is highly aware of his geographical and social location. The narrator is not offended only by Summers' presence in Thermopylae; he is offended by the paved street on which Summers and his family live and their ease of access to southern space. In comparison, the narrator drives to Summers' home on a road named after a defeated confederate general, driving a work truck borrowed from his brother-in-law. The narrator clings to his race as a marker of his class, although only Summers meets the narrator's stated class aspirations. Summers' driveway is paved, he owns his own automobile, and his home is electrified. When Summers arrives home, the narrator describes seeing him "in a new white car up his driveway towards his garage with the light shining" (728). The trajectory of technology and its accompanying prosperity, which was intended at every point to maintain white supremacy, has slipped from the narrator's control and instead allowed Summers to claim his own humanity and citizenship. After shooting Summers, the narrator tells him: "There was one way left, for me to be ahead of you and stay ahead of you, by Dad, and I just taken it. Now I'm alive and you ain't. We ain't never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead" (729). Since the infrastructural violence of segregation failed, the narrator resorted to physical, interpersonal violence—again, he displays the primitive behaviors that he associates with Black southerners. However, in keeping with the paradoxical nature of technology in the South, Welty's narrator continues to be haunted by

photographic and televisual images of the same face he saw on television the night of his crime.

The story centers photographs and televisual images as opportunities for African American "invasion" of white rights and spaces. Though originally upset by Summers' image on the television, the narrator is also upset by Summers' photograph appearing in older mass media technology of the newspaper. He uses the newspaper photograph, smaller and more portable than the televisual image, to identify his victim: "Never seen him before, never seen him since, never seen anything of his black face but his picture, never seen his face alive, any time at all, or anywheres, and didn't want to, need to, never hope to see that face and never will" (728). The photograph, which the narrator perceives as a threat in itself, suggests the white supremacist southern tradition of using the camera either to objectify Black southerners or to exclude them entirely from visual representations of the South. With resentment, the narrator notes that he has never been the subject of a photograph—"I ain't ever had one made. Not ever! The best that newspaper could do for me was offer a five-hundred-dollar reward for finding out who I am" (730). Though the narrator believes he can turn off both the medium of the television and its content, Summers himself, the image of Summers persists: "His face was in front of the public before I got rid of him, and after I got rid of him there it is again—the same picture" (730). He resents his invisibility in comparison to Evers, but invisibility is also a function of his whiteness that serves to protect him. As the narrator's wife predicted, Summers' death "[got] him right back on TV," and the increased media attention brought more scrutiny to Mississippi's system of racism.

Though it is illuminating, the technological framework of Welty's story is not unique. Welty and other southern writers, like Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Gaines, and Alice Walker, often used narrative to expose the white supremacy embedded in American technology and predict the real-world violence that would result from using machines to perpetuate human prejudice. These southern texts, which provide either contemporary challenges to or countermemories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century technologies they consider, challenge the technological determinist notion that scientific progress will lead to greater equity in the United States. Though some work on the intersections of technology and American literature by scholars like Cecilia Tichi, Jennifer Lieberman, David Nye, and Simone Browne exists, my dissertation argues that southern literature, situated at a unique nexus in American narratives of progress and race, requires attention as an archive to consider the power narrative has over the development and use of technology.

Methodology

The South plays a charged role in narratives of American progress. Popular conceptions of the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted the region as either an Edenic space free from the troubles of industrialization or a backwards drag on national advancements (Duck 2). Southern studies scholars have long been interested in this paradox, and Duck's *The Nation's Region* argues that the nation as a whole used the South as an imagined space that could contain their anxieties about both rapid progress and racial unrest in the twentieth century (5). Building on Duck's insight, I suggest that modern Southern literature refracts this anxiety, consumed by the convergence of racial and technological narratives, yet registers that far from being a

source of racial justice, technological development merely reinstates white supremacist logics. Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) satirizes the way that the poor white Lester family prioritize automobile ownership over the lives of their Black neighbors. "Delta Autumn," the epilogue of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942), laments the vanishing forest while its wealthy, white male characters maintain access to the remaining hunting grounds with automobiles that drive "faster and faster each year because the roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive" (319).

The Old South imagined by white supremacists during the Jim Crow era never existed, and I follow critics such as Tara McPherson who call that South the "imagined South" (*Reconstructing Dixie* 3). However, the imagined South had material consequences in the geographical area that still houses the remnants of chattel slavery, the plantation economy, and the convict-lease system. Following Thadious Davis, I assume that although the "South" never really existed, reclamation of the physical space of the South is important for southern literature, especially by African American authors. In short, the myth of the South is material and has material effects (Hagood 5), and scholars must interrogate the spatial and political context of technology operating within that geographical space or by people who maintained that space. For Davis, the southscape includes the "natural environment and the social collective that shapes that environment out of its cultural beliefs, practices, and technologies" (12). My dissertation focuses on imagined Southern environments and the modern technologies and infrastructures that (re)organized its people and land during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but it does so with the understanding that such cultural imaginaries have material consequences, both in the lived environments of the South and also in the

lifeworlds of its inhabitants. Fiction provides a model for this movement between the ideological and the experiential through the prism of literary character and scene setting.

Since Leo Marx's influential *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), literary studies have also contended with the intrusions or extensions of technology into pastoral spaces in fiction and verse. Browne's *Dark Matters* (2015) and Lieberman's *Power Lines* (2017) are two recent models that call for further study of literary representations of technology. Browne's multidisciplinary work creates important links between early technologies of surveillance, such as devices for branding slaves, and more recent surveillance methods: "Rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order" (9). Browne also develops the concept of "black luminosity," or the hyper-visibility of Black bodies in a white supremacist landscape for the purpose of racial "boundary maintenance" (67). Lieberman's analysis of electricity in the work of early twentieth century writers like Jack London and Charlotte Perkins Gilman provides similarly illuminating concepts, such as the "electrical slave," which Lieberman exposes as a white supremacist narrative depicting slavery as a "necessary" step in the technological advancement of the nation (38). This narrative, in both print culture and literature, contributed to characterizations of white people as the intended or natural users of machines and Black people as the machines themselves.

My dissertation also draws from a growing number of historians interested in the development and social impact of technology. My research question was partially inspired by Ruth Cowan's simple observation in *A Social History of American*

Technology that since America has an intranational and international reputation for being a highly advanced society, it is strange that American history is not often considered in terms of technological development (3). Similarly, the technological historian Carroll Pursell notes in the introduction to *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience* that the absence of African Americans from American histories of technology is the result of multiple forms of oppression including active exclusion from education and shifting social constructions of race and masculinity (xiii-xv). In *Networks of Power*, Thomas Hughes contends that technology should be studied in the context of the systems developed around it, and most importantly, that those systems are inherently political, reflecting the values of the societies that produced them (3-5). Historians have already made inroads into tracing the racialized development of these systems, and the chapters of this dissertation are enriched by the work of Bruce Schulman on the South's "rebranding" as a Sun Belt rather than a Cotton Belt, Tammy Ingram's work on road-building in the South, and Grace Hale's work on the establishment of whiteness as a Reconstruction-era social construct.

My dissertation interrogates literary tropes that draw upon specific technologies (mills, electricity, automobiles, and cameras) and how southern literature adopts, rejects, and modifies the social meanings of technology. For example, in most American literature, the automobile functions as a symbol of freedom of movement and progress. Faulkner's Boon Hogganbeck, a racially ambiguous and marginalized figure in *The Reivers* (1962), becomes so enamored with the automobile as a symbol of social freedom that he steals one from his wealthy, patriarchal employer. In southern literature, however, the symbol of freedom or economic privilege can take on elements of fear of invasion or

interference from northerners or the federal government. In "Where is the Voice Coming From?," the narrator interprets Roland Summers' paved street and new, white automobile as evidence that the civil rights movement aims to subjugate southern white people and privilege southern Black people. Southern authors pay particular attention to symbols of technological freedom from the past, and they create literary reminders that the past is inescapable, even by high-speed vehicles.

Southern literature also adopts pastoral and antipastoral elements to appropriate or challenge national narratives of southernness. In some cases, it served the interests of the South to encourage stereotypes about the South as an Edenic place of pastoral beauty that was more connected to the pre-industrial past than the rest of the nation. However, many writers resisted or complicated that characterization by introducing antipastoral elements to expose the ugliness of the visually idyllic plantation and its legacy. These pastoral and antipastoral elements also include engagement with the American technological sublime, which David Nye defines as a reaction of awe, fear, and expansion of the imagination in response to a technological marvel like a skyscraper or the Hoover Dam (*Technological Sublime* 20-23). My dissertation asks how southerners may have experienced this particularly American form of the sublime when sublime technological feats like the Tennessee Valley Authority also eroded differences between the South and the rest of the nation.

Other major literary techniques for exposing or reinforcing technological white supremacy include the personification of machines and the electrical slave, a narrative employed in advertising to position electrical appliances as a natural successor to slavery (Lieberman 38). The advertising gimmick insidiously contributed to a national myth that

saw the enslavement of Black people as a necessary sacrifice for national progress and suggested that technological advancement would make social problems obsolete (Lieberman 57). My dissertation argues that many forms of personification of machines and/or mechanization of people within southern literature contribute to the denial of the human cruelties of American slavery. The strategy appears on the campus of the narrator's southern college in *Invisible Man*—the school and its founder borrow the imagery of the power plant as a way to prove their post-emancipation usefulness to their white benefactors, and the narrator is called "mechanical man" (94) for complying with the college's vision for race relations in the South.

Finally, I examine the texts for literary redirections of the technological gaze, a concept drawn from bell hooks' writings on the oppositional gaze, in which Black subjects, specifically Black women, reassert their right to look and observe, and assert their experiences as counter-memory (131). Browne adopts the term "dark sousveillance" to describe a practice of critiquing "anti-black surveillance" to resist violence and imagine new ways of being (21). In my chapters on electrification and photography, I identify literary moments when Black characters draw the curtain back on the technology used to illuminate and contain them. Modern southern literature also represents the technological apparatus and diagnoses its role in rendering racialized bodies into spectacles. In William Faulkner's *Light in August,* the mixed-race character Joe Christmas appears as a monstrous figure in the headlights of a car driven by a young white couple. Joe Christmas looks back at the drivers, recognizing his own pursuit and surveillance under a Jim Crow regime, but the car also emblematizes white sexual anxieties (the site of necking and other unsupervised erotic activities) and their racial

consequences. Such ambivalences abound in southern literature's technological tropes from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

This dissertation has a wide temporal scope because of the palimpsestic nature of the South and southern literature, which consistently revise and recirculate the myths on which they are founded. My major contention in this project is that technological white supremacy is an extension, and often a convenient disguise, of premodern southern social structures. Thus, patterns and tropes that are established by earlier writers (Chesnutt, Dixon, Hentz) remain in place in the fictional worlds of later writers (Gaines, Walker, Komunyakaa). To compensate for the wide temporal scope, I have chosen to examine fiction that focuses narrowly on the collisions of the racial caste system with specific technologies in the South. Other intersections, especially those of gender and class, exist in these texts, but I focus on these technologies as they establish literary resistance to the circular and evolving strategies of southern white supremacy: fixity and surveillance. To trace this pattern of literary resistance, I have examined technologies that I believe are representative of the material and metaphorical consequences of southern white supremacy: the mill, the electric light, the automobile, and the camera.

The first chapter considers racialized bodies and their relationship to southern land and labor, arguing that technological advancement in the South began as a way to maintain southern white supremacy rather than disrupt it. The mill, one of the earliest technologies implemented in the South, was closely related to the land and landscape, and it continued to naturalize the idea that Black labor was intended (by God, nature, or some other divine ordination) to facilitate white leisure. This chapter considers literature that complicates the legacy of the southern mill, calling attention to who is being

consumed as white southerners consume mill products. I mention Lost Causist, white supremacist texts, such as *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) and *The Clansman*, that frame the mill either as a sign of continued economic greatness or as a symbol of the plantation's fall but focus on texts that call the naturalization of white supremacy into question.

The chapter opens with a brief reading of Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Gristmill." In the poem, which is set in a gristmill in Louisiana, Komunyakaa considers what has been stolen from Black laborers in the South. Black mill workers are part of the "machine's calibrated rhythm" in the gristmill, but they are also resources to be reaped by white landowners: "Smooth, white hands / Halved the meal & husk / *One for you, two for me"* (38-40). Komunyakaa's poem identifies the mill as the beginning of many thefts of Black identity, and the chapter examines that theme through four texts about mills in the South: Charles Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy," Zora Neale Hurston's "Spunk," Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* and William Faulkner's *"*Pantaloon in Black." In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather sets the story of Sapphira and Nancy against the backdrop of the mill owned by Sapphira's husband. An intellectually gifted enslaved man named Sampson runs the mill, and my chapter argues that while the jealous Sapphira tries to have Nancy's innocence and beauty "consumed" by rape, her husband Henry consumes the talents of his mill-hand Sampson. The following texts, Faulkner's "Pantaloon in Black," Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy," and Hurston's "Spunk," consider the mill as a source of southern shame not because it consumes the landscape, but because it consumes Black people. Here, the chapter claims, is a literary challenge to white expectations of automatic

Black labor and the beginning of the suggestion that ownership of bodies, land, and technology in the South can be reclaimed through narrative.

White power structures often responded to the threat of Black reclamation of labor and space with increased surveillance, and the second chapter considers literary challenges to technological forms of racial surveillance. Guided by Browne's term "black luminosity," which suggests the hypervisibility of Black people in white supremacist spaces (Browne 67) and the resilience of Black people, their talents, and their subjectivity despite acts of oppression, the chapter examines literary representations of the electrification of the South. Many scholars, such as Nye and Lieberman, have considered the metaphorical meanings of electricity and light in literature, but this chapter examines southern iterations of the trope of electrification or illumination as a tool of white supremacy.

In the second chapter, I read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* to consider the extremes of white surveillance of Black southerners and its relationship to electricity. Though much of *Invisible Man* takes place in the North, I am interested in the parts of the novel concerning the South, where the narrator is introduced to electricity's relationship to Blackness through the generators on the campus of his unnamed college, taken by most scholars to be a fictional representation of the Tuskegee Institute founded by Booker T. Washington. This chapter follows the relationship between this college's power plant and the type of exceptionalism, emblematized by Washington, that Ellison critiques in *Invisible Man* as preventing Black solidarity by encouraging self-surveillance in the Black community.

In *A Lesson Before Dying,* the Louisiana justice system dehumanizes Jefferson by comparing him to an animal, but his oppression is perhaps even more technological than the torture faced by the narrator of *Invisible Man*. Though there are liberatory uses of electricity in *A Lesson Before Dying,* such as the single light bulb in the cell where Jefferson writes in his journal and the batteries the community buys Jefferson so that he can listen to his radio, the novel also takes electrical oppression to its most sinister conclusion: the electric chair. The electric chair represents the ultimate dehumanization of Black people's bodies, and the chapter interrogates the relationship between lights and forms of electrical torture. Black characters in southern literature absorb, deflect, or otherwise reappropriate these technologies to shift the reader's attention back onto the violence of white supremacy.

The texts in the third chapter consider increased Black mobility in the South during the explosion of automobile ownership in the South and white supremacist responses to that mobility. This chapter opens with Komunyakaa's "History Lessons," in which a young man learns about the reality of lynching in the South. The images of automobiles that figure prominently in the poem's three scenes of white supremacist violence foreground my claims about white vehicular violence against Blackness, and the chapter argues that as the automobile perforated the South's racial and geographic borders, white supremacist control of the region became both more difficult to enact and more difficult to expose. To assert this contradiction, I trace vehicular violence against Black masculinity as well as the way that the blame for that violence began to shift away from individuals and toward a technological system.

In the third chapter, I use Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which subverts a white southern family's understanding of themselves as the inheritors of American progress and mobility, as an example of the casual white supremacy encouraged by American narratives of progress. Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* challenges the sexual "threat" of Black men in automobiles and the continued fixity of Black women southerners. As an example of the complex agency of southern automobiles, I consider barriers to movement and automobile ownership that reflect white supremacy but are not enacted by any white individual. Such a systemic resistance to racial equality appears in behavior of the automobile in *The Piano Lesson*, which carries Boy Willie and his friend Lyman to the North but still seems to operate in a manner consistent with southern segregation. The illusion of the automobile's agency reflects the framework of white southern violence in which Boy Willie and his vehicle operate, and I argue that the assignment of agency to technology is the beginning of a southern strategy to displace the blame of a white supremacist system.

The final chapter of the dissertation considers literary representations of the technology that I believe has the closest link to contemporary technologies of white supremacy: the camera. The camera is both a long-established technology in America and a technology that is continuously updated—in the same text, cameras and the photographs they produce can appear as both antique and cutting edge. This material duality echoes a thematic duality; the camera often appears as, alternatively, an invasive threat or a tool of self-defense. Using writing by southern women in the twentieth century, the final chapter considers the literary trope of the camera as a weapon of the photographer, who can alternately be an invader or a seducer. Reappropriation of the

camera, as imagined by the characters, requires the removal of whiteness and masculinity from the medium, placing both memory and narrative into the camera's frame to avoid the misrepresentations caused by the material limitations of the lens. In the chapter, works by Welty, Hurston, and Alice Walker attempt to deweaponize the camera's "double legacy" (Henninger 114) in the South.

In "Where is the Voice Coming From?", Welty establishes that cameras and printed images of Black activists can endanger them at the same time that they provide a platform. In an earlier short story, "Kin" (1940), Welty depicts the camera as a different kind of weapon, giving it the qualities of a musket in a Civil War raid on the South. In the second half of the chapter, I read resistance to the weaponized and sometimes colonialist camera in the work of Hurston and Walker. Hurston, like Welty, was a photographer, though her use of the camera was largely in the service of her anthropological work. Her training in anthropology attuned Hurston to photography that dehumanized both Africans and African Americans, depicting them as primitive and less advanced than European Americans. Her recently released book, *Barracoon*, reveals the negotiations between privacy and invasion as Hurston interviews the real last survivor of the slave ship *Clotilde*, Oluale Kossola. Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* deweaponizes the camera by placing it in the control of a fictional photographer's model, Lissie, whose centuries of previous lives are visible only to the camera of a Black itinerant photographer. Lissie embodies countermemory, but her interactions with the camera insist that no representational technology can envision Blackness without acknowledging the authority and memory of the subject.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the presence of technologies like television, radio, and firearms in "Where is the Voice Coming From?", there are many further avenues of inquiry into literary representations of prototypical whiteness and technology. In this dissertation, I have chosen to trace technological tropes in southern literature that represent the flexibility of white supremacist strategies as they are narrated in the South. In the first chapter, literature about mills questions the natural place (both geographical and societal) of Africans and African Americans in the South. Writers like Hurston and Faulkner use anti-pastoral elements to connect older social structures of slavery to mills that literally and figuratively consume the bodies of laborers. In the second chapter, Ellison and Gaines consider electricity, especially the literary trope of the electrical slave, to combat the heightened white supremacist surveillance that accompanied slight social advances for African American southerners. Ellison's *Invisible Man* considers the literal reclamation of both southern spaces and electrical grids powered by Black labor in the South, but Gaines' later *A Lesson Before Dying* considers the consequences of persistent use of electricity to surveil and imprison Black people, creating a literary prediction of death if both literal and symbolic connections between Black and white southerners fail.

The third chapter continues tracing the evolving strategies of white supremacy—when increased mobility and visibility strengthen Black resistance to segregation, racist southern leaders respond with narratives that fabricate dangers of integration while eliding white responsibility for Black southerners' suffering. The chapter's texts about automobility, notably *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *The Piano Lesson*, consider what transportation technology can offer to people as narratively circumscribed as Black

southern men. In the final chapter, literature about the camera challenges the history of prototypical whiteness and suggests, along with the conclusions of the second chapter, that the racist history of technology cannot be reclaimed without the context of narrative and memory. As in the previous chapters, there is no final, triumphal Black reappropriation of technology in my study of literary representations of photography. The struggle to excise white supremacy from the design and implementation of technology continues. However, I assert that dedicated study of literary and cultural representations of technology from before the digital age will strengthen readers' ability to recognize and revise the stories available to Americans about contemporary progress and its social and racial consequences.

CHAPTER 1

"ONE FOR YOU, TWO FOR ME": MILLS AND WHITE SUPREMACIST CONSUMPTION IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

Introduction

The rapid technological expansion between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century was psychologically jarring for southerners across racial boundaries. Bruce Schulman, historian of industrialization in the South, records that "After the Civil War, industrialization below the Mason-Dixon line had proceeded rapidly. Led by the development of cotton textiles, the South's rate of industrial growth actually outpaced of the national average from 1869 to 1929" (5). As Black southerners began to navigate the post-emancipation South and the possibility of labor outside of the plantation, they were met with resistance from southern white supremacists who were anxious to reinstate the antebellum social order despite this rapid change. Thadious Davis identifies the fixity of race and place as one of the major desires of the white post-Reconstruction South: "Nowhere has the struggle of African Americans against fixity been more visible or vicious than in the U.S. South" (155). According to Davis, white supremacists after the Reconstruction and during Jim Crow attempted to keep Black southerners in place, both geographically and socially. Historian Grace Hale points to this vicious desire for fixity as part of the impetus for the construction of whiteness as a category in the Reconstruction South: "white southerners chose geographic anchors,

whether imagined spaces or evoked by narratives or the physical spaces recaptured through spectacle, literally to ground their racial identity within the mobility of modernity" (*Making Whiteness* 9). Both Davis and Hale demonstrate that literature was crucial to this reconsideration of the South's relationship to race, modernity, and regional self-definition.

While the South contended with the material consequences of the failed Confederacy and the rise in industrialism, the region also developed a unique form of narrative grief. Much of the white South mourned the Lost Cause and simultaneously constructed, through literature and other cultural efforts, an idealized South that had never literally existed (McPherson 1-4). This literary trend, which dates not to the end of the Civil War but rather to the beginning of abolitionist movements in the country, often reacted to the South's reputation within the nation. According to Duck, the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was perceived as "A collection of communities moving at different rates in trajectory as characterized by different customs, goals, and beliefs systems" (5). In this national perception, the South's trajectory was slower and less beneficial to the country than the North's. This perception, which influenced and was influenced by literary genres like the plantation novel, served several purposes for the nation during reconstruction. It allowed the Northeast to position itself as the economic and moral authority for the nation. The Northeast, then, could project its guilt for its complicity in slavery onto the South, effectively containing that guilt in the past (McPherson 3). This strategy preserved a regional status quo relatively well until the 1930s, when the South began to be perceived as a "drag" on the nation rather than a repository for the nation's agricultural past (Duck 18).

Both racist and antiracist southern writers negotiated the South's national reputation in literature, manipulating it for different ends. The plantation novel leveraged the South's status as a "peculiar" region or a pre-industrial, prelapsarian space to advocate for the preservation of the white supremacist southern social hierarchy. According to Michael Kreyling, much of the South as it is currently imagined in literature and culture comes from the writing of the Agrarians, who insisted in the 1920s that modernity, industrialization, and (most frighteningly, in their view) integration would rob the South of its regional identity. Kreyling proposes that "the Agrarians produced the South in the same way that all historically indigenous social elites produce ideological realities: out of strategies for seizing and retaining power… that are then reproduced as 'natural'" (6). The Agrarians vocalized a desire for racial, social, and economic fixity that far preceded them. This chapter argues that the South's relationships to technology and race have been closely connected since before the South was widely considered a technological space, and that southern literature reveals how narratives of both race and technology in the South reproduced or challenged the natural status of white supremacy.

As modernity encroached upon the South, southern white supremacists were concerned with both narrative and economic control of the New South. These desires were interrelated, and narrative measures often served to reflect, reinforce, and even disrupt the white supremacist South's attempt to reassert its hierarchy. Schulman records that despite the dizzying speed of the South's industrialization, it "never induced a full scale industrial revolution along northern lines" (5), and perhaps more disappointingly for southern white supremacists, it "never succeeded in restoring the plantation regimen" (4). Plantation owners, who often became landlords to newly free sharecroppers, struggled to

adjust to their reduced power over Black southerners. Schulman writes that "The rural South's most vexing problem, however, was how to organize the labor force after the end of slavery…. Landlords found their former bondsmen intractable, even rebellious, and used every means within their power, including extralegal violence, to discipline and intimidate the freedmen" (4). To describe their desire to keep Black southerners in their social and geographical places and ensure that the financial windfalls of industrialization only benefitted white people, William J. Phelan succinctly expresses that "planters wanted manufacturing without a manufacturing society" (151). White supremacists in the South turned to several strategies for maintaining their participation in national progress without endorsing the racial and social progress they believed would accompany a manufacturing society.

The strategies of white supremacy crossed every sector of Black life in the South, affecting their ability to access jobs, housing, education, and government services. Duck summarizes these strategies in terms of both southern policies and southern self-identification:

> In seeking to institutionalize apartheid, late nineteenth-century white southern elites mobilized a two-pronged temporal strategy, portraying southern African Americans as unprepared for full participation in U.S. political and economic life and also depicting southern society more generally as one shaped by traditional affiliative principles unassimilable to [modern] liberal paradigms. (6)

Literature was an integral part of this temporal strategy. Other methods, like racist interpretations of the Bible, scientific racism, and laws like Black Codes also caused significant damage, but literature brought these elements into an imaginary space where a

new South could be imagined and placed in conversation with the imagined Old South or Lost Cause. Through plot, characterization, racialized tropes, and symbols of industrialism and pastoralism, the literature of the South engaged with the threats and opportunities posed by technology, exposing the white supremacist nature of Southern "progress" as often as it attempted to maintain southern fixity.

In this chapter, I will consider literary depictions of southern mills throughout the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as spaces where fixity is both reinforced and challenged. To enact the strategies outlined by Duck, white supremacist southern authors often wrote literature that highlighted the idealized Old South of the Lost Cause. This type of literature offers the paternalist South as a solution to the problems of industrialism. The family structure, abstracted to include the white planter as father and enslaved people as children, poses as a more natural and morally correct way of life that allegedly protects Black people from their own independence. To naturalize this way of life, literature often conflates Black people with land or machines to undermine their subjectivity and situate white southerners as the only ones capable of engaging with modernity. However, both Black and white writers resisted these representations of technology, producing a body of work that denaturalized white supremacy, making its unnatural horrors obvious.

The mill, a technology that existed in the South since colonial times but evolved rapidly between 1860 and 1940, provided a technological symbol full of opportunity for literary disruption. The age of the mill often meant that its symbolism could serve cross-temporal purposes. Take, for example, Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Gristmill:"

Black hands shucked

& shelled corn into a washtub

While a circle of ancient voices

Hummed “Li’l Liza Jane.”

Daddy shouldered a hundred-pound sack

To Mister Adam’s gristmill.

The place was a moment of

Inertia. A horde of rough shoes

Against a revolving dancefloor.

Navel to navel. Slip-

Socket to ball-

Bearing & cogwheel.

Gears dragged & caught,

& the machine’s calibrated

Rhythm kicked in….

…A field holler

Travelled out, coming back

With the same sweaty cries

Elvis stole from R&B,

Like a millstone worn

Bright. Smooth, white hands

Halved the meal & husk:

One for you, two for me. (29)

Published in 1992, the poems that make up *Magic City* memorialize Komunyakaa's childhood in 1940s Louisiana, but "Gristmill" stands out as difficult to place in time. Its references to music sung by both enslaved people and Elvis make it as likely to be set in the mid-nineteenth or mid-twentieth centuries. Louisiana's poverty and slow industrial growth, especially in majority African American areas, also keeps this poem unfixed in time, as does the fact that mills used the type of machinery mentioned in the poem for quite a long time, even when mills were powered by horses or water. By flattening time, Komunyakaa reveals to the reader the oldest technology in the poem: race, a construct "designed to separate, stratify, and sanctify the many forms of injustice experiences by members of racialized groups" (Benjamin 36). As the mill grinds corn, the miller grinds economic benefit out of his employees and his customers. When the speaker's father brings one hundred pounds of corn to the mill, he must accept the rules of the white miller. The miller can use his control of the technology to present the theft of the Black man's labor as halving: "*One for you, two for me"* (29). The mentality that Black southerners must accept white southerners' false benevolence because white people own and control southern land reappears in many of the texts this chapter. The mill, presented in Komunyakaa's work as a technology that connects southern oppression over the decades of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, surfaces as one of the first spaces in the South that can symbolize its agricultural past, its relationship with modernity, and its racial cruelties.

Mills in Southern Literature

This chapter considers mills that, although they produce different finished materials, share the quality of being simultaneously technological and integrated into the

South's pastoral landscape. In *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience*, Carroll Pursell notes that "Even before the industrial revolution reached the south, when the area's economy depended almost completely on agriculture, mills using enslaved workers were hardly unknown on southern plantations" (65). Gristmills and cotton mills were often used to provide for the needs of the immediate community rather than to participate in a national market (Pursell 65). Both types of mills worked on smaller scales and were gradually mechanized. When they did produce on larger scales, Phelan records that "The initial idea for workers in the southern mills was to use slave labor basically because slaves lacked mobility. They could not strike for better wages or better working conditions or leave when they had saved sufficient money to head west and buy a farm" (142). Though this labor plan changed relatively quickly (the costs of removing enslaved people from plantations, housing them, and paying their enslaver for the labor were too high), it reveals the assumptions of southerners that, along with the correct type of soil and weather, they had the additional "natural" resource of free labor.

Though white people were undeniably in legal and economic control of the South, they were never as independent, self-sufficient, or superior as they believed. Ruth Cowan records in *A Social History of American Technology* that the southern colonies were never self-sufficient, but instead were dependent on the labor of the enslaved as well as the northern colonies and, in some cases, England (21). Pursell agrees, adding that "Enslaved Africans were, to a remarkable degree, the technologists of the southern colonies" (1). Black people used and developed technology since their arrival in the South, though their enslavers received credit for any patents until after the Civil War.

When industrialization increased shortly after the Civil War, the strategy of using the labor of the enslaved people over whom white southerners had control became more complicated. Black workers had some agency, and the mill became a contested space in the same way the land that it was on and the rightful users of its technology was contested. Lumber mills appear in the chapters as an example of this type of technological symbol. William P. Jones records that "Between 1870 and 1910, lumber grew faster and employed more workers than any other industry in the Southern United States" (1). Though cotton was still emblematic of the South, the most money was in lumber, and lumber mills also contained the most Black workers: "Eighty-three thousand black men worked in southern saw and planning mills in 1910, more than the entire number of southerners employed by cotton textiles and four times those employed in iron and steel" (1). Jones claims that these Black lumber mill workers had unprecedented economic and social power in the South, but they still faced white southerners' uses of "law and terror to circumscribe African American social and political influence" (1). Jones, as well as other historians like Pursell, agree that the circumscription of Black life in the South has a large narrative component. In the next section, I will argue that one overlooked aspect of technological oppression in the white supremacist South is literature's ability not only to romanticize the pre-industrial South, but also to aestheticize new southern ways of engaging with technology that anticipate and attempt to block the modern threats of equality and integration.

The plantation novel placed careful conditions upon burgeoning technology in the South. For white supremacist southerners, one of the greatest threats to the South was northern interference in its economic and social systems. In response to the threat of

northern intervention, the plantation novel romanticized the South's way of life, promoting paternalism and fixity as the most appropriate way of approaching modernity. Pursell writes,

> The social construction of race is a critical element in understanding the historically evolving relationship between technology and African-Americans because the barring of black people from full participation in the nation's technological culture was only partly a matter of law and custom; it was also a matter of racial beliefs and meanings…. The construction of these stereotypes did not happen by accident, nor were they inevitable. The myth of "Negro disability" has been a critical tool in the continuing effort to keep African-Americans in a position of inferiority" (xv).

Though white supremacist southern elites would accept no concessions toward integration or racial equality, they could not do the same with rapidly expanding technology. Writers from the plantation novelist to the Agrarians perceived technology as the death knell of the South's regional individuality, but they could not effectively resist the economic and narrative power of American progress. Instead, literature about technology in the South often questions whether technology can be operated under existing white supremacist hierarchies. In *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854), Caroline Lee Hentz attempts to respond to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Paired with a later novel that glorifies the Old South, Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1901), *The Planter's Northern Bride* can be read as an early attempt to fix industrialization in its proper southern place. In *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), which inspired the

notorious film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), two families, one southern and one northern, try to reclaim their wealth, morals, and sense of racial superiority in the Reconstruction South. Neither novel is about industrialization, but they both deal with the structure of paternalism in the South, emblematized by mills that produce aesthetic and economic benefits for white characters while providing those white characters ways to occupy and consume the labor of Black southerners.

The Planter's Northern Bride tells the story of Eulalia, the daughter of a northern abolitionist, who falls in love with and marries a wealthy southern planter. The romance between the two promotes the paternalist social structure of the South over what is portrayed as northern alienation. Eulalia and her husband Moreland represent a type of national reconciliation that favors the South. Eulalia, who is chaste and well-meaning but influenced by her father's "false" ideas of racial equality, submits to the love and leadership of her southern husband, who is intelligent, wealthy, and in the right about all of the nation's moral and political debates. Once she travels to the South and takes her place as the mistress of the plantation, Eulalia realizes the correctness of her husband's way of life. In particular, the mills on the land stand out as evidence of the South's superiority:

> Eulalia was soon initiated in the mysteries of plantation life. With ever-increasing interest she studied the scenes around her, and the character of the community of whose dark circumference she was made the central light…. She visited the saw-mill and grist-mill, built on the margin of a roaring stream; the blacksmith's shop, that, isolated from the other buildings, looked as if it were cooling its fiery forge in the fresh green expanse that surrounded it…. (341).

On the plantation, the sawmill and the gristmill are part of the landscape in much the same way that the Black inhabitants of the plantation form a "dark circumference" around the main house. Eulalia admires the "neatness, order, and despatch" (341) of this landscape, and the use of these technologies certainly gives the impression that the plantation supports and maintains a family: "wherever she turned her eye she saw abundant proof of Moreland's considerate kindness and liberality. The watchful guardian providence of the whole establishment, he seemed to see and command everything at a single glance" (342). Eulalia enjoys being "rewarded" for her youth, beauty, and chastity with a wealthy husband and the deference of the people he enslaves, and she projects that belief onto the enslaved people of the plantation as well. For their compliance with the plantation system, they are rewarded by being given clothing, food, and furniture produced by the plantation's machine. Her husband, Eulalia believes, magnanimously "rewards" the infantilized enslaved people with the fruits of their own labor.

The novel positions slave labor in the South as far preferable to the factory towns in the North for two reasons—first, it suggests that technology is more harmonious with nature in the South, and second, it suggests that the plantation system is where enslaved Americans belong. In the previous excerpt, the mills on the plantation were improvements upon the natural—they sit on roaring streams, they blend in with the fields, and they provide goods to sustain the plantation, its inhabitants, and its leader. Eulalia realizes that her abolitionist feelings arose from a misunderstanding of African Americans' ability to function independently of their geographic location: "Eulalia, who had never seen the negro at the North, but as an isolated being, beheld him now in his domestic and social relations, and, it seemed to her, that he must be a great deal happier

thus situated, bearing the name of a slave, than wandering about a nominal freeman, without the genial influences of home and friends" (337). Her conversion is representative of popular conceptions of Black Americans as more primitive and therefore more connected to nature. The novel suggests that Black people cannot engage with forms of technology other than the ones in which their enslaver has trained them:

> Do the spirits of the labourers in Northern factories ever rebound more lightly than this, after laying down the burden of toil? … Do the hundreds and thousands buried in the black coal-pits and wretched dens of Great Britain, who have never heard, in their living graves, of the God who created, the Saviour who redeemed them, pass their sunless lives in greater comfort or fuller enjoyment? (337)

Using the trope of the Black and white southern family, the novel suggests that by hoarding control of technology, forcing Black people to do menial labor, and claiming ownership of the product of that labor, white planters are taking proper care of the people they enslave. In this sense, the sentimental literature effectively combines religious and scientific racism to dehumanize the Black characters—when they are allowing soot to be one with their skin in the blacksmith's shop, they are machines. When they enjoy themselves by singing after work, they are primitive and innocent as livestock. At the end of the novel, when some of the people enslaved by Moreland do assert their desire for freedom, their behavior is depicted as an evil rejection of the gift of the southern family. Their attempts at asserting subjectivity are unsuccessful, and with the convenient narrative voice of a didactic, sentimental novel, the behavior of every Black person on Moreland's property is folded into a trope that serves white supremacy.

The moral and technological correctness of fixity is simple in *The Planter's Northern Bride.* The once-rebellious Black people on the plantation simply repent, return to their place, and return to their work. In Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, reasserting white supremacy in the post-emancipation South is more complicated. At the beginning of Dixon's novel, North and South are represented by two sets of siblings, Elsie and Phil Stoneman in the North and Ben and Margaret Cameron in the South. The two young men form a strong bond across enemy lines during the Civil War and eventually marry each other's sisters. Like in *The Planter's Northern Bride,* the love between the sets of siblings is intended to model the reconciliation of the white citizens of both regions. However, reconciliation becomes more complicated because of the perceived predatory behavior of northern whites, like the Stonemans' father, who promote racial equality. Though Austin Stoneman adopts the newer technology of electricity to secretly communicate with his African American mistress, the true motivation for his villainy is not his "betrayal" of the white race but rather his desire to use technology to thwart white southern sovereignty. Lee's army destroyed the iron mills he started in Pennsylvania in hopes of becoming wealthy enough to rise above his father's station (95). After his dramatic repentance and conversion to the southern white supremacy espoused by his children, Stoneman admits that "Mightiest of all was my motive of revenge…. I stood on the hill in the darkness, cried, raved, cursed, while I watched the troops lay those mills in ashes. Then and there I swore that I'd live until I ground the South beneath my heel!" (373). Stoneman's failed mills are a reflection of his failed morality. The novel claims that he betrays his race by falling in love with a Black woman and his country by resisting Lincoln's efforts to

placate former confederates in the South, and so his technological efforts end in destruction.

Later in the novel, Stoneman's son Phil models a better relationship between the South and technology. Though he remains a northerner, Phil has adopted the white supremacy of the Camerons with religious fervor. Margaret Cameron, as a proxy for the South itself, is the pure, white object of his affections. Before Phil proposes to Margaret, he becomes wealthy by improving the wreckage of the Reconstruction South:

> While the Camerons were growing each day poorer, Phil was becoming rich. His genius, skill, and enterprise had been quick to see the possibilities of the waterpower. The old Eagle cotton mills had been burned during the war. Phil organized the Eagle & Phœnix Company, interested Northern capitalists, bought the falls, and erected two great mills, the dim hum of whose spindles added a new note to the river's music. Eager, swift, modest, his head full of ideas, his heart full of faith, he had pressed forward to success (278-279).

Unlike his father, Phil finds his wealth within the South and symbolically reconciles both regions by recruiting northern investors. Though he takes northern capital, Phil understands the limits and uses of this technological advancement. His mills are cotton mills that appreciate the natural resources of the South, and he manages them in such a way that they add to the natural beauty of the falls. His love for Margaret is synonymous with his love for the South, and he promises her that his industry will only improve the South, which "but for the Black Curse," he claims, "would be to-day the garden of the world!" (282). When he proposes marriage, Phil promises Margaret that he will become a citizen of the South: "I will help you build here a new South on all that's good and noble

in the old, until its dead field blossom again, its harbours bristle with ships, and the hum of a thousand industries make music in every valley" (282). Phil Stoneman's promise preserves the pastoral beauty of the South, and because he loves the South and Margaret, he can be trusted to oversee industrialization in a way that preserves white supremacy.

These cautious negotiations between white supremacy and industrialization are not unique to the novels I have described. Rather, they are indicative of a literary trend that engages with modernity by preserving pastoral or Edenic notions of the Old South. To do this, white supremacist southern literature portrays Black southerners as machines themselves, adopts elements of the pastoral, and connects technology and intelligence to whiteness. The mill, with its long history in the South and easy connection to the land, provides bountiful symbolic ground for writers to make these claims. However, the material reality of the mill as well as its literary representations hold opportunities for anti-racist literature that challenges the consumption of Black people's bodies, labor, and subjectivity through southern mills. In the remainder of the chapter, I will consider literary representations of the mill that challenge the prescription for white supremacist uses of technology exemplified by *The Planter's Northern Bride* and *The Clansman.* These texts, which consider mills from the antebellum period to the 1920s, subvert the narrative of the Edenic South, literary tropes that depict Black southerners as land or machines, and other literary methods for using the symbol of the mill to naturalize white supremacy.

Southern white supremacy also depends upon the use of tropes that dehumanize Black men and women—often as machines/animals or land, respectively—to maintain its literary idealization. In novels like *The Planter's Northern Bride*, more benevolent

versions of the trope exist as Eulalia considers the enslaved people on her plantation as a "dark circumference" that adds to the landscape. In *The Clansman,* the trope can be seen in characters like the leopard-like seductress Lydia Brown or the brutish Gus, who rises above his level of intelligence and takes a military role simply to terrorize white men and rape white women. Hale claims that southern white supremacists developed these stereotypes to justify segregation after their false claims of racial harmony in the antebellum South: "Reconstruction in fiction, white southern memoir, and history became as peopled as the plantation romance with flat and caricatured blacks" (*Making Whiteness* 75). This language initiated both textual and physical violence, but it also allowed white southerners to negotiate their place in American progress by becoming modern subjects themselves while positioning Black people, along with land and machines, as the raw materials of modernity.

The four texts I examine, two by Black southern authors and two by white southern authors, depict the mill as part of the landscape of a South still clinging to an imagined Lost Cause. Like in Yusef Komunyakaa's "Gristmill," the layering of more and less advanced technologies and historical periods is important as the authors navigate the South's continued obsession with its own past. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) examines the mill and miller's family life at a turning point for both industrialization and public opinion of slavery in antebellum Virginia. Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy" (1899) uses the technological changes in sawmills after the war as a frame for the haunting story of an enslaved man's death in the mill saw. "Pantaloon in Black" (1940), the central story of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, considers the mechanization and exploitation of the strong, capable Black men who appear in so many stories about the mill. Finally, Hurston's

"Spunk" (1925) returns to themes of death and haunting at the site of the mill, suggesting that millhands can and do transcend the bodily effects of their exploitation. These stories complicate familiar narratives about racial subordination and technological progress in different ways and to different ends, but each one adapts the trope of the southern mill, used in plantation literature to establish the fixity of white supremacy, to challenge this impression of timeless and natural hierarchy.

"Sometimes Keeping People in Their Place is Being Good to Them": Fixity in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Willa Cather's final novel and her only novel dealing explicitly with her southern heritage, Cather uses her memories of childhood in the early 1900s as a frame for the story of Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert and her husband Henry. Sapphira becomes obsessed with an enslaved young woman, Nancy, and attempts to have her beauty and innocence consumed by rape. Her husband Henry, who considers himself a reluctant slaveholder, consumes the talents and strength of his head millhand, Sampson. The frame of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is complicated—the story is told through layers of memory, but the end of the novel reveals that the story is being told to a young white girl (a fictionalized Cather) who is about to witness the reunion of Nancy, who fled the South because of Sapphira's violence, and her mother Till. This frame centers whiteness in the novel, but it also creates a connection between the assumptions of whites in both the 1900s and the 1830s that Black life existed for their benefit. Many critics struggle with Cather's last novel, which Toni Morrison calls a "fugitive" from the author's own literary estate (19). Morrison argues that this frame serves no one but the white characters and perhaps Cather's desire to assuage her guilt

about her southern heritage: “The reunion is literally stage managed for the author, now become a child…. Only with Africanist characters is such a project thinkable: delayed gratification for the pleasure of a (white) child” (27). Other critics consider this frame a commentary on southern history—John T. Matthews argues that “the child narrator represents a mentality unacquainted with the evils of the past she has been born into; she comes too late to the novel, and her self-absorption is juvenile to a fault. Cather’s strategy here is to subject such historical obtuseness to implicit reproach” (161). My reading of the novel’s frame is that not only is it Africanist, as Morrison argues, but that it mimics the function of the mill against which the novel is set: Black labor and lives are turned into a product that benefits whiteness. Though the frame makes it difficult, as Morrison notes, to consider the subjectivity of the Black characters, it does predict the cognitive consequences of continued consumption of African Americans through the mill.

The novel’s complexity comes from its simultaneous commitments to racial equality and assuaging white guilt. Though the frame through which the young girl learns her lesson about the racial sins of her ancestors is insulting, it does reflect the twentieth century South’s attempts to center whiteness in southern history. At several points in the novel, a more adult voice of the child narrator seems to reflect on the situations of the characters. One such moment mitigates the abolitionist thoughts of Sapphira’s white daughter. Mrs. Blake, whose natural sensibilities are offended by slavery, tries to find some compassion for her slave-holding mother. Her thoughts echo attempts by later southerners to reconcile the history of the region with their desire to feel positively about their own heritage:

> Yet one must admit inconsistencies. There was her singular indulgence with Tansy Dave, her real affection for Till and old Jezebel, her patience with Sampson's lazy wife. Even now, from her chair, she took some part in all the celebrations that darkies love. She liked to see them happy. On Christmas morning she sat in the long hall and had all the men on the place come in to get their presents and their Christmas drink (220).

The claim that some enslavers were kind is a literary strategy equally common in slavery apology texts and in twentieth century romanticizations of the Old South. The frame, whether it satirizes or seriously considers the narrative of the benevolent slaveowner, insists upon whiteness as the center of the narrative. It replicates the pattern of "*one for you, two for me*" exposed by Komunyakaa in "Gristmill." Enslaved characters may have some of the benefits of modern values, but white characters (like Henry and Mrs. Blake) are consistently given more literary space to acknowledge black subjectivity than black subjects are to express it.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, which does consider its Black characters only through the lens of whiteness, succeeds in criticizing the conflation of Black people with land at the same time that it overlooks the problematic conflation of Black people with machines. Sampson and Nancy, who are both enslaved by the Colberts but rarely interact in the novel, serve as masculine and feminine examples of stereotypes used to dehumanize Black southerners from the antebellum period well into the 1940s. Sapphira considers Nancy part of her inheritance, like the land the mill sits on. Nancy is perhaps even the yield of that inheritance, since she is not purchased but rather born to Till. Having forced Till to marry Jeff, an infertile man, Sapphira considers Nancy's birth a

bargain (9). She dismisses the possibility that Till was raped by one of the Colbert brothers: "'We got the portraits out of [the painter] anyway, and maybe we got a smart yellow girl into the bargain.' Mrs. Colbert laughed discreetly, as if the idea amused and rather pleased her. 'Till was within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff. I never hectored her about it'" (9). Early in Nancy's life, Sapphira developed an attitude of ownership toward her by treating her like a decoration. Later, when she begins to suspect that Henry has noticed that Nancy is developing sexually, she exercises her power by attempting to destroy Nancy's body without pausing to confirm her incorrect suspicions. The novel literalizes and criticizes this obsession with "deflowering" by placing Nancy within the natural landscape. Sapphira makes Nancy a natural resource, a product of the land that can be reaped by any white person with a claim to the space. The most dangerous moments for Nancy occur outdoors, where she is part of the beautiful landscape but cannot control what happens to her. In one scene, Martin accosts Nancy when she is enjoying an afternoon in a tree, surrounded by blossoms. The scene subverts the traditional image of lovers in the pastoral landscape—Martin never considers consent, instead thrusting his head between Nancy's legs as he speaks to her inappropriately. Though Nancy is beautiful, her race prevents her from being a person in this tableau—instead, she is another object that Martin can pull down from the tree and consume. Doubly dehumanized by her race and gender, Nancy relies on the help of a white woman, Mrs. Blake, and a Black man, Sampson.

Sampson, the head mill hand, is a masculine parallel to Nancy in the novel. While Nancy's identity is collapsed onto the land through her femininity, Sampson becomes conflated with the mill itself. Sampson is a mixed-race character, and through his work at

the mill, Henry begins to see his potential as a human being: “he was a tall, straight mulatto with a good countenance, thoughtful, intelligent. His head was full behind the ears, shaped more like a melon lying down than a peanut standing on end” (109). In the text, this description of Sampson comes through Henry’s thoughts about which of the enslaved men on the property would be capable of freedom. Henry, a voracious reader on the topics of religion and slavery, falls back on popular race science when he measures the capability of Sampson. Initially, Henry cannot see Sampson without the context of the mill—his capability, his strength, and his intelligence are all in relation to the mill. When Henry considers freeing the people Sapphira’s family enslaved, which he has a legal right to do as her husband, he considers their ability to function as machines or in mills elsewhere: “Henry Colbert knew he had a legal right to manumit any of his wife's negroes; but that would be an outrage to her feelings, and an injustice to the slaves themselves. Where would they go? How would they live? They had never learned to take care of themselves or to provide for tomorrow. They were a part of the Dodderidge property and the Dodderidge household” (108). Sampson is selected as the exception, perhaps because of his white ancestry. While the text depicts Henry as a sympathetic, reluctant enslaver, the character parrots some of the most insidious religious and scientific justifications for slavery. In the phrase “part of the Dodderidge property and part of the Dodderidge household,” the texts highlights several of the ways that its contemporary South, the South of the 1940s, tried to reconcile with its ancestors’ crimes: first, that the enslaved people were inherited and not purchased directly by a southerner like Henry, and second, that they were better kept as part of the property, like livestock, so that whites could look after their physical and spiritual well-being.

Sampson's most complex moment in the text is a refusal of manumission, filtered through Henry's memory and palpable relief. At one moment three years before the events of the novel, Henry had told Sampson of his plan to free him and help him find work in the Quaker Mills of Philadelphia. Sampson, to Henry's surprise and relief, rejected his chance for freedom:

> Sampson did not interrupt; he stood in his manly, responsible way, listening intently to his master. But when it was his turn to speak, he broke down. This was his home. Here he knew everybody. He didn't want to go out among strangers. Besides, Belle, his wife, was a slack worker, and his children were little. He could never keep them in a city as well off as they were here. What ever had put such a notion in Mister Henry's head? Wasn't he real smart about his work?.... Anyhow, he'd a'most sooner leave the chillun than leave the mill, when they'd got everything fixed up so nice and could bolt finer white flour than you could buy in town. (109-110)

Sampson's multilayered response contradicts Henry's opinion that he would work as well in one mill or another. Sampson is not, according to his own argument, an interchangeable part in a mechanical mill. Instead, he's part of a human network that includes his family and friends. He understands his usefulness to both Henry and the mill, and he seems to fear that in another place, the privileges he has because of his technological skill may not extend to his wife, whom he acknowledges as a poor worker. The somewhat disjointed litany of reasons that Sampson gives for not desiring freedom mixes emotional arguments as well as appeals toward the progress that the mill is making. Sampson mentions that he has finally gotten the mill to a point that it rivals more

advanced mills that ship their products to "town." He has a sense of pride in his work, and he knows that Henry will be most swayed by that argument.

Though he certainly is sincere in his love for his family, Sampson's argument is also designed to defuse the threat that he poses as an intelligent, talented, mixed-race Black man. Henry's sense of paternalism, driven by his religious reading, is strong. Henry's recollection of Sampson's rejection of manumission carefully situates Sampson in the exact place that Henry, in his guilt, hopes Sampson will stay. Henry wants to free Sampson but fears Sapphira, and Sampson's choice to stay is the ideal remedy for Henry's conscience. Sampson's demonstration of his value to Henry similarly allows Henry to both congratulate himself for recognizing Sampson's moral character and ignore challenges to his own character as a slaveholder. For Henry, Sampson is the ideal Black man in the tradition of Stowe's Uncle Tom—he has irreproachable character without challenging the morality of slavery, and he is capable of producing without an interest in consumption. Though his nod toward freedom comforts him, Henry continues to consume Sampson's talents, and Sampson becomes an essential piece of the mill. At the end of the novel, after Nancy runs away with the help of Henry and Sapphira's daughter, Henry reveals that despite his moral angst over slavery, he will continue to prioritize his own comfort: "Sometimes," he tells Sapphira when she has a rare moment of empathy for her abolitionist daughter, "keeping people in their place is being good to them" (268).

When Sampson does risk his position at the mill, he does so to reject the idea of Black women as inhuman property. Unlike the white men in the novel, Sampson sees Nancy as a human child rather than an abstract symbol of desire. When he finds Nancy

being harassed by Martin, he leverages his own masculinity to protect Nancy. Nancy's father Jeff is not her biological father, his impotence is well-known on the plantation, and Martin would not fear him. When Nancy calls to Jeff from the tree under which Martin waits for her, Sampson steps in to intimidate Martin. Knowing that eye contact with a white man is forbidden to enslaved Black men, Sampson meets Martin's eye. He acknowledges to Martin that he is aware of his sexual harassment even though Nancy cannot admit it. The eye contact disassociates Sampson from both land and machine. He looks at Martin to demonstrate that his vision is not filtered by Martin's race—he seems him as both a predator and a moral inferior. This sudden denial of Martin's whiteness and masculinity infuriates him, as hooks notes that enslaved Black people were never allowed to look at white people (115). When Sampson's gaze registers with Martin as a witness to his sexual harassment, Martin retreats both physically and emotionally to the hierarchy of the plantation. "That mill-hand don't know where he belongs," he tells himself (182). By witnessing Martin's transgression, openly looking at him and later telling Henry what he observed, Sampson subverts the assumption that he is only a part of the mill. Risking his own displacement, Sampson allows Nancy time to flee the South, avoiding the most sinister way that slavery connects Nancy to the landscape: her plan to drown herself in the millpond to avoid a rape from which she has no legal recourse.

Resistance to Perpetual Motion in "Po' Sandy"

Charles Chesnutt, writing forty years before Cather but about the same period, predicts and challenges these white interpretations of Black stories. "Po' Sandy," (1899), establishes a comparison of mills before and after the war to consider the consumption of both southern land and southern Black people. Sandy is turned into a tree by his wife so

that he can have a respite from the exhaustion of slavery. Instead, his tree is chopped down and put through a sawmill, killing him and allowing his spirit to allegedly haunt the structure made from his body. The frame of "Po' Sandy" is richer than the frame of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* consisting of multiple racial and regional perspectives. The narrator of the entire story collection is John, a white northern man who has bought a former plantation as a business venture after the Civil War. John's wife Annie is charmed by the imagined South, and John himself sees the South as a place where his northern knowledge can be applied to both cultivate and civilize the landscape. John repeats stories told by Julius, a formerly enslaved man who has remained on the plantation and is familiar with the area. John sees Julius as a simple, quaint keeper of the status quo. Julius, however, has learned to navigate the chaos of the Reconstruction South to secure his own needs. Throughout *The Conjure Woman,* he uses the pre-existing tensions between the pastoral and industrialized South to gain more control over his own space. In "Po' Sandy" in particular, Julius uses the physical location of the sawmill to which he drives John and Annie as the scene for his story about Sandy and Tenie.

The story's frame resists the stereotype of the strong, capable Black man, though racist characters dehumanize and mechanize Sandy. In Julius' tale, which is set visually against the lumber mill, Sandy's mistreatment is tied to his "usefulness" to the man who enslaves him. The story reverses stereotypes of the paternalistic, harmonious plantation by emphasizing the constant disruption of Sandy's life. Because Sandy is particularly capable, each of his enslaver's children want him as a wedding gift when they leave the home. To keep his children happy, their father sends Sandy to them on a rotating schedule. At other times, he rents out Sandy's talents to other landowners in the area.

While Sandy is away, McSwayne sells his wife and replaces her with another woman. While McSwayne's family is so important to him that he will subject Sandy to perpetual motion rather than displease any of his children, McSwayne expects Sandy to find his family members interchangeable. Sandy does eventually bond with his new wife, to whom he finally expresses his frustrations:

> 'I'm gittin' monst'us ti'ed er dish yer gwine roun' so much. Here I is lent ter Mars Jeems dis mont', en I got ter do so-en-so; en ter Mars Archie de nex' mont', en I got ter do so-en-so; den I got ter go ter Miss Jinnie's: en hit's Sandy dis en Sandy dat, en Sandy yer en Sandy dere, tel it 'pears ter me I ain' got no home, ner no marster, ner no mistiss, ner no nuffin. I can't eben keep a wife: my yuther ole 'oman wuz sol' away widout my gittin' a chance fer ter tell her good-by; en now I got ter go off en leab you, Tenie, en I dunno whe'r I'm eber gwine ter see you ag'in er no I wisht I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile.' (44-45)

Though she is a converted Christian, Sandy's wife Tenie offers her skill as a conjure woman to turn him into a tree. Their resistance to Sandy's mechanization is, perhaps counterintuitively, to make him fully inhuman.

Sandy's transformation into a tree both resists the white supremacist appropriation of his body and considers alternative ways for Black southerners to interact with the land. Sandy's lament about his exhaustion emphasizes that he, a human being, has several needs that machines do not, especially rest. Unlike the McSwaynes, Sandy's desire to remain in the space is not to build wealth or maintain power, but rather to rest his physical body and maintain family connections. Since his enslavers already consider him

property, this transformation into a tree temporarily subverts their desire to use him. Jeffery Myers considers the entire collection of stories as both a resistance to white ownership of land in the South as well as a more imaginative use of the literary conflation of African Americans and land (6). Myers claims that where Chesnutt's work seems to participate in the symbolic reduction of Black people to property, it actually imagines connections between Black southerners and land that have liberatory possibilities: "Chesnutt's conflation of cheap land and cheap labor signals the book's theme of how land owners, before and after emancipation, exploited both African Americans and the natural world for material gain, constructing both as the 'Other' against which the land/slave owner takes his identity" (7). In "Po' Sandy," white enslavers not only take their identity from the racial hierarchy, but they also use technology to reinforce their authority over both land and people. In "Po' Sandy," Chesnutt illustrates this cruelty through the symbolic horror of the sawmill.

The major threat to Sandy and Tenie's tenuous, occasional happiness after Sandy becomes a tree is, once again, the demands of the white family. Tenie is taken from the plantation to nurse a McSwayne family member, and while she is gone McSwayne decides to build a kitchen. Sandy's tree is chosen for lumber, and the tale depicts the sawmill as a space of unimaginable horror that makes the consumption of Tenie and Sandy's bodies through slavery a violent, literal destruction. In sharp contrast to the pastoral harmony of the mills in *The Planter's Northern Bride* or even the mill's outlet for Sampson's intelligence in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the sawmill in "Po' Sandy" destroys Sandy and drives his wife insane. Julius, telling the tale, heightens the drama by describing the tree's resistance to death: "But it wuz mighty hard wuk; fer of all de

sweekin', en moanin', en groanin', dat log done it w'iles de saw wuz a-cuttin' thoo it. De saw wuz one er dese yer ole-timey, up-en-down saws, en hit tuk longer dem days ter saw a log 'en it do now. Dey greased de saw, but dat didn' stop de fuss; hit kep' right on, tel fin'ly dey got de log all sawed up" (55). Julius places this event directly into the narrative of the South's technological development by mentioning that the saw that clumsily destroyed Sandy is outdated. The suggestion that more modern saw could make quicker work of Sandy's tree both frightens Annie and insinuates that users of newer technology may be more efficient at destroying and consuming Black bodies.

"Ah Just Cant Quit Thinking": Persistent Humanity in "Pantaloon in Black"

In "Pantaloon in Black" (1940), the updated machineries of both mills and white supremacy conspire to dehumanize Rider, a millhand of exceptional talent much like Sandy and Sampson. After the death of his beloved wife Mannie, Rider performs much more dangerous feats of strength at the mill, and when it seems that the mill itself cannot kill him, Rider kills one of the white mill employees. The machinery of white supremacy takes over, and the relatives of the dead white man lynch Rider to punish him for the same strength for which he was formerly celebrated. The frame of "Pantaloon in Black" challenges white consumption of Black bodies, highlighting what is lost when Black stories are told for white listeners' benefit while a white sheriff narrates the story of Rider's grief and death to entertain his wife at the dinner table. The sheriff is almost comically incorrect in almost every assumption he makes about Rider—he misunderstands Rider's love for his wife, his relationship with machines at the mill, and his motivations for the murder. In a surprising moment that reminds the reader of the rapidly technologizing world outside of the mill town, the sheriff's wife refuses to engage

with the story her husband tells her, instead insisting that he finish eating so that she can clear the table and go to "the picture show" (152). The reference to film adds another element of technological consumption to the text, as the sheriff's flat, two-dimensional retelling of Rider's tragedy is compared unfavorably to a film. Faulkner's half-frame succeeds in tying Rider's work in the mill to the larger world of whiteness, technology, and consumption, making the story not the outlier of the novel that it is normally considered but rather a centerpiece that considers how Black people are consumed as white southerners begin to reap the benefits of technology even as they bemoan the loss of the South's natural landscape.

Post-emancipation mills and their advanced methods of consumption reappear "Pantaloon in Black," where the labor of free Black southerners is organized around a machine that consumes their environment and their labor. Rider's incredible strength makes him almost superhuman to his peers, and Rider internalizes the mechanization of his personality to avoid human pain. After the death of his wife, Rider processes his emotions through repetitive movement. His family, like Sandy's, wants him to find healing by remaining still and connected to his family, but Rider insists on digging his wife's grave himself. Without responding to a friend's offer to take his place, Rider mechanically digs "with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition" (129). Later, he lifts logs that only the mill's pulley system should be able to lift. Rider's death wish is multilayered: he believes that if he does not die from lifting the logs, he can at least shed one human quality: thought. To avoid thinking, Rider continues drinking unhealthy amounts of alcohol and completing riskier feats of strength at the mill. His aunt and uncle, who raised him, try to call him home and bring him back

into the community. Instead, Rider continues moving with the current of modernity, bringing himself closer to destruction.

Rejecting his family's offers of help and prayer, Rider continues to seek out mechanical movement and the space of the mill. When he returns to the mill at night to gamble, his movements have become so mechanized that he has no control over them: "And then it was all right. He was moving again. But he was not moving, he was drinking….But it was all right. And now he was moving, the jug gone now and he didn't know the when or where of that either" (144-5). Since his daily work at the sawmill could not kill him, Rider returned at night to a perhaps more dangerous conflict with a white mill security guard, Birdsong. Rider discovers that Birdsong is allowing Black men to meet in the mill's tool room to gamble so that he can take advantage of them by cheating with an extra pair of dice. Birdsong's cheating manifests the ways that Black workers are taken advantage of by white owners of the mill, and Rider automatically kills Birdsong—"in the second before the half-drawn pistol exploded he actually struck at the white man's throat not with the blade but with a sweeping blow of his fist, following through in the same motion so that not even the first jet of blood touched his arm" (146). Again, Rider's improbable physical abilities make him seem at once more and less than human. The spectacular conflict in which Rider defeats a pistol with his fists belies the deep, human grief from which his death wish arises. Later, when Rider breaks out of his cell and is pinned to the ground by his killers, he is found laughing and repeating "Hit look lack Ah just cant quit thinking. Look lack Ah just cant quit" (152). The persistence of human thought, his own love for his wife and her haunting memory, cannot be subdued by either alcoholism or violence. Instead, he rides the machinery of white supremacy to its logical

end—when he cannot be killed by the mill saw itself, he seeks out a type of conflict with white supremacy that will certainly result in his death. Rider, who felt indestructible within his own community, was aware of his vulnerability to the forms of white violence lurking outside his home space. His swift murder when he leaves his social place reflects the consequences for white control of mill towns predicted in Hurston's earlier story, "Spunk."

"Spunk" and the Consumption of Black Men's Labor

Hurston's "Spunk" (1925) tells a remarkably similar story to "Po' Sandy" and "Pantaloon in Black," in which a Black millhand named Spunk is eventually consumed by the machine he was believed to dominate. In Hurston's story, however, Spunk's town is entirely African American, and whiteness is moved to the periphery of the mill village. The framing and perspective of Hurston's "Spunk" decenter whiteness entirely. "Spunk," set in an entirely African American mill town in Florida, is told through conversations between two of Spunk's neighbors, Elijah and Walter. Elijah and Walter gossip and have public conversations that inform both the town and the reader about Spunk, his affair, his belief in ghosts, and his death in the sawmill. The conversations between two Black men who know Spunk contrast starkly with the ignorant assumptions of the white sheriff in "Pantaloon in Black." Though Walter and Elijah have a range of opinions about Spunk, they understand him with and without the context of his mill work—to them, he is neither an animal nor a part of a machine, but an individual. The mill is peripheral, not the whole of Black life, but it does hover as a threatening and unfamiliar element in the community. Hurston's staging emphasizes the location of white southern culture in the story—though it does not appear, its influence looms in the sawmill where the men work.

I interpret Hurston's removal of whiteness, technology, and their attendant dangers to the outskirts of the story as a resistance of literary representations of Black people as part of southern land or machines. In "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (1997), bell hooks demonstrates that even when physically absent, white people are often connected to terror in the black imagination and must regard whiteness with fear to survive (338-339). hooks writes that whiteness makes its presence felt "most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures" (341). All of the inhabitants of the village, except Spunk, fear the power of the shining saw at the mill. Though they respect his fearlessness, Spunk's community also fears for him, because although it seems as if no white supremacists are surveilling their community, Spunk may be endangered if he rises to their notice. Jones argues that Hurston's writing about working-class Black men in the South portrays them as "defenders of an alternative 'folk' culture" more or less outside of the trajectory of American progress (4). However, the framing of "Spunk," a story told jointly by a Black community with the impersonal terror of whiteness on its outskirts, suggests that through depersonalized technologies, white supremacy can keep Black people from accessing their power in ways that threaten the social order.

Hurston's "Spunk" takes place in a mill town like the one in "Pantaloon in Black," but whiteness is even more distant from the story. Instead, Spunk's strength is celebrated by the community at the same time as his actions are understood from multiple perspectives. Unlike Faulkner's sheriff, who insists that Rider "aint human," (147), Spunk's community understands him as an individual. Stereotypes of the Black Ulysses, or the strong, virile Black man alienated by modernity exemplified by the writings of

Howard Odum in the late 1920s (Jones 7) do occur in the story, but the technological and animal metaphors that characterize Spunk do not allow his complete mechanization. “But that’s one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks,” Elijah explains. “He ain’t skeered of nothin‘ on God’s green footstool—nothin’! He rides that log down at saw-mill jus‘ like he struts ’round wid another man’s wife—jus‘ don’t give a kitty. When Tes’ Miller got cut to giblets on that circle-saw, Spunk steps right up and starts ridin'. The rest of us was skeered to go near it” (1). Hurston, according to Jones, “discovered an alternative value system that she believed persisted only where African Americans were culturally isolated from whites” (4). In “Spunk,” that isolation does not provide safety: Hurston, like Odum, “agreed that African Americans were essentially alienated by the process of modernization in the South, and that they could either resist or succumb to—but never influence—its development” (Jones 4). Spunk’s physical, sexual, and economic freedom were limited to his small village, and any interaction he has with the mill becomes an interaction with whiteness.

Spunk’s death in the mill, foreshadowed by the fact that he does not fear “the dangerous log-carriage that fed the singing, snarling, biting, circle-saw” (5), seems supernatural to the community and to Spunk himself. After Spunk kills Joe Kanty, the husband of his girlfriend Lena, Spunk believes that Joe haunts him in the form of a black bobcat. Spunk seems to believe he is haunted at the mill as well—when the saw wobbles at the mill, and he cannot perform as well as he normally does, Spunk claims someone pushed him and becomes furious at the machinist who comes to inspect the mill. The next day, Spunk does fall onto the mill saw. Elijah, spooked by witnessing Spunk’s death, becomes skittish and waits until he is in the dark away from the “lighted store” (7) to tell

Walter the story. Spunk fell onto the saw and, while dying in a pile of sawdust, insisted that Joe Kanty pushed him. The dramatic ghost story, which Elijah claims to believe, is overshadowed by the poverty of Spunk's wake: "the cooling board consisted of three sixteen-inch boards on saw horses, a dingy sheet was his shroud" (8). Though the imaginative life of the community has managed to exist outside of whiteness and American progress (Jones 8), their poverty and reliance upon the mill is obvious after Spunk's death. Spunk, unfazed by the similar death of Tes' Miller, is eventually consumed by the mill. Despite the legendary strength and love of Black men like Spunk, Sandy, and Rider, their bodies become collateral damage in the process of industrialization and the maintenance of a southern racial hierarchy.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Technological Space

As early as southern literature begins to consider the mill as a symbol of southern progress, it also begins to represent the mill's accompanying questions of production and consumption. The mill often functions as an intermediary between the natural world and technological benefits that Black southerners may be prevented from having. The miller, with the ability to dictate both who uses the mill and for what cost, symbolizes the type of complete ownership of southern space that white supremacists wanted to exercise. Though successful in both literary and geographic contexts, white supremacist ownership of the land is never complete. Many southern writers take the strength of white supremacy into account when writing about Black engagements with technology and create plots that expose and subvert rather than triumph over white supremacy. In the stories I have considered in this chapter, memory and haunting appear as strategies that acknowledge the rights of Black people to own and use spaces that they have built

through their labor and through white people's use of Black people as tools rather than subjects of modernity.

The stories of Sampson and Nancy in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are concluded through the memory of the young, fictionalized author for the ostensible purpose of teaching her a lesson about the South's past. Nancy returns as a cosmopolitan woman, seemingly wealthy and healed from her childhood trauma. The child narrator learns that the story has a happy ending and that eventually, all the people enslaved by her ancestors were freed. Through the child's naïve acceptance of the "happy" reunion, it does seem that the white characters in the text continue to profit from Black suffering. However, the text suggests that even though Nancy is free from the memory of her time at the plantation, the Dodderidge-Colbert descendants are not free from their memory of what was done to her and the other enslaved people on the plantation. Though Nancy and Sampson both leave the South and become successful, the white southerners left behind cannot separate the space from the memory of slavery or the claim of Black people to the space they worked to produce.

The end of Sampson's story suggests the continued claims of formerly enslaved people to Virginia. Henry Colbert reluctantly freed the people Sapphira enslaved immediately after her death and found Sampson the work in the northern Pennsylvania mill that he had long idealized. Till relays Sampson's fate: he succeeded in Pennsylvania, but his continued fondness for the work he did in southern mills suggests a value system that exists outside of white narratives of region and progress. Though technology gives Sampson both his freedom and his livelihood after freedom, Sampson's relationship to technology and land remains complex. When he returns home, he insists that bread made

with flour ground by machines has a foul taste. Till recounts to Nancy that Sampson "told [her] how in the big mill where he works the grindin' is all done by steam, and the machines runs so fast an' gits so hot, an' burns all the taste out-a the flour. 'They is no real bread but what's made out-a water- ground flour,' he says to me" (289). This surprising rejection of the industrialized North creates a counternarrative of South as Sampson sees it—a place where his human intelligence guided machines and where human hands guided the process of making bread. Though he is consistently identified only as the millhand, Sampson continues to insist on negotiation between the human and machine, and he seems to think that negotiation requires reclamation of some of patterns of Black life in the South.

Though the memories of Nancy and the other formerly enslaved people who were considered "part of the Dodderidge household and the Dodderidge property (108)" constitute a metaphorical haunting that produced discomfort in the ancestors of the white people who continue to profit from their work, the other texts in this chapter consider literal hauntings and the suggestion that Black southerners can maintain a claim to property in death that they did not have in life. The haunted lumber made from the tree inhabited by Sandy's spirit creates a literal allegory of Black southerners' claims to the spaces created by their labor. Sandy, consumed by the mill, is used to build an even more literal space of consumption in the kitchen. The lingering legend of his death and the wild grief of his bereaved wife make that space an uncomfortable place for white people to inhabit—the Black people on the plantation believe, or claim to believe, that the kitchen is haunted, and McSwayne's wife can no longer keep a cook. As the stories of hauntings spread, Julius says that the mistress becomes unable to use not just the kitchen but the

yard: “En bimeby hit got so Mars Marrabo's wife herse'f wuz skeered ter go out in de yard after dark” (58). McSwayne then converts the kitchen into a schoolhouse, a structure that is ostensibly more useful to the Black people on the plantation than the kitchen where they are forced to work. In the story’s present, the ghost story works on John’s wife Annie as well. Though she claims that she does not believe the ghost story, the lumber’s attachment to slavery and suffering are too much for her: “‘What a system it was,’ she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, "under which such things were possible!’” (60). When her husband asks if she really believes that Sandy turned into a tree, she replies “Oh, no,’… not that,” (60-61). She refuses to use the lumber from the schoolhouse for the new kitchen, and Julius has effectively secured the right to continue to use it as a meeting space for the Black people in the area. Though either Julius’ ghost story or his presence as a physical reminder of the cruelties of slavery, Annie realizes that his claim to that space is far stronger than her own.

In “Pantaloon in Black” and “Spunk,” hauntings reveal not just the physical damage done to mill workers but the disruption of life in a mill town, which was often structured to favor the availability of the labor of Black men over their ability to maintain stable families. Cowan claims that “the whole system was profoundly patriarchal” (85) and that mill towns often mimicked the plantation. Jones records that the white supremacist nature of the mill towns was slightly more complex, but that even as Black men exercised more social freedom, white employers attempted to control their behaviors by shaping their leisure activities and launching “ambitious anti-vice campaigns aimed at forcing working-class communities to comply with their new social policies” (62). In short, the white mill owner or employer still associated Black men with criminality and

sexuality and attempted to subjugate both their days and their nights to the demands of the machine. Both Spunk and Rider become caught up in the kind of "vices" made possible by the structure of the mill town, and the hauntings they experience attempt to call them back to their own humanity. Joe's ghost manifests Spunk's guilt for taking the wife of another man, but it also functions as the reminder that Spunk is not as free as the text has previously suggested. The ghost of Rider's wife Mannie does not haunt the mill but rather the home she and Rider rent from "the local white landowner," Carothers Edmonds, whose family owns much of Yoknapatawpha and likely enslaved the ancestors of the same Black people who rent from him in *Go Down, Moses*. Like the rest of Rider's family, Mannie wants to draw Rider away from the mechanical speed of the mill, gambling, and alcoholism and back to the home space. The ghosts of Joe Kanty and Mannie are not direct results of death at the mill, but rather reminders that the life of a mill town does not revolve around producing profit for white millers. Instead, their continued lives foreground the humanity of Black people by separating the human spirit from the dehumanized body in an ultimate rejection of fixity.

These literary strategies for Black reclamation of technology are imperfect, and in many cases they are unsuccessful. However, they demonstrate the increasing challenge that industrialization from the Civil War to the early twentieth century posed to a concrete racial hierarchy in the American South. Southern writers like Cather, Faulkner, Chesnutt, and Hurston challenged the consumption of Black people in southern mills early and often, and that challenge both shaped and reflected a growing anxiety about the moral certainties of white supremacy and segregation. In the next chapter, I will consider another convergence of technology and race that reflects this growing anxiety: electricity.

Electrification provided an opportunity to extend and ease southern ways of life, but literature about the phenomenon of electricity suggests that those benefits were uneven and used to increase control and surveillance of Black southerners. The following chapter considers the adoption of electricity and its spectrum of promise and violence as another literary strategy to loosen the grip of literal and figurative "white power" in the South. . .

CHAPTER 2

BLACK LUMINOSITY: ELECTRIFIED RACIAL BOUNDARIES IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, white supremacist literature used the setting and symbolism of the southern mill to set careful conditions on the narrative uses of technological advancement in the South. One major villain in Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905), Lydia Brown, also uses electricity to upend the power structure of the white home. Using a secret electric signal within the home she shares with Austin Stoneman, Lydia sends Stoneman messages and manages the home as its lady. Her control of the household alienates Stoneman's racist children, and her proximity to more technological, cosmopolitan spaces like the capital prefigures the novel's indictment of northern industrialism in favor of southern lifeways. Lydia's use of electricity, still a mysterious and sublime technology at the turn of the century, reflects her scandalous departure from her place as a servant of the household as well as her sensualized effects on the behavior of Austin Stoneman. The text thwarts her status as the most technologically sophisticated character in the novel (the only other character associated with electricity is Abraham Lincoln himself) by insisting upon her animal qualities: "his housekeeper, Lydia Brown, was a mulatto, a woman of extraordinary animal beauty and the fiery temper of a leopardess…. All sorts of gossip could be heard in Washington about this woman, her

jewels, her dresses, her airs, her assumption of the dignity of the presiding genius of National legislation and her domination of the old Commoner and his life" (57-58). Lydia's sinister presence in the home becomes more threatening as her electric communications, connected with her powerful influence over Stoneman, suggest that Reconstruction efforts intend to reverse, rather than dismantle, the racial hierarchy in the South. The novel dramatizes this imagined future by redirecting scientific and technological advancements to reinforce white supremacy. However, antiracist southern writers responded not only with resistance to the racial fixity represented by the mill, but also with reimaginations of the symbolic power of electricity to resist the new forms of surveillance and disenfranchisement that obstructed Black southerners.

Fifty years after the publication of the text that contains Lydia Brown's brief and easily overcome electrical subversion, the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) hoards lightbulbs and steals electricity from "Monopolated Light & Power," (7) a conglomerate that reflects the thorough integration of electricity into the American landscape. The narrator, who reclaims electrical power in resistance to oppression faced in both the North and the South, connects his right to steal electricity for his hidden home to the labor that he and the African American community have been forced to do to maintain white supremacy. For the narrator of *Invisible Man*, electrical power is both the source of and antidote to his oppression. He heals his trauma with creative, beneficial uses of electricity, though he remains isolated even after departing from the South. In this chapter, I will argue that movements toward future models of resistance to technological white supremacy suggested by *Invisible Man* are more firmly established in Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). *A Lesson Before Dying*, set in Louisiana in the

1940s, posits the electric chair as the logical conclusion of the white supremacy embedded in the South's technological grid. The literal and symbolic death sentence can be avoided, as *Invisible Man* suggests, by changing the direction of power that insists on subjugation and surveillance of Black southerners. *A Lesson Before Dying*, in conjunction with Ellison's work, suggests that stronger resistance to white supremacy requires scattering and diffusion of electricity and its potential for violence.

In the century following the publication of *The Clansman* and other white supremacist texts, electricity's incredible power continued to mystify, threaten, and inspire the nation. As Pursell has noted, white supremacist culture depended on the myth of "Negro disability" (xv) to conceptualize American advancement. Their dependence on this myth mirrors Morrison's description of Africanism, or white American literature's reliance on the presence of the African diaspora to establish its own identity (15-16). Discourse about electricity was grafted onto existing religious and scientific associations of darkness and light (Nye, *Technological Sublime* 2, 23). As with other forms of scientific racism, these early writings made spurious scientific claims and combined them with religious and social platitudes to support the continued subjugation of enslaved Americans. In 1861, *Debow's Review*, a southern magazine dedicated to agricultural, industrial, and commercial progress, published an "original contribution from the pen of Dr. Cartwright, of New Orleans," in which the doctor claims that "There are no free negroes in the Northern States, Canada, the West Indies or Africa. They are all in the service of Satan when deprived of the guardianship of the white man" (648). In 1863, the *American Phrenological Journal* also argued that Africans brought to Virginia and Carolina were going "north to the form of the white man" and "becoming a pale face just

as fast as the God of nature intended he should" (103). As "Where is the Voice Coming From?" (1963) demonstrates in the introduction to this dissertation, this logic of lightness, whiteness, and progress persisted, almost completely excluding Black Americans from the narratives of American advancement that developed later in the century.

Instead, Black Americans functioned in fiction as the fixed, permanent past against which white Americans evaluated modernity. Nye records that at the beginning of the century, when electricity was still a modern marvel rather than a familiar household necessity, World's Fairs and other exhibitions would display the wonders of electricity through racialized depictions: "Electrification was placed quite consciously at the apex of an evolutionary framework….One of the most common ways to illustrate progress was to evoke its opposite, primitiveness, and most exhibitions included 'ethnological' villages—compounds representing the life of Mexicans, Cubans, Black in the Old South, Filipinos, or Africans in the jungle…." (*Electrifying America* 35-36). These strategies of white supremacy coincide to form a literary and cultural tradition of white supremacy in the guise of neutral technology. White supremacist understandings of electricity appear as specifically white interpretations of the technological sublime, contributions to an "electric slave" trope that depicts slavery as a necessary evolutionary step that preceded industrialization, and the illumination of Black bodies to construct white racial identity. By the early twentieth century, one method of engagement with technology, what Nye calls the American technological sublime, often erased the suffering of Black people upon whose labor the South was built. The American technological sublime is not explicitly racialized—instead, Nye describes it as a uniquely American response to the

miracles performed by technology, the potential danger of that technology, and a general sense of awe at the rapid and astounding progress of America itself (*American Technological Sublime* 16). As examples, Nye uses World's Fairs (which would have been segregated in the South), large displays of electrical light like the "White Ways" studied by Harrison ("Extending the White Way" 968), and hydroelectric dams. The American technological sublime is unique from other forms of the sublime, according to Nye, because of the work it does to create or cement national identity (*Technological Sublime* 4). However, Black Americans at the time would have been excluded from that identity, leaving whiteness at the center of this particular form of the sublime.

There were also more quotidian ways of using narratives of electricity to whitewash the nation's racial sins. Lieberman records the pervasive cultural myth of the electric slave, a racialized language of electricity that encouraged the beliefs of white Americans that because of scientific advancement, they were no longer required to labor for their own survival. Instead, progress dictated that enslaved or underpaid laborers in American society would eventually be replaced by electricity. Lieberman records particularly racist ads for General Electric, one of which depicts an enslaved man labeled "electricity" chained to a post labeled "tools of the past." The advertisement is captioned, "I AM ELECTRICITY: Set Me Free – Then I Can Work For You" (*Power Lines* 182). This advertisement "exploits stereotypes of the shiftless slave" and "promotes the use of electricity ('tamed' by majority-white engineering firms) to replace work that was often performed by lower-class non-white people" (*Power Lines* 181). This advertising strategy was ubiquitous elsewhere, even in the South, where electricity had yet to be purchased on the scale that it was in the North. The pervasive suggestion that Black Americans are the

tools rather than the agents of technological change anticipates the mid-century strategies of electric companies and political leaders in the South, who saw that they could leverage the demand for electricity into political power to maintain the racial status quo (C Harrison, "Electric Conservatism" 341). Southern writers inherited a literary landscape in which electrification, especially the electric light and its accompanying markers of subjectivity, was inevitable, threatening, and inherently racialized.

In this chapter, I will consider southern writing by Black authors who expose and criticize the social and material consequences of electrification in the South. The electric light itself often masquerades as a case example of the neutrality of technology: carrying no meaning within itself, it simply illuminates. Even Marshall McLuhan, whose influential essay "The Medium is the Message" (1964) shook loose the entrenchment of technological neutrality in media studies, suggested that the lightbulb could be seen as "pure content" (1). Scholars after McLuhan, studying both electricity and its social meanings, have contended that electricity is value-laden and subject to criticism of the political, social, religious, and racial messages it carries (Hughes 9, Browne 15, Cubitt 310). Electrification's social consequences were multivalent, including both implementation of electrical systems that strongly favored white southerners and white southern resistance to federal interventions. In the wake of an electrification process that made integration seem inevitable, southern white supremacists developed unique social, rhetorical, and literary strategies to use electricity to secure white power. As Harrison states in his study of streetlighting in North Carolina, "The placement of street lighting closely corresponded with the location of more highly valued and protected white property, further enhancing its value and worth. African American neighborhoods were

confronted by the opposite effect – they circumscribed with light yet left largely unilluminated and devalued" ("Extending the White Way" 968). Harrison's article notes a material condition faced by Black southerners that is also a social condition long criticized by Black writers who recorded the electrification of the South: they are surrounded by light but struggle to use, possess, or control electricity for their own purposes. These writers subverted the symbolism of electricity, drawing attention away from the technological sublime and the promise of technological determinism and toward the surveillance of and violence against Black people's bodies that created the network of white supremacy in the South.

Electricity also served to turn racial differences into a spectacle that reinforced the superiority of whiteness. At the convergence of regional identity, racism, and economic investment in the maintenance of segregation and white supremacy, southern literature began to reveal electric or electrified systems of oppression in the industrializing South. That oppression was often material—as Harrison writes, pervasive racist beliefs in the South suggested that Black Americans were too "primitive" to need artificial lighting even in the 1930s ("Extending the White Way" 962). Electricity and electric light also became media for less overt psychological forms of surveillance and control. In *Dark Matters,* Browne describes "black luminosity," or the figurative and/or literal illumination of a Black person's body for the purpose of observation or manipulation by white society. Browne defines black luminosity as racialized boundary maintenance that "is intricately tied to knowing the black body, subjecting some to a high visibility, as Ellison put it, by way of technologies of seeing that sought to render the subject outside of the category of the human, *un*-visible" (67-68). This simultaneous hypervisiblity and

devaluation, similar to Harrison's finding that Black spaces are "circumscribed with light yet left largely unilluminated and devalued" ("Extending the White Way" 967), informs my reading of black luminosity in literature. These concepts relate to white control of technologies of vision like light and electricity. As I demonstrate in my reading of *Invisible Man*, one iteration of white control of technologies like electric light is to allow Black exceptionalism, encouraging it with very specific requirements, and creating a mechanistic system in which Black southerners surveil each other and themselves from the perspective of white supremacy. On the opposite end of the spectrum, represented by more violent uses of electricity in *A Lesson Before Dying*, a Black man who is not considered exceptional by the white supremacist structure dies because of the white South's implacable belief that Black men are primitive and criminal.

Both Ellison and Gaines explicate the technological oppression their characters face by linking their own presents, the novels' temporal settings, and the not-so-distant past of the plantation South. *Invisible Man* is set in and shortly before the 1930s, and *A Lesson Before Dying* is set in the 1940s. To consider the temporal distance between these novels' settings and publications, I will use Thadious Davis' concept of "chaining." In *Southscapes,* Davis writes that "Chaining is a way of constructing the working of space in Gaines' imaginary. The links form connective tissue carrying ideas both forward and backward along a time-space continuum, and the open space within each link forms the contained and shaped ideas that are pushed or pulled along with the motion of the links or that remain static when the links are unmoving and stable" (214). Davis' concept of chaining illuminates the complex temporality of these novels and many novels about the South by emphasizing the author's use of space to create simultaneous awareness of both

the past and the present. Davis coins this term specifically to explicate the pastness of Gaines' work because Gaines' multilayered and multitemporal depictions of Louisiana trouble the past even as they illuminate it. I will also use the term to discuss *Invisible Man*, especially the narrator's college, because the college occupies the space of the atrocities of slavery, the liberation attempts of people like the Founder, as well as the powerful network of white supremacy that thwarts racial progress by controlling technological progress.

In Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), Black men experience a white American culture that simultaneously uses narratives of progress to dehumanize them and uses technological apparatus to punish them for their presence in the South. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator becomes disillusioned with the fallacious logic of separate but equal, learning that the electric power plant started by his college's illustrious founder serves white supremacy more than the Black college students. The college considers the narrator an exceptional young Black man until he acts outside of the interests of the school's white benefactors. In response, the narrator begins to consider himself part of a machine meant to perpetuate white supremacy and begins to implement some technological forms of resistance. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson is excluded from modernity through both his blackness and his faulty education. He suspects his former teacher, Grant, of visiting him in the service of the racist justice system, of being "with 'em" and planning to "jeck that switch" (74). When he is inevitably found guilty at his trial, the electric chair hangs over Jefferson and his family as a form of technologized state-sanctioned violence that allows white supremacists to shift personal responsibility away from themselves.

In both texts, the indoctrination of white supremacy is represented by the education system. The narrator of *Invisible Man* and Grant, the narrator of *A Lesson Before Dying*, both come to understand the education system as the system that inculcates young Black people with southern white supremacy. In *Invisible Man*, the connection between electrical power and the education system is explicit. The narrator receives a college scholarship after being tortured with electricity by white "benefactors" and later attends a college like the Tuskegee Institute with a power plant on campus. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant also attends a college like Tuskegee Institute, where he reluctantly trains to teach in ways that he believes only reinforce the social codes of Jim Crow. His limited teaching contributes to the inability of Jefferson to avoid conflict with the justice system. Both texts reveal that in the Jim Crow South, only two possibilities for Black masculinity existed: exceptionality, associated with lightness and assimilation into white culture, and criminality, associated with darkness and primitive behaviors. These educational systems produced conditions of racialized surveillance as well as self-surveillance in both novels. Like the panopticon, the educational system trains characters to examine both themselves and others, using the threat of electric shock as a method of ensuring their compliance. As the narrator of *Invisible Man*, Grant, and Jefferson engage with technology in these texts, their awareness of technological and racial narratives is absorbed from their early experiences in southern schools. During these engagements with electrified technologies, the characters resist the cruel, single-directional nature of ethnocentric power and instead advocate a multi-directional, multivocal philosophy of technological power.

"I Discovered that I Could Contain the Electricity": Reclaimed Power in *Invisible Man*

In the prologue and other parts of the novel in which the narrator resides in the North on the outskirts of Harlem, his commentary on the relationship between electricity and privilege is direct. Monopolated Light & Power, the company from which he steals the electricity for the 1,639 light bulbs he has accumulated, is an obvious symbol of the confluence of economic, racial, and technological oppression. In the parts of the novel that deal with the South, however, the narrator's reflections on electricity and power are more nuanced—before the narrator realizes he is invisible, his experiences with electricity mark a painful process of seeing the system of white supremacy in the South clearly. The narrator's experiences as an exceptional young Black man in the South are dictated by white benefactors with sinister motives who, like the murderous narrator of Welty's "Where is the Voice Coming From?," operate in darkness while associating themselves with light. The strategies of white benevolence in the novel parallel Black relationships to electricity, and the novel exposes how electricity as well as narratives of modern respectability are wielded against Black characters. In *Invisible Man*, hyperawareness and surveillance of Blackness can turn Black communities against each other, giving literal and figurative power up to white supremacy.

Readings of electricity in *Invisible Man*, though plentiful, are often symbolic and consider neither the regional specificity of the first half of the novel nor its connections to material oppression of Black southerners through white control of electrical systems. In addition to Lieberman, who concludes her monograph with a reading of Ellison's "electrifying humanism" in *Invisible Man* and other writings (*Power Lines* 168), Herman

Beavers reads the mentions of electricity, Edison, Ford, and other figures of American technology as symbolic reference to the narrator's quest for reliance on his own resources (12-14). Douglas Ford and Johnnie Wilcox have also produced full-length readings of electricity in *Invisible Man*, and both agree that the narrator's use of electricity is subversive. Ford focuses on the "emancipatory possibilities" of electricity "as a sign of cultural energies bearing the potential for redirection" (888). Wilcox's reading makes electricity even more symbolic, calling it a symbol of capital while asserting the narrator as a "black cyborg subject" (987). Both readings are interested in the mechanical qualities of the narrator himself, and my argument shares many of their conclusions, especially Ford's focus on the narrator's ability to redirect electricity. Wilcox argues that the combination of the Black body with machinery makes the figure of the cyborg an empowering understanding of blackness, and in a similar but explicitly Afro-Futurist addition to *Invisible Man* scholarship, Lisa Yaszek claims that "Ellison's novel performs an important act of chronopolitical intervention into conventional thinking about the future" but "does not offer readers any alternative futures—black, white, or any other colour" (310). However, I believe that the novel's concerns are with resisting the mechanization of Black Americans, figuring them as controllers of electricity and not conductors. Thus, the future of African Americans relies on radical reclamation of their own natural resources, both material and nonmaterial, even if it initially results in isolation. The narrator of *Invisible Man*, though he perhaps does not enact the future himself, clarifies two factors of African American identity that will be regulated and transmitted through electricity: visibility and voice, which are regulated through light

bulbs and the phonograph in *Invisible Man* but, in later African American literature, expand to technologies like the radio and the electric chair in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Though the electrical themes of the novel are more pronounced in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, the narrator's encounter with the systematic nature of white supremacy begins when he is a young, gifted student in a segregated southern school. He is invited to repeat his graduation speech for a group of wealthy, white leaders of the community, and his family hopes that this sort of attention will validate him as a future leader of his community. However, these white men lure him into a space away from view of the community, sexually harass him and his peers by forcing them to watch a white woman perform in the nude, and then force the young boys to fight each other and scramble for electrified coins. These coins begin the novel's complex representation of electrification in the South. In the episode, the narrator and his schoolmates are forced to pick up money from a rug they discover has been electrified:

> I lunged for a yellow coin lying on the blue design of the carpet, touching it and sending a surprised shriek to join those rising around me. I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let it go. A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. The rug was electrified (27).

In the security of their own power and control over the space, the white men train these Black children to accept the system of white power that will attract, punish, and trap them like the electrified coin on the rug. The narrator attempts the path of least resistance, trying to pick up gold and paper money that conducts less electricity. He also discovers that he "could contain the electricity—a contradiction, but it works" (27). This strategy characterizes the narrator's early interactions with white supremacy. He accepts the

"luminosity" of being noticed by white society and absorbs the accompanying punishments.

The young narrator's speech reflects the accommodationist racial politics exemplified by Booker T. Washington. He begins his speech with Washington's famous "cast down your bucket" metaphor, suggesting that white southerners should take advantage of the "resource" of their Black neighbors (29). He absorbs the white men's threats and, believing in his strategy of the path of least resistance, follows their direction to the Negro college. However, their intentions are exposed by the narrator's memories and dreams of his grandfather. His grandfather, who practiced scrupulous racial humility, informed the narrator on his deathbed that this behavior was a disguise and that he was a "spy in the enemy's country" (16). The grandfather's interpretation of his own behavior mirrors what Browne calls "dark sousveillance," or specifically Black forms of countersurveilling white supremacy (22). When he receives the scholarship, the narrator does not yet understand his grandfather's advice, but he dreams that his grandfather reveals to him that his scholarship from the white men is intended to keep him "running" (33). The white men's intention to keep the narrator "running" suggests a reward for the physical distance required by segregation, but it is more importantly a mechanical term, suggesting both perpetual motion and functionality. The scholarship and the modicum of visibility afforded to the narrator give him just enough literal and metaphorical power to keep him running as a depersonalized part of a machine that serves the southern social structure, but not enough to assert his full civil rights.

White supremacist strategies for keeping Black southerners running as machines to benefit white supremacy abound at the college the narrator attends. One of these

strategies comes from the legacy of the "founder," a fictionalized Washington. The narrator's experiences at the college satirize narratives of white European progress as well as Washington's aspirations to earn a place in that narrative of progress. A power plant on college grounds generates electricity for the campus, and Tuskegee institute had a similar electricity initiative. Washington was deeply interested in promoting the student-built and student-run plant as evidence of the success of his educational theories. Arthur U. Craig, a professor whom Washington billed as the "first African American electrical engineer," was briefly central to this narrative. However, Lieberman records that Craig himself resisted this narrative and other parts of the Tuskegee philosophy. While Washington hoped to promote Craig as a symbol of the school's engagement with modernity, touting him in newspaper articles as the first Black electrical engineer, Craig himself was hesitant to accept this symbolic role. Uncovering Craig's letters from Washington's papers, Lieberman argues that Craig was actually far more concerned with the education his students were receiving. While Washington attempted to have students build and run a power plant that would attract money from white donors, Craig argued that the expectations of work and education were preventing his students from developing as individuals. Lieberman argues that Craig's approach both resisted his reduction to a symbol and emphasized teaching over other aspects of engineering: "Arthur Ulysses Craig did not want to embody progress. He wanted to ignite it. He was less invested in his own public persona than in the promise of transformative education" ("Arthur U. Craig" 81). Though Lieberman maintains the legitimacy of Washington's manipulation of American narratives of race and technology, she suggests that his attachment to the symbolism of the power plant ultimately thwarted Craig's pedagogical goals and may

have harmed students. Craig, who wanted to teach specifically so that he would not "become a mere machine" in an engineering position ("Arthur U. Craig" 74), eventually left Tuskegee because of his frustration with the mechanization of his students through the power plant.

Invisible Man highlights the dissonance between the practical experience of the students, who sometimes paid tuition by working in the power plant, and the rhetoric of the college about their production of electricity. The power plant makes the college famous, but it is also harmfully prescriptive—the students must literally and figuratively fuel the college's mission, or else they are discarded. In the novel, this prioritization of reputation over student success amounts to objectification. When Homer A. Barbee pauses in his speech about the history of the institution, the narrator can "hear the power engines far across the campus throbbing the night like an excited pulse" (132). Barbee characterizes the power plant as "marvelous," claiming that it supplies "power to an area larger than many towns—all operated by *black hands*. Thus, my young friends, does the light of the Founder still burn" (132-133). However, the light of the Founder must burn cleanly, meaning that all Black students must comply with the Founder's rather narrow rules for exceptionality.

The electrified, modern college campus filled with respectable young men and women contrasts with the cabin inhabited by Jim Trueblood, which was built before emancipation and remains in the area. Trueblood's character, surroundings, and behavior are "darker" (less modern, educated, moral, and electrified) than the college campus (Lieberman, *Power Lines* 190). However, the Trueblood scene, set against the whir of the generators on campus, chains the imagined modern space of the campus to what the

narrator calls “slavery times,” emphasizing that there has been no change in white consumption of Black identity. Trueblood’s abject, pre-industrial existence horrifies the Black leaders of the college, who tried to pay him to leave the area upon discovering that both his wife and his daughter were pregnant with his children. However, the white community insisted that Trueblood stay, and the scandal made him both highly visible and highly entertaining. He made money from his infamy, and in return, the white community reveled in the confirmation of their racial biases. Norton’s voyeuristic fascination with Trueblood is especially heinous—his barely disguised attraction to his own deceased daughter leads him to both despise and envy Trueblood. Properly illuminated and understood clearly, Norton is not Trueblood’s superior despite his success in the modern world. However, Trueblood’s story allows him to project his desires into the darkened space of Trueblood’s cabin just as the other whites in the community construct their own racial superiority by mocking the Trueblood family. For his “service,” Trueblood is showered with patronizing charity from white people, which embarrasses the college although it also operates with donations from white benefactors. Like the electrified money on the rug in the battle royal, this money is connected to a system of oppression that needs people like Trueblood, and later Jefferson, to function.

After he takes Norton to see Trueblood, the narrator is expelled from school because he does not understand or subscribe to the college’s strategic self-surveillance. The narrator cannot yet grasp the double standard of Black luminosity in the South—he must be fully visible to whites, but he must ensure that they see only what they want to see. After Mr. Norton meets Trueblood, Dr. Bledsoe explains to the narrator that he never should have allowed Mr. Norton to see a Black person like that—“Haven’t you the sense

God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense" (102). The narrator is shocked by Bledsoe's ethic, which emphasizes loyalty to neither white benefactors nor his Black students but rather power itself: "you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it!" (145). Bledsoe has leveraged the illuminated borders of his own racialization, allowing white benefactors to use him as a site of self-definition in exchange for power. However, the racialized border has isolated him, and to keep "running," he exposes and expels his own students, ultimately failing in his responsibility to create opportunities for their empowerment.

After his time at the southern college, the narrator comes to understand himself as part of a racialized system and to resist the strategy of absorption that he once espoused. Once he leaves the South, he begins to form a strategy for reclaiming both electric light and narratives about Blackness in the United States, using the specific legacy of the American inventor (often a white northerner) to contest the literary trope of the exceptional Black man. During the narrator's "hibernation" in his hidden apartment just outside of Harlem, he begins to both steal electricity and "tinker" (7). The theft of electricity, or rather the restoration of stolen property, reflects a more ethical use of the resources of Black people. Using Davis' concept of chaining, I argue that Ellison predicts this reclamation by imbuing his southern space with layers of the past. The space's ties to slavery and exploitation are evident in the narrator's Edenic memories of the appearance of the college where he was rejected and traumatized. The space recalls the legacy of slavery and white supremacist consumption of Black talent. He operates an automobile, a

common symbol of American freedom, in the service of Mr. Norton, and he takes Mr. Norton to two places associated with the consumption of Black lives and trauma for white benefit—both Trueblood's cabin and the Golden Day. At the Golden Day, the veterans live with the psychological side effects of both war and continued racism. These acts of consumption, timeless except for their technological markers, are the open spaces in the chain linked by the shadow of the campus power plant. The narrator and preceding generations of enslaved and exploited Black Americans produced the conditions upon which the United States built the electrical grid. Their labor powers both the North and South, and the narrator's theft simply redirects his own power back toward himself.

In the prologue, the narrator accompanies his theft with a description of himself as a tinker and an inventor. The narrator's brief claim is a near-revolutionary reimagination of the Black Americans' relationship with technology, as the American inventor is one of the most sacredly white and masculine figures in the country's consciousness. The narrator claims that "Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a 'thinker-tinker.'" (7). The narrator's claim is more than delusion because it adopts Ford, Edison, and Franklin as models for his own behavior. These men were considered technological geniuses, and Edison especially is credited with the discovery or invention of devices that were stolen or copied from other inventors. Perhaps most importantly, these men represented a new figure on the American cultural scene—the engineer. The engineer's stereotypical qualities were the complete opposite of the narrator's social role. The engineer was not beholden to social norms or the values of the past—they were considered exempt from many social norms because of their genius, and

they were expected to design new ways of living (Tichi 99). The qualities of the engineer—intelligence, independence, foresight, technological prowess—were inextricably linked to whiteness. In contrast, the type of Black American typified by Booker T. Washington would learn trades rather than invent. Though Washington and others would be interested in learning from giants like Edison and Ford to demonstrate Black people's technical competence, they may hesitate to immediately claim Black leadership in these areas. When he claims kinship with Ford, Edison, and Franklin, the narrator identifies himself as a visionary, radically rejecting the limits placed on him by scientific racism. Thus, Ellison's narrator marks two strategies common in reclamations of technology in Black southern literature: first, to take back the power and resources that the Black community produces, and second, to figure Black characters as theorists of technology rather than technologies themselves. The narrator of *A Lesson Before Dying*, a similarly exceptional Black man named Grant, also educated at a southern college like Tuskegee, inherits those strategies and tries to help Jefferson, a young Black man awaiting the electric chair, implement them in a southern space.

The narrator's "warm hole" full of stolen electricity provides a solution to the trauma he has faced by removing his body from the reach of the white supremacist system in both the South and the North. Despite his awareness of its facilitation of white supremacy, the narrator of *Invisible Man* removes narratives of darkness and lightness from their racial associations and claims to love electric light: "And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form…without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well" (6-7). Unlike the

college that tries to mimic white forms of electrical and light production, the narrator steals electricity back and creates his own, individual expression. One of the major criticisms of the novel, however, is that the narrator's isolation provides no model for the future of African American involvement with a racist system. The narrator's vision of the future is admittedly unclear, but his marijuana trip, which merges his senses and allows him to "hear the silence of sound" (13), suggests that his vision for the future will move him from an obsession with light and visibility to a concern with sound and audibility. Though the narrator rejoices in the amount of light in his hole, he acknowledges a certain "acoustical deadness" (7). That deadness is supplemented by electricity once more in the form of the phonograph: the narrator has one phonograph, but plans to have five, so he can "hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time" (8). The phonograph carries the voice of Louis Armstrong into the hole and has the distinct advantage of not requiring bodily presence. The technology of the phonograph and the radio allow Black voices to connect with each other while still regulating their visibility to the white community, which holds the promise of relative safety as well as successful community formation. Significant progress toward hearing "around corners" (13) is made in Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, in which Jefferson's voicelessness is given "form" by his radio and other electrical forms of connection with his community.

"Jeck that Switch": Connection and Resistance in A Lesson Before Dying

Alternative impacts of Black luminosity surface in *A Lesson Before Dying* when Jefferson is reduced to an inhuman conductor of electricity and suffers a predestined, state sanctioned murder via "Gruesome Gerty," Louisiana's travelling electric chair. Both

Grant and Jefferson represent the types of Black men that the southern white supremacist system exploits. Grant, talented enough to be manipulated by the promise of upward mobility, is allowed to teach but not given the resources or freedom to properly educate his students. Jefferson, almost illiterate and with a reputation for low intelligence, is a victim of the school's lack of resources, but he has learned exactly what white supremacy wanted to teach him—the inferiority and precarity of his own life. The novel identifies both tropes as potentially subversive, and Grant himself eventually sees Jefferson as the kind of "race man" he could never become. Like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, both Grant and Jefferson's negotiations of their community identities are marked by their own luminosity and their engagements with electricity. Their engagements with electricity reflect how their racialized existences have become, like Browne describes, a highly visible site at which white people work out their own ideas of race.

Jefferson's life before and after imprisonment is characterized by a lack of electrical power until he is killed by the overwhelming electrical power of the state. In Miss Emma's home, where Jefferson grew up with his Nannan, Grant finds a single light bulb in the center of the room almost identical to the one in Jefferson's cell. However, when Grant visits Emma, he finds that she relies instead on the fire in her hearth, which Grant notes gives "about as much fire as a candle would" (76). In this dimly-lit room, Grant realizes that his Tante Lou and Jefferson's Nannan Emma have cast him as a sort of Prometheus, tasked to bring education and humanity to his community because of his talent. In this scene, the contrast between Emma's fire and her light bulb suggests the futility of her aging worldview. While Jefferson knows that Lou and Emma believe that he can change their circumstances through a certain type of religious and intellectual

leadership, he is also aware that modernity has thwarted their hopes for a southern Black Prometheus. In this scene, Grant attempts to bring light to the room by stuffing Emma's fireplace with as many logs as he can carry. His endeavors are not enough—modernity requires that he engage with the network, not simply the flame. Like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, Grant must learn to contain the current of the system of power and accept the disrespect of the Sheriff to reach Jefferson.

Jefferson's jail cell contains a single hanging light bulb and a single high window. The single light bulb, according to the diary Jefferson leaves Grant, is not always on, and Jefferson does not control the light switch. He records the sheriff asking if he wants his light on all night. The sheriff, who came to Jefferson's cell to try and influence him to speak well of him in the diary, responds to Jefferson's request for light by making what seems like a mocking connection between the light and the chair: "he ax me if i want the lite to stay on all nite in case i want rite som mo an i tol him yesir and he say all rite i coud have all the lite i want" (233). Despite the Sheriff's mocking tone, Jefferson does use the electricity he is afforded to illuminate both his own circumstances and his identity. In his journal, he successfully reverses the technological gaze of the penal system. The justice system, represented by the nameless, faceless governor and the electric chair, identifies Jefferson as an inhuman hog, a simple conductor for the chair's electricity to close the circuit of white supremacy. Jefferson's journal resists these attempts to use his criminality as a border to reinforce whiteness. According to the system created by white supremacy, Grant and Jefferson go to the two places created for Black men in a white supremacist society—the accommodationist school and the prison.

By crafting alternative connections, Jefferson and Grant reimagine the possibilities for their mechanized existences.

Like Trueblood, whites in the community use Jefferson as a symbol for backwardness and primitivism. Jefferson seems uniquely conflated with the past, and even his attorney uses late nineteenth century scientific racism like phrenology: "Do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence?" (7). To the attorney, Jefferson's mistake is intrinsic, an African-descended man's fundamental inability to understand modern white society. Jefferson's fate is, in fact, systemic. When Mr. Gropé, who might have been allowed to tell the truth because he is white, dies on the floor of the grocery store, Jefferson sees himself clearly from the perspective of the police. He considers using the telephone to try and exercise his own voice before he is seen at the crime scene, but he has never had access to a telephone and does not know how to use it. Unable to make use of the telephone network, Jefferson realizes flight is his only option. When he is caught, his community knows that despite his innocence, he will be sacrificed to white supremacy. The kind of flight enacted by Grant's parents during the beginnings of the Great Migration or Nancy in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is almost as unacceptable to the white power structure as the murder Jefferson did not commit.

Because of their positions in relation to Black luminosity, Jefferson and Grant behave in highly circumscribed ways. Grant resents the expectations of his Black elders and detests the system in which he must operate to be allowed to see Jefferson. Like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, Grant must become a mechanical, subservient man—waiting at doorsteps, entering only through the back door, using grammar that is slightly less correct

than the whites who speak to him, and visiting white people exactly when he is summoned. The white people around him create opportunities to remind him of his place, using false politeness and the weight of social etiquette to test the limits of Grant's humanity. Like Jefferson, and like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, Grant considers flight, but instead he continues absorbing the shocks of the white power system, eventually allowing Jefferson to redirect some of that energy. Jefferson has been deeply wounded by the role he plays in the justice system and acts like a hog in prison because, he says, "That's all I'm is" (122). Like Grant, Jefferson is at once playing and resisting his prescribed role. The tension between their societal roles keeps the two men apart, but their eventual connection reveals a full circuit of Black community that provides an alternative source of power within the text.

The text mimics the electrical grid that powers both the tools of the community and the electric chair by carefully regulating characters' movements and connections. Though they are also rural, the white southerners function with much more ease: their grid has more connections and possible paths, their movements are more fluid, and they have the power to enact their desires. White characters can disrupt the flow of Black life at will—for example, Grant is often summoned to the Pichot home by a messenger and expected to leave his students during school hours. Black characters have certain, limited paths—Grant goes back and forth from Bayonne to the quarter, Jefferson goes from his cell to the dayroom, and Emma goes from the quarter to the prison. Their crossings, usually initiated by Lou and Emma, bring energy to some part of the community that is lacking in it. At another end of the community's grid, in Bayonne at the Rainbow Club, Vivian's interactions with Grant allow him to bring her compassion back to Jefferson

though she and Jefferson have never met. Though it has almost no relationship to the prison or the school, the Rainbow Club is one of the major crossing points in the novel because it supplies both the literal and metaphorical currents that allow Grant and Jefferson to connect. Like the Golden Day in *Invisible Man*, which is named after a technological utopia in a work by Lewis Mumford (Lieberman, *Power Lines* 192), the Rainbow Club is a peripheral shelter for characters who are dissatisfied with the southern social structure. Though people at the Rainbow Club rarely discuss Jefferson or his plight, they are all aware of the work Grant is doing. Everyone, including Jefferson himself, understands Jefferson through the electric chair: he is a dead man, and he was dead the moment he came into proximity with a white man's corpse. However, the people in the Rainbow Club generate alternative ways of seeing and hearing about Jefferson.

When two mixed-race men at the Rainbow Club depict Jefferson as another Black criminal who disrupts their aspirations to whiteness, they offer to commit the same kind of technological proxy-surveillance offered to Norton by Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*. In response to their casual violence toward Jefferson, their desire to throw the switch themselves on behalf of the white power structure, Grant physically attacks them. Though they try to stop the violence, it is clear that the owners of the Rainbow Club have organized their space to protect Grant (and by extension Jefferson) from the kind of racialized self-surveillance represented by the mixed-race bricklayers. The owners' name for their establishment, the Rainbow Club, suggests aspirations of ending racism and the kind of colorism experienced by Vivian and Grant because of Vivian's lighter skin tone. However, the rainbow also suggests the full visible spectrum of electromagnetic light. This light-oriented name, as well as the efforts of those who go there to know and be

known, suggests a multidirectional alternative to the type of one-way vision exemplified by the rest of the novel. The rainbow suggests a scattering of light and the possibility that the characters can see and be seen on an individual basis. The type of connection depicted in the Rainbow Club, on that does not rely entirely on the permission of powerful white men, causes disruption of the social order in Louisiana.

The Rainbow Club also produces the major technological tool that Jefferson and Grant use to disrupt the power of the electric chair: Jefferson's radio. The radio, both an owned object and a conductor of information, constitutes Jefferson's status as a citizen in a new way. Understanding the differences between both access and ownership for Black and white southerners, Grant is careful to make the radio as much Jefferson's own as he can. Using the money collected at the Rainbow Club, Grant insists to the radio saleswoman that he wants a new, boxed radio. She does not want to sell him a new radio, instead offering him the sales floor sample that has been handled by customers. Grant insists on a new one, though his small assertion of power is interrupted when a white woman comes into the store and is served immediately. Eventually, Grant receives a new radio and procures that batteries that the Sheriff will refuse to provide. The batteries, which will provide electrical power to the radio, have important symbolic and practical function to Jefferson and Grant because they ensure that Jefferson will not have to rely on literal power sources at the prison to operate his radio.

For the framework of this essay, the content of the radio is secondary to its function as a node in Jefferson's community network. However, the content of the radio seems to present a threat to Jefferson's pastor, who believes that Grant has presented Jefferson with a "sin box" (181). Like the sermon of Homer Barbee in *Invisible Man*,

Reverend Ambrose uses religious prescriptions for behavior to identify an acceptable type of Black man and ensures that behavior through pastoral oversight. Though Lou supports the Reverend, his attempts to surface Jefferson's humanity rely on a structure that is fundamentally tied to white supremacy. By trying to block out "sin," Reverend Ambrose engages in the type of automatic self-surveillance that white supremacy has embedded into Black southern communities. The reverend's religious strategy, like the sermon about the power plant on the college's campus in *Invisible Man*, suggests that certain religious and technological behaviors can mitigate racism by proving (though ever-changing and duplicitous criteria) that Black people are worthy of respect. By trying to deflect Jefferson's sources of knowledge and human connection, the Reverend wants to point him toward a single source of light in the sense of religious belief. This strategy functions well for the Reverend, as Grant later realizes that the Reverend has continued to engage with the painful tradition of white supremacy to redirect the benefits of religion to the congregation: "He is going to use *their* God to give him strength" (249). However, the reappropriation of religion that empowered their ancestors is a smaller part of the network that empowers Grant and Jefferson, who want a wider field of vision and multiple avenues to consider and express their experience. The radio, with multiple channels including Blues, country, and sports, provides multiple sources of knowledge and connection. In contrast to the single direction of the "charges" of religious instruction, surveillance, and the electric chair, the radio provides opportunity for both safety and recognition.

At the end of his life, Jefferson has learned how to use electricity to redirect the danger of the electric chair. The importance of the phonograph and the radio is

anticipated by Ellison in *Invisible Man* as a way to unite African Americans in shared experience whether or not their bodies are physically present and in the same location. Lawrence Levine records in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* that the phonograph and the radio united northern and southern African Americans despite their previous physical limitations:

> At first the musical variations were shuttled back and forth from North to South and city to country like the migratory patterns of so many southern blacks; ultimately the phonograph and the radio played central roles in the constant process of syncretization. The result was that black music had no single locus; it existed wherever Negroes did. (201)

Thus, the boundary between North and South gives way to a boundary that the narrator of *Invisible Man* establishes in his hole: those who "really listen" to music like Louis Armstrong's and those who don't. Although Ford suggests blues as a medium through which history can be rewritten (998), the medium of music in these novels is secondary to its content: the voices of Black people. The radio and phonograph connect African Americans not only through songs and sermons, but through news of African American heroes such as Joe Louis and Jack Johnson (Levine 433-435). Through the radio, Jefferson will continue to live in the memory of his community, and his story will likely continue to expand the network of those who choose to listen to Black voices. Jefferson even enlists Paul, the white police officer in charge of his imprisonment, in this subversion. Jefferson wants to leave his radio to Paul, but Paul instead passes it on to the other inmates, perhaps recognizing not only the effect of the radio on Jefferson but his own place in the proper use of it. Although "the radio was silent" (244) on the day of

Jefferson's execution, the novel ends with hope that the radio will soon be turned on again. The grip of the oppressive prison system will be loosened for the prisoners who survive Jefferson by the radio and by the memories conducted through it. The radio teaches him, consciously or unconsciously, that electricity can be harnessed by Black voices—it can be arranged into a narrative. Jefferson goes on to choose to create his own narrative in his journal and, finally chooses to demand his own narrative, to create his own light from the electricity which threatens him, with his final words: "tell Nannan I walked" (254).

The electric chair makes the pervasive nature of white supremacy in the town a sensory experience. The gruesome parade of the electric chair ends at the front door of the courthouse (a door which the Black citizens of the town would not have been able to use). Witnesses to it respond with fear, but white citizens seem to believe that they have no responsibility for its presence. One white citizen jokes to a Black man who works at the jail that "he had better watch himself, or maybe they would have to bring Gerty back for him to sit in her lap" (241). A white bank teller tells a customer that her child sensed the community's discomfort and fear and asked what would happen at the jail, but that she told him the sheriff had to "put an old bad [Black man] away" (243). Many white women also perform excessive horror at the sound and appearance of the chair, but they and their husbands simply remove themselves from the range of hearing and sight. The sound of the generator persists, filling the town from noon until the time of Jefferson's execution.

Jefferson's radio, his attachment to it, and the wider Black community's connection to him through it counter the similarly pervasive power of the electric chair.

The portable electric chair, Gruesome Gerty, arrives on the back of a truck and travels from the state's center of power to the town courthouse. Its invisible but audible presence expands throughout the town, and the people in Bayonne have complex reactions to it. For white residents, the experience of the electric chair is almost completely depersonalized—Jefferson's death is automatic, nothing can be done about it, and most importantly, those individual white people feel confident that they are not responsible. The text tries to reverse the impersonal, single-directional nature of this power through the characters' attempts to see the white power structure. Jefferson constantly asks for the details of his execution. Grant grapples with the impersonality of the justice system—"Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice?" (156). He emphasizes that the men in charge of Jefferson's death have not met him, but his question highlights that there are also thirteen individuals who set this "inevitability" into motion. Gaines uses the Black community's sense of personal grief to illuminate white delusions about their culpability in this violence. In the penultimate chapter, amongst a set of vignettes that show how different spaces in the town face the day of the execution, Gaines describes the Sheriff: "This was the first time he was in charge of an execution, and he was praying that everything would go well" (238). As the Reverend and Tante Lou pray that Emma can survive her grief, the Sheriff's prayer that he will kill Jefferson successfully exposes the blasphemy of white supremacy and reveals that despite the Sheriff's easy access to technologies of vision, he does not see Jefferson at all.

Though the electric chair represents pervasive white supremacy and does kill Jefferson, it also functions as a technology for the text to countersurveil the casual,

violent racism of white Louisianans. Gaines was inspired to write Jefferson by his memory of the killings of Emmett Till and Willie Francis, but he was also fascinated with the travelling electric chair that Louisiana used for executions during his childhood (Lowe 309). However, his literary allusions to the murders of both Till and Francis (whose life and execution are more similar to Jefferson's than Till's is) emphasize a mid-twentieth century shift in private and public executions of Black people. According to Michael Trotti, the movement from public, open executions and lynchings to private executions inside of prisons functioned as a way for the state to hide its guilt and allow citizens to ignore the cruelty of executions. It also, importantly, denied the victim of execution the opportunity to see and address the public (96). Miss Emma, who would have grown up in an era of public lynching and executions, refuses to allow the state to execute Jefferson with no witnesses and no acknowledgement of his humanity. Though her access to power is limited, her actions throughout the novel subvert the privacy of white supremacy, forcing it to either make itself known or consent to her requests that Reverend Ambrose and others witness Jefferson's death.

Though most white citizens choose not to witness Jefferson's executions, and those who do stay in town do so for the sake of spectacle, the electrical charge that causes Jefferson's death does make it possible for at least some white citizens to consider their own actions. Paul reports to Grant that Jefferson did walk as his Nannan had hoped, adding "I heard the two jolts, but I wouldn't look up. I'll never forget the sound of that generator as long as I live on that earth" (254). Paul did not visually witness Jefferson's death, but he heard it, and it brought him closer to recognizing Jefferson's humanity and seeing his own relationship to white supremacy. The auditory connection initiates hope

for a later, more sustained connection between Paul and the Black community. More importantly, it suggests to him that power over Black lives belongs in Black hands. Though Jefferson wants to give Paul the radio, Paul understands that he has no right to take it. Instead, he places it in the dayroom for the other prisons, adding the technological "window" of the radio to the metaphorical light allowed into the dayroom. Paul also declines to open Jefferson's diary without permission, instead asking Grant if he can read it one day. Paul's modified behavior suggests that although he is not ready to look directly at white supremacy, he is open the uses of technology that Grant and Jefferson theorize, especially those that use technology to secure rather than invade privacy.

Conclusion

Taken together, these novels can be read as part of an alternative literary lineage for technology in the American South. Instead of depicting technological innovation, especially electricity, as the endpoint of a trajectory of white progress leading from slavery to automated "electric" slaves, the novels consider how technology hides the continuation of slavery and cruelty. In *Invisible Man*, this subterfuge appears as the mechanization of exceptional Black children to keep white supremacy running. The Black community's attempts to acquire power, represented by the power plant, fail because they imitate a white power structure that requires them to surveil their own community. The narrator's later theft of light bulbs to "give form" to his own invisibility is more successful because it acknowledges his own ownership of and creativity with the technology. Similar ingenuity is displayed by Jefferson, who supplements the single bulb in his cell with auditory window provided by his radio, and the Rainbow Club, which

operates like a prism to deflect both intrusions of white supremacy and accommodationist self-surveillance.

Both novels directly challenge the American technological sublime by revising the kind of national identity manufactured through technological marvels. Like Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy" revised southern pastoralism by imbuing the horrors of slavery into the trees of the forest, these novels challenge the American reader's sublime feelings about electricity. Nye reworks the sublime to represent its impact on an industrialized America: "Where Kant had reasoned that the awe inspired by a sublime object made men aware of their moral worth, the American sublime transformed the individual's experience of immensity and awe into a belief in national greatness" (*Technological Sublime* 43). Both Ellison and Gaines, raised in the context of the electrifying landscape of the South, are keenly aware that national greatness is difficult to extricate from national whiteness. In *Invisible Man*, the Founder's desire for grandeur through the power plant is undercut by the cruel, petty behavior of the school's administration. The school's attempts to participate in the symbolic display of man's power over darkness (Nye, *Technological Sublime* 144) mock the idea of a sublime, electrified South. The school's power plant requires the mistreatment of Black students but will still not be accepted as part of the white South. *A Lesson Before Dying* takes the electrical sublime to its most fearful consequence in the electric chair, using the idea of electrical spectacle applied directly to the human body to question the character of the nation that produced such a display. Grant tries to communicate the terror of the chair to his students, whose experience with electricity is so limited that they struggle to comprehend:

> "Do you all know what is going to happen to someone just like you who sat right where you're sitting only a few years ago? All right, I'll tell you. They're going to kill him in Bayonne. They're going to sit him in a chair, they're going to tie him down with straps, they're going to connect wires to his head, to his wrists, to his legs, and they're going to shoot electricity through the wires into his body until he's dead" (39).

Grant's anger, the students' fear, and Paul's later promise that he will never forget the sound of Jefferson's electrocution contrast with the sublimity experienced by white southerners as they realize the enormity of the electric chair, which is intended to both symbolize their power and protect their whiteness. The Black experience of electricity, which Nye says can serve as a symbolic double for the larger concept of technology in America (*Technological Sublime* 172), emphasizes the embodied consequences of narratives of American triumph over the "darkness" (144).

Both novels thwart technological determinism by using the electrical grid to chain past and present southern cruelty. Slavery is never out of sight and never quite in the past. In *Invisible Man*, the doctor at the Golden Day invokes the electric slave trope by telling the narrator that he has become a "mechanical man," an unfeeling machine who replicates the patterns of slavery despite his aspirations to racial equality (94). The campus of the college, like Bayonne and the quarter, is deliberately difficult to place in time because of the spatial remnants of the plantation. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the spaces inhabited primarily by Grant and his community are still called the quarter and the plantation. According to Davis, "the past is not merely a temporal sign in Gaines but a configuration of and platform for a black space that stems from the plantation as an

architectural as well as imaginative structure with slavery and segregation shaping and influencing its boundaries and its interiority" (215). By chaining slavery, Jim Crow, and his own present together, Gaines creates a multilayered space much like the space of the college campus in *Invisible Man*. In both texts, chaining also serves to highlight and criticize technological advancements—the function of electricity in each novel's temporal spaces seems to be to perpetuate centuries-old ways of understanding Black identity even as it hurtles white Americans into a future of perceived democracy and individual freedom.

The use of electric light theorized by these novels is multidirectional and requires the consent of the illuminated person. Instead of power flowing from a single source, these novels imagine scattered sources of power that move where power is needed rather than accruing in one place. Jefferson's small radio, passed from the community at the Rainbow Club, to Jefferson's cell, to the dayroom with the other prisoners, defies the fear-spreading power of Gruesome Gerty's generator. Electricity is neither neutral nor democratizing while it is under white control, and these novels provide a model for democratization through reclaiming, decentralizing, and fully considering the human consequences of electrified southern spaces. Their models are disrupted, of course, by the pervasive charges of white supremacy that continue to limit the choices of Black southerners, forcing people like the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Jefferson to absorb the negative effects of electricity. Formed on these principles, the electrical grid contributes to the carefully constructed, but still precarious, regional and racial boundaries of the South.

In both novels, technological oppression of Black Americans becomes increasingly less traceable to a white agent. While in literature about the mill, the plantation owner or miller was clearly complicit in the suffering of Black mill workers, both *Invisible Man* and *A Lesson Before Dying* consider the distance that white individuals create between themselves and white supremacy. In *Invisible Man,* Mr. Norton uses Dr. Bledsoe to punish the narrator while claiming to personally forgive him for his disruption of Norton's racial fantasies. When he inhabits a more technological world, the narrator battles with Monopolated Light & Power as an impersonal system representing white supremacy. Likewise, Jefferson is sentenced by a white judge and jury who never appear in the text, and he is killed by the electric chair although the white people who operate it claim that they do not want to do so. In this way, the texts demonstrate that white supremacy in the South can leverage technological change to elide the individual white person's complicity in Jim Crow. In the following chapter, automobiles appear as another contested space for the perpetuation or perforation of regional and racial borders in the South, often creating opportunities for the enactment of southern white supremacist principles in the absence of a clear human agent. Texts about race and automobility like Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* consider what the freedoms of the automobile can offer to firmly fixed, highly surveilled Black men in the American South.

CHAPTER 3

MOBILE WHITE SUPREMACY: RACIAL AND SPATIAL BOUNDARIES OF SOUTHERN AUTOMOBILE CULTURE

Introduction

The automobile, an enduring symbol of American freedom and individuality, often reads as both an object of desire and a space of danger in southern literature. Frank Owlsley borrowed the image of the automobile for his metonymic denunciation of industrialization as a "Juggernaut" that "drove his car across the South" (91) in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Faulkner's Ike McCaslin bemoans the shrinking of the forest that makes longer and longer automobile trips necessary each time he goes hunting. In southern literature, transportation technology is always more fraught than other technologies—technology that facilitates travel can facilitate flight from the South, and as Quentin Compson famously learns in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), flight from the South is at once physically possible and psychologically impossible. Other southern writers, like Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, and Yusef Komunyakaa, adopted the symbol of the automobile as a method for understanding and perhaps controlling the driver's own southern identity. Southern literature predicts, depicts, and condemns a legacy of white supremacist vehicular violence against Black southerners. In this chapter, I will consider how literary narratives of automobility reflect white southern anxiety about regional identity and race. The works of writers like O'Connor, Hurston,

Komunyakaa, and August Wilson suggest that when the automobile perforated the South's racial and geographic borders, white supremacist control of the region became both more difficult to enact and more difficult to expose.

Though automotive citizenship (Clarke 166) was eventually available to most Americans regardless of race or gender, the character of the driver in southern literature was most often white and male. Clarke and Cotten Seiler have established that in American automobile culture, the automobile carried connotations of masculinity, virility, and freedom of both movement and thought (Clarke 41-46, Seiler 55-57). These qualities, though desirable to southern men at the beginning of the twentieth century, collided with existing literary questions of the South's place in the nation after industrialization. While the Agrarians believed that technology would destroy both the South's regional specificity and its ability to produce art, modernist writers like O'Connor and Hurston used the automobile to predict and explore new kinds of technological Souths. The automobile's unique combination of motion and vision appeared in southern literature as a new medium through which to consider the speed and direction of the New South. The presence of the automobile in literature also raised questions of the driver, their gender, their race, and their relationship to the ghosts of the South's past.

The advent of the automobile radically altered American perceptions of space, time, and individuality. The automobile's promise lay in its situation as both a personally owned machine that allowed freedom of movement and a temporary space that shielded the driver from some of the expectations of the space through which they travelled. As the automobile provided a way to conquer space, southern writers concerned with the

nature of southern space had to contend with the automobile as both an object and a form of altered perception. In the South, the automobile's potential for seemingly endless movement challenged southern power structures that depended on very particular and hierarchical relationships to the land. Automobiles contributed to the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South, and author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston recorded white resistance to Black movement:

> Do what they would, the State, County and City all over the South could do little to halt the stampede. The cry of "Goin' Nawth" hung over the land like the wail over Egypt at the death of the first-born. The railroad stations might be watched, but there could be no effective censorship over the mails. No one could keep track of the movements of cars and wagons and mules and men walking. Railroads, hardroads, dirt roads, side roads, roads were in the minds of the black South and all roads led North. (*Jonah's Gourd Vine* 151)

Hurston's meditation on the Great Migration, the "wail over Egypt" (151) that lasted from the early 1910s to the 1970s, reflects her deep understanding, established in my earlier reading of her short story "Spunk," of white supremacy's need to keep Black southerners figuratively and literally attached to the land. In southern literature, the automobile can represent and dramatize this racial tension at the same time that it expresses the uneven development and aspirations of the region.

While many southerners were thrilled by the idea of the automobile even if it was unlikely that they could purchase one, there were particularly southern objections to the new transportation technology. Faulkner fictionalizes this feeling amongst the southern aristocracy in *The Reivers,* when the elder Lucius Priest purchases an automobile for

reasons of social status in 1905 and then promptly locks it away, refusing to even drive it into his garage (30-32). Soon after, though, automobiles became somewhat common—Seiler records that "in 1900, there were some eight thousand registered automobiles in the United States; by 1929, the number was over 23.1 million" (36). Tammy Ingram adds that "Registrations in the South, which had lagged behind the rest of the country before the Model T, caught up by 1910 and continued to rise thereafter. In Georgia, automobile ownership rose more than 60 percent in a single year, increasing from 12,919 in 1913 to nearly 21,000 in 1914, and in North Carolina, ownership more than doubled that same year" (31-32). The ownership of an automobile might suggest a certain class position, but the ability of anyone with enough money to purchase an automobile challenged existing class and race structures in the South.

The material impact of the popularity of the automobile manifested in the South through the exponential increase in the number of roads. The building of roads in the South was a necessarily politicized and racialized process, and many southerners resisted the federal interference in segregation that would come with federal assistance to build roads. Howard Lawrence Preston records that southerners at the turn of the century were interested in the development of "good roads" for reasons that reinforced their existing ways of life—good roads made farming and the transportation of agricultural goods easier (4). However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Preston links good roads in the South to progressivism, tourism, and perhaps even national homogenization. Southerners believed, he argues, that the creation of good roads would lead to development on par with the rest of the nation, which continued to view the South as backward (8). Despite public enthusiasm and even patriotic "holidays" in which

communities donated their own time to work on roads, the South developed slowly, not in the least because some Agrarians resisted infrastructural development as a departure from the South's values (Preston 16-18). These unevenly developed roads reflected a "radically uneven development" (Taylor 319) of the South as an artistic and intellectual region, and they marked both psychological and practical borders—once other Americans reached a place that was impassable because of outdated roads, they associated the lack of infrastructure with a lack of modern values, affirming the inaccessible South as an imaginary, premodern space in their minds.

When powerful white southerners did pursue roadbuilding to counteract their regional reputation, most of the roads in the South were built by the labor of African Americans. Chain gangs built most of the new roads in the South between their popularization around 1900 and their decline in the 1930s. These chain gangs were predominately if not exclusively Black, and white prisoners on chain gangs were often referred to by the same racial slurs as Black prisoners, emphasizing the Southern white supremacist belief that Blackness was a perpetual state of inferiority (Ingram 138). Like sharecropping, the chain gang system were operated after Reconstruction to ensure that the white South could continue to exploit Black labor. Ingram records that "Along with new segregationist Jim Crow laws and extralegal racialized violence, convict leasing and chain gangs were used to simultaneously restore white supremacy and rebuild southern industry and infrastructure" (130). Southern roads were built in other ways, including required days on which able-bodied men in a county were expected to volunteer to build roads in their own communities, but white southern voters overwhelmingly supported the convict lease system instead (Ingram 130). Though the convict lease system existed

throughout the country, it was far more common in the South, and Ingram argues that it was deployed specifically to reinstate antebellum social order (135). Even in this new, modern South, Black Americans suffered to build infrastructure that benefitted white Americans. Only the comforts of modernity were attractive to white supremacists, and the accompanying values of democracy and equality were not welcome. However, those roads eventually allowed both escape from the South and the establishment of new federal funding and ideas in the South, functionally perforating the strict boundary of control that white supremacists had maintained in the nineteenth century.

The social impact of automobiles raised concerns about citizenship, agency, and sexuality, and the simple act of a Black person purchasing an automobile was an affront to the southern racial order. In *Making Whiteness*, Hale summarizes the racial anxiety of white supremacists who were threatened by the purchasing power of Black southerners in the twentieth century: "What could segregation signs do in the face of such movement? What was the meaning of inferiority when a southern black could simply get into his better car and ride?" (192-193). Literal movement was a threat, but southern whites were perhaps more threatened by the Black automobile owner's ability to claim for themselves the subjectivity and agency that accompanied the automobile. Other modernizing technologies, like the mill and electricity, had been carefully developed within the South to prevent the unsanctioned movement of Black southerners, but once purchased, the automobile itself could hardly be controlled. There were measures in place to prevent Black freedom in southern spaces, but according to Cotten Seiler, there was "some truth" to the promise of automobility for Black Americans: "Despite the violence and intimidation directed toward black drivers, the road even in its earlier iteration had to

some degree provided a space where the everyday discrimination and coercion African Americans faced in other public spaces… could be blunted, circumvented, and even avenged" (125). The subsequent battle for subjectivity, as white supremacy tried to mitigate the democratizing abilities of the automobile, was at least partially fought in literature.

As I have argued in my first two chapters, power structures in the South were highly aware of the region's ambivalent place in the narrative of national progress. The South, functioning as the "nation's region" (Duck 3-5), was imagined by the rest of the nation as a fixed place in which both the idealized and embarrassing parts of the nation's past remained in the present. Driving to the South, in the northern literary imagination, functioned as time travel. The windshield of a vehicle functioned as a screen to separate the "modern" American from the southerner (Black or white) while simultaneously allowing those non-southerners to view, criticize, and narrate the South. In *The Cruise of the Rolling Junk* (1924), F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests to his wife Zelda that they drive South to acquire peaches and biscuits (and, perhaps, become beautiful, pleasant, and happy). He believes that he is proposing time travel: "I began to draw an ethereal picture—of how we would roll southward along the glittering boulevards of many cities, then, by way of quiet lanes and fragrant hollows whose honeysuckle branches would ruffle our hair with white sweet fingers, into red and dusty-colored country towns…" (30). He does not propose a journey into the literal South, but into the mythical one. However, northern projections onto the South like Fitzgerald's often contributed to the South's ambivalence toward automobility.

The automobile, along with the drivers' new perspective of time and place, posed multiple threats to the less-industrialized South. Ingram notes that "early automobiles were playthings for wealthy metropolitans who liked to flee the confines of the city for weekend drives. Farmers, however, detested the loud, dangerous 'devil wagons' that zipped through the countryside tearing up dirt roads and frightening— and sometimes striking— livestock" (24). The development of the road system threatened the South with federal interference, national homogenization, and integration. Schulman records that the automobile was so popular and the need for good roads so pressing that "At no time since the Civil War had southern political leaders more acutely felt the need to shield themselves from the interference of the national government, but at no other time had they been so powerless to do so" (125-126). Because of the power of the automobile as technology, consumer item, and vantage point from which the nation began to understand itself, the white supremacist South supported the development of roads and turned to narrative and political methods to make sure that, like the mill, this new technology operated in the service of whiteness.

Southern literary understandings of automobility very often, whether consciously or unconsciously, kept African Americans out of the driver's seat. In literature, depictions of white automobility often included the fixity of Black southerners. *Tobacco Road* contains a scene in which a poor white couple, obsessed with their new vehicle, slams into a carriage and kills its African American driver. The driver is blamed for his lack of speed – "If he hadn't been asleep on the wagon it wouldn't have happened at all. He was plumb asleep till it woke him up and threw him out in the ditch" (159). To the family still focused entirely on the automobile, the man's death is a natural consequence of speed.

Dude's father Jeeter reasons that Black men "will get killed. Looks like there ain't no way to stop it" (159). Caldwell draws attention to white southerners' understanding of Black suffering as collateral damage for their own quality of life. This poor white family's very literal sacrifice of a Black man to modernity and its accompanying speed suggests that though technology in the South has evolved, white southerners' understanding of Black subjectivity has not.

The remainder of this chapter will consider southern literary contestations of southern roads and the automobiles that inhabited them. In southern literature, the broken, malfunctioning, or otherwise unsuitable automobile becomes a symbol of the South's inability to participate fully in modernity. As Cecilia Tichi notes, novels are an appropriate place for inquiry about the social impact of new technologies, as "novelists have the task of encoding culture in word choices that represent the vanguard of contemporary consciousness" (27). In the South, this "vanguard" of consciousness was especially varied, and fiction, poetry, and drama about automobility used formal understandings of speed and movement, metaphors of masculinity and sexuality, and the automobile as an imaginative space within the already imagined space of the South to consider these changes. The texts in this chapter consider regional and racial additions to Tichi's claim, suggesting that the idea of the "gear-and-girder" was not running as smoothly in the South. In Yusef Komunyakaa's "History Lessons," (1992) the automobile appears as a weapon of more than figurative violence throughout twentieth century Mississippi. In Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953), backseat driving by the grandmother causes an automobile accident that leads to the murders of a white, southern family. In Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1933) and August

Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987), Black ownership of automobiles is similarly thwarted or doomed. Bad roads and junk automobiles mark the South's engagement with modernity—halting and hampered by its own faulty design.

"History Lessons" of Vehicular Violence

One common response to the mobility of Black southerners was increased vehicular violence, and the automobile was both an aspirational object and an ever-present danger for Black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. In Yusef Komunyakaa's *Magic City*, a collection of poems about the author's childhood in Louisiana in the 1940s, Komunyakaa remembers the centrality of automobiles in his life as both a space to explore adolescent sexuality and an instrument of violence. The collection's central poem, "History Lessons," is a poetic narrative of three instances in which a young man learns about his community's history from a woman companion, and each stanza is marked by the threatening presence of a weaponized automobile. The poem juxtaposes images of nature and family life in Louisiana with moments in which the narrator learns about the constant danger he is in because of his race. In the first, the narrator enjoys a bucolic scene under a tree until his companion points out the remnants of a rope used to conduct a lynching:

> …Twenty-five
>
> Years earlier it had been a stage for half the town:
>
> Cain & poor whites at a picnic on saint augustine
>
> Grass. No, I couldn't see the piece of blonde rope (4-7).

The enjambment between "twenty-five" and "years" leaves space for the speaker to register how recently the lynching occurred. Similarly, the images in the poem are

difficult to place in time—the courthouse lawn, the tree, and even a weather-worn rope lack temporal markers. The final lines of the stanza establish that the barbarity of lynching is the South's recent past: "That was where they prodded him / Up into the flatbed of a pickup" (12-13). Again, enjambment works to surprise the reader and challenge assumptions about the "modern" South. In the previous line, the man is "prodded" as if he were an enslaved African at auction or a prisoner. Immediately after, the reader is presented with "the flatbed of a pickup," an object so quotidian and modern that its use in a lynching shatters the idea of the automobile's neutrality.

In the following stanza, the narrator enjoys a picnic of common southern food—"coffee & chicory with lots of milk, / Hoecakes, bacon, & gooseberry jam" (14-15)—while his companion tells him about the attempted rape of a white woman and subsequent lynching of an innocent Black boxer. A white woman, she tells him, shot a man who broke into her home, and the white citizens went out to look for a (necessarily Black) perpetrator. The vehicles in this stanza emphasize the imbalance of power between white and Black southerners as the vehicles appear to track down the offender:

> How their car lights crawled sage fields
> Midnight to daybreak, how a young black boxer
> Was running & punching the air at sunrise,
> How they tarred & feathered him & dragged the corpse
> Behind a Model T through the Mill Quarters,
> How they dumped the prizefighter on his mother's doorstep, … (18-23)

The car headlights provide a vehicular enhancement of the electrical methods of surveillance discussed in the previous chapter. Combining technological mobility and

technological vision, the lights invade the natural space of the sage fields. Their power reinforced by their ownership of powerful machines, the drivers of the car (who, in the poem, seem fused with the car itself) decide the identity of the rapist. They use a Model T, the ultimate symbol of (white) American ingenuity, to brutally murder the man. The dragging behind a Model T, a modern addition to a traditional tarring and feathering, emphasizes that social equality is not an automatic consequence of technological progress. The murder victim in the stanza is innocent, it turns out, and a group of young boys later find the real rapist, in blackface with a bullet in his chest, under a train trestle. The car lights, not intended for the surveillance of whiteness, overlooked the actual criminal because the white citizens of the town had operated those cars to search for their own imagined expectation of a hypersexual, violent Black man.

Like in Welty's "Where is the Voice Coming From?," the final stanza of "History Lessons" positions automobile ownership as an antidote to white men's class- and race-based resentment of Black people, moving from physical violence to the threats inherent in maintaining the hierarchical status of white masculinity. In this stanza, the narrator witnesses race-based aggression against an older woman:

> When I stepped out on the back porch
> The pick-up man from Bogalusa Dry Cleaners
> Leaned against his van, with an armload
> Of her Sunday dresses, telling her
> Emmett Till had begged for it
> With his damn wolf whistle.

She was looking at the lye-scoured floor,

White as his face (29-35).

White supremacy has invaded the speaker's home space: his guardian has enough money to hire the dry cleaner, but the white man is simply the dry cleaner's driver. The driver corrects what he views as an economic power imbalance by reminding the Black family of his ability to enact violence against them. His comments about Emmett Till's death are calculated to remind the family that his race secures him power that no amount of money can give them. The narrator responds by yelling at the pick-up man, but because of his automobility, the pick-up man does not have to face any consequences. His threat completed, he drives away:

& my fists were cocked,

Hammers in the air. He popped

The clutch when he turned the corner,

As she pulled me into her arms

& whispered, *Son, you ain't gonna live long.* (37-41)

The pick-up man's faith in his own automobile-assisted masculinity is pathetic to both the reader and narrator, who see clearly that the man is drawing personal power from his use of the van even though the vehicle belongs to his employer, and he must use it to pick up a Black woman's dry cleaning. However, the mother in the stanza understands that the white man's fear of his own worthlessness poses great danger to her son.

Komunyakaa, presenting the automobile through poetry, provides a countermemory of the technological development of the South. The poem also suggests the use of the vehicle as a marker of agency, a tool of aggression, and a complicated

"medium" through which the changing South is imagined. Southern writers observed the South and others through the automobile, wrote about ownership of the automobile and its attendant racialized meanings, and questioned the social structures onto which roads were mapped. Komunyakaa's *Magic City*, as well as August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* at the end of the chapter, provide contemporary accounts of mid-twentieth century engagements with technology. I include these texts with "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* to emphasize both the persistent nature of these technological narratives and the creativity of later African American writers in establishing countermemories of early technologies. The interplay between these texts emphasizes the circuitous, flexible success of white supremacy on American roads—there are movements toward liberation, but the kind of constant forward trajectory suggested by technological determinism does not exist for Black drivers.

Passive White Supremacy in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Flannery O'Connor's southern gothic road trip story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" demonstrates a literary use of the vehicle to both navigate the driver's and passengers' southern identity and to fix marginalized southerners outside of the South's trajectory of progress. The automobile in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" predicts the consequence of faith in the automobile as part of a white southern family's self-conception: it ends in a violent crash. The short story is dependent on the automobile and generational understandings of the unique space of the vehicle. The driver, Bailey, understands the vehicle as evidence of common American class aspirations. Bailey has the capital to both purchase an automobile and take his family to Florida, but the narrative embellishments of automobile ownership and the road trip—a compliant,

harmonious family and an enjoyable road experience—elude him. His family's racial and generational identities interfere with his expression of the automobile as an extension of his power. The automobile facilitates this conflict—like the form of the short story itself, the automobile forces these southerners to confront both their forward velocity and the drag of their past.

Bailey's children, June Star and John Wesley, understand the car as a machine that excuses them from understanding or regarding the spaces they cross: "Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much" (119). The children's faith in the car, like America's faith in the automobility of the future, is evident—they believe it will take them where they need to go in as little time as possible. Conversely, the grandmother's understanding of speed reflects what Robert Rea identifies as a generation gap (171). In a family relationship completely mediated by the automobile, the generation gap manifests as a difference in philosophies of technology. For the younger family, the automobile is a liminal space in which they wait between real events—the movement outside the vehicle means little in comparison to the experience of owning and using the vehicle itself. For the grandmother, the automobile is a space in (or through) which she can try to recreate home dynamics. She brings an animal who does not belong inside the physical apparatus of the automobile, but she also brings narratives of southern identity that do not take into account that the automobile is not a stationary home and cannot be sustained by the same narrative mechanisms.

The grandmother's presence in the vehicle interferes with its forward trajectory. She troubles the homogeneously American space of the vehicle with her insistence on regional specificity. The grandmother's valuation of southern spaces focuses on the

familiar rather than the new, and she insists that her grandchildren should want to travel to spaces that reinforce their "connections" to people and ideas of the past: "In my time," said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then" (119). Through her line of vision in the automobile, she tries to reclaim southern space as something under white control. When Bailey drives past a Black child on the roadside, she treats him as entertainment: "'Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!' she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. 'Wouldn't that make a picture, now?'" (119). Using the automobile window as a vantage point as she moves past the child in both space and time, the grandmother flattens his identity: "If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (119). The children join her in their roles as moving observers, reducing the child to both a roadside image and a fixed point from which to admire their own class and race. After witnessing the spectacle of their own privilege in contrast to the disadvantaged child, the children become more susceptible to the grandmother's narratives of the Old South.

In the vehicle, both the grandmother and the children mimic the role of the flâneur/flâneuse, described by Anne Friedberg as a person who exercises a mobile, virtual gaze within the context of the modern city (33). Friedberg's work draws a gendered distinction between the flâneur and the flâneuse—the flâneur is an empowered subject within modernity, and the flâneuse is often the object of his gaze. An unencumbered flâneuse, according to Friedberg, is relatively rare and usually requires some construction of modernity and consumerism (like shopping or tourism) to empower her (35-36). In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the vehicle owned by the family facilitates the grandmother

and the children's flânerie. However, the southern context of modernity dramatically changes Friedberg's conception of the flâneur/flâneuse—the family, supposedly modern through their ownership of the automobile, have a different relationship to modernity because of their southernness. While they consider the relatively rural parts of Georgia through which they drive, they are also aware of the rest of the nation's belief in their backwardness. In rejecting both states, John Wesley says "Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground…. And Georgia is a lousy state too" (119). This ambivalent flânerie manifests in the grandmother insisting on the superiority of her southern manners and racial caste system, but also in the children giving voice to their relative superiority over other southerners. When the wife of Red Sammy, owner and mascot of the roadside diner at which the family stops, playfully asks June Star if she would like to stay and be her little girl, June Star replies, "No I certainly wouldn't…. I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" (121). Though the family has exited the vehicle to eat, they want to maintain the psychological distance from the landscape that the vehicle affords them. While they pass through this space, the children do not feel any kinship to it. The grandmother scolds June Star for her failure of manners but also rejects Red Sammy and his wife as peers—instead, they are fixed spectacles like the young Black boy on the roadside, but they are also opportunities for the grandmother to perform a southern lady's condescension to her inferiors.

Though the grandmother, allegorically, may be read as an embodiment of the South's past that creates drag as the family moves forward, this reading does not consider the automobile's role in fixing Black southerners to the landscape. In "Flannery O'Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture," Patricia Yaeger relates the grandmother's

fascination with the past directly to the story's violence: "O'Connor represents a society that is incapable of supporting its bodies. Her bodies disintegrate, become part-bodies devoid of even the contradictory ideology that went into their making" (204). The violence of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," according to Yaeger, is inseparable from the violence of white supremacy. Yaeger positions O'Connor as both critical of and complicit in southern white supremacy, adding that the violence in this short story is analogous to the textual and personal "cutting" that characterizes O'Connor's violent fiction (193). Yaeger notes that: "This is not to argue that O'Connor writes as a militant radical, or even as a redeemed integrationist, but simply to suggest that, by turning the sadistic allure of her stories into a masochistic machinery that gobbles up her readers as well, she produces terrifying elegies for a system that lives but does not work" (204). In this abbreviated reading of violence in the text, Yaeger does not consider the violence enacted by the automobile itself—before the Misfit, the automobile mangles the bodies of the white southern family. But violence suggested or enacted by an automobile is difficult to notice in literature. The house that the family is looking for was built by enslaved people, and Yaeger notes that O'Connor's own home in Georgia was built by enslaved people. However, the road that the family travels from Atlanta to Florida, very likely highway 75 or some part of the route that would become highway 75, was largely built by mostly Black prison labor in the form of chain gangs, a modern extension of slavery (Ingram 133). Their accident collapses these forms of violence, bringing the road into focus as a space that does not guarantee freedom for all.

The family's death and their preceding automobile accident refute both their ability to function within modernity and their passive white supremacy. After the

accident, the children's attention is once again redirected to the actual apparatus of the automobile: "'We've had an ACCIDENT!'" the children screamed in a frenzy of delight" (125). The children, entertained by the spectacle of the crash, are delighted by the consequences of the speed of modernity. Even the crash reinforces their focus on their cinematic sense of their own identity. However, the automobile crash quickly decenters the family as the empowered viewers of the landscape. Their sense of safety in their whiteness and consumerism is damaged along with the car. When the Misfit appears, the grandmother's faith in their shared whiteness is shattered by violence. Instead of allying himself with the family and their white middle class values, the Misfit kills them, reducing them to a roadside spectacle. The Misfit, though he is also white, has suffered from a southern prison system designed to punish Black southerners. His work on the chain gang and other forms of traumatization at the hands of the prison system suggest that he has some small experiential knowledge of the system primarily designed to maintain white supremacy and hide the persistence of slavery after emancipation. Whether the Misfit also benefitted from white supremacy during his prison time, which is likely, he seems to have unlearned both his racial and religious alliance to people like the grandmother and her family. When she tries to claim him as her child, he shoots her. Symbolically, this violence matches the type of cutting and slashing that the family has committed on their road trip, reducing other individuals to their race or class identities. Their murder is a reversal of the fixity white supremacy imposes on others to secure its forward trajectory.

"A Chevrolet Would Uh Done Me": *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and Black Automobility

Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* explores Black masculine mobility and automobility in a space that, like the southern town in "Spunk," centers Black experience and lives. Hurston, whose anthropological studies were facilitated by her car ownership, understood the varied meanings of transportation technology in Black life (Pettinger 177). Her automobile was both a barrier to and a facilitator of her anthropological work, representing both her position in a different world from the people she interviewed and a means by which to connect with them. The class tension created by the automobile is reflected in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. John, a young, attractive, and poor mixed-race man, is initially attracted to movement through his interactions with trains. Work on the railroad, as well as his white father's false benevolence, provides him some class mobility. When John marries a wealthy woman, however, he receives a car as an anniversary gift. The Cadillac mobilizes John in dangerous ways, proving a moving vantage point for the text to conclude its meditations on distance, community, and sexuality.

John's interactions with the train at the beginning of the novel parallel the progress of the South's relationship to technology. The first time he sees a train as a young man, his fear is in keeping with stereotypes about Black southerners as primitive and incapable of understanding modernity. However, more enlightened friends educate him about the train, and he soon becomes fascinated with it. His first ride on a train is a revelation about self, place, and power:

> To him nothing in the world ever quite equaled that first ride on a train…the glory lay all over him for hours at a time. He marveled that just anybody could come along and be allowed to get on such a glorified thing. It ought to be extra special.

> He got off the train at every stop so that he could stand off a piece and feast his eyes on the engine. The greatest accumulation of power that he had ever seen. (104)

John's reaction to the train, coupled with his terror on his first sighting of it, captures the phenomenon of the technological sublime at that point in the American South's history. He feels fear, awe, and perhaps even love for the power represented by the train. Despite his size and strength, John is surprisingly humbled by the train. This reflects, I suggest, the racial differences in the experience of the American technological sublime. Where, as Nye suggests, white Americans' sense of patriotism and progress are enhanced by the wonders of the railroad, electricity, and the skyscraper (*Technological Sublime* 37-43), a Black American may have a justified suspicion that he is not included in such progress. John wonders, in fact, why "just anybody" would be allowed on something as sublime as a train, reflecting a sense among Black southerners that their relationship with technology is gatekept by whites.

To counteract white narratives of technology in *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* some Black characters suggest a countermemory of technology's development in the United States. Their countermemory is based upon their own knowledge that primarily Black southerners built the infrastructure—railroads and roads—of which white Americans are so proud. Within their own communities, Black southerners are widely aware of the theft of their labor and their intellectual property. Discussing the relationship between Booker T. Washington and President Roosevelt, two young Black men say that Washington

> Built uh great big ole school wuth uh thousand dollars, maybe mo'" (138). They continue, "Teddy wuz allus sendin' fuh 'im tuh hit 'im tuh he'p 'im run de

> Guv'ment. Yeah man, dat's de way it 'tis—[Black people] think up eve'ything good and de white folks steal it from us. Dass right. [A Black man] invented de train. White man seen it and run right off and made him one jes' lak it and told eve'ybody be thought it up. Same way wid 'lectwicity (138).

While not entirely factual, this piece of community lore expresses a long tradition of theft that is corroborated by Pursell in *A Hammer in Their Hands* (21-22). Black southerners were often not allowed to hold patents, and the people who enslaved them were allowed to profit from their inventions (22). Though these unnamed characters have no proof of these particular claims, they are metaphorically true—white people have thwarted Black southern attempts at movement, represented by the train, and power, represented by electricity.

John's father, a white landowner named Judge Alf Pearson, is the first gatekeeper of technology that John encounters. John's relationship to mobility is shaped by Alf and the stereotypes he sees in John. In fact, the judge seems to delight in John's resemblance to him, treating John like an avatar of his own youth. Though he is disappointed in the intellectual pursuits of his white son, Alf mirthfully sexualizes John, calling him a "walking orgasm" (50). Alf's understanding of movement is predicated on white convenience. For example, when he meets John, he mentions that he is surprised that Amy, John's mother, would want to move away after Emancipation. Amy's proximity to Alf was convenient for him, and he believes that the privileges his family gave Amy while he took sexual advantage of her amounted to treating her well. Her exercise of free movement and consenting marriage to a sharecropper after Emancipation, then, seemed

to breach the type of contract that white landowners who viewed themselves as benevolent believed that they had with formerly enslaved Americans.

Judge Pearson, operating from his own (mis)understanding of Black American movement, teaches John a principle of movement that shapes John's use of the both the train and the automobile: "distance is the only cure for certain diseases" (99). John takes this definition of distance as well-meaning, if not paternal, advice. John's need for escape comes from a disagreement with the husband of a woman who continues to pursue John sexually—though John is emotionally dedicated to his wife Lucy, he struggles to decline the advances of the women in his community, and he is consistently sexualized and objectified by almost everyone who meets him. When his conflict with the woman's husband becomes violent, Judge Pearson is faced with the inconvenience of either allowing John to face criminal consequences or using his influence with other white men to help John, perhaps even admitting that John is his son. Instead, he chooses to remove John from his space. He tells John that his problems with both women and the police can be solved by distance, giving him fifty dollars and suggesting, "I know a man who could put lots of distance between him and this place before [midnight], even wearing his two best suits—one over the other. He wouldn't fool with baggage because it would hold him back. He would get to a railroad twenty-five or thirty miles off" (100). His father's advice teaches him to see distance as a way of avoiding consequences and transportation technology as tools of perpetual new identities. Those technologies, however, are not designed for John to use them in that way—no amount of vehicular speed can release him from his responsibilities to his community.

After fleeing town, John finds work on the railroad that allows him to send for his wife Lucy and settle down in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida. Lucy, a symbol for the type of domestication that the man of the automobile age wants to flee, is highly intelligent, responsible, and business-minded. She leads John to become a prominent citizen in Eatonville, and many of the town's citizens envy both his social position and his wife. John separates his pride in his wife and his desire for other women neatly—to him, his role as a husband and preacher and his desires as a "natchel man" (122) have considerable distance between them. He continues to apply distance as a solution—when one of his daughters is dying, John tells Lucy that he must leave town until after her death because he cannot watch his child die. His daughter recovers, but not before John uses his grief as an excuse to spend a week in Tampa "away from God" (118) and in the company of Hattie Tyson. While he preaches in Eatonville, he keeps Hattie as a mistress in Oviedo, seemingly believing that the physical distance will mitigate the consequences of infidelity. Of course, his commitment to his own right of free movement punishes both his family and community, who are affected by John's actions during his long absences. Once Lucy dies and takes John's claim to respectability with her, the town becomes more vocal in their disapproval of their pastor, and John flees.

At the end of the novel, John's habitual movement is once again arrested by love and marriage. John prays for Lucy's return and meets Sally Lovelace, whom he considers a sort of reincarnation of Lucy. Sally, who falls in love with John immediately upon hiring him to do work on her houses, holds a surplus of the factors of stable domesticity that were often denied to Black southerners. Sally has inherited several homes from her deceased husband, and she has continued the business of renting the homes out during

her widowhood. When John begins courting her, she assures him that she has enough money and stability for them both, and she urges him to marry her so that he can take a position preaching at a local church. Her resources provide an opportunity for John to rejoin a community without facing the harm he caused in his former community. John's new church, which he intends to use as an endpoint to his physical and moral wandering, is already named "Pilgrim's Rest." Sally assures him that she will shield him from any rumors that come to Pilgrim's Rest from Eatonton. John accepts and restarts the life he lost when he betrayed Lucy. John treats women as if they fall into two categories matching his level of mobility: women for traveling (Hattie, Big 'Oman, Ora) and women for settling (Lucy and Sally). He believes that Lucy would be pleased by his new marriage, which he hopes will keep him in place and purge his guilt: "Let Lucy see it too, Lawd," he prays, "so she kin rest" (191).

On the first anniversary of their marriage, Sally buys John a Cadillac. Like his initial experiences with the train, John is humbled by ownership of the Cadillac. He tells his wife that a less expensive vehicle would have suited him: "But a Chevrolet would uh done me. You didn't hafta go buy no Cadillac" (193). The cultural meanings of luxury and utilitarian automobile brands had already developed by the 1930s, and John's expression of disbelief at the Cadillac suggests a cultural imaginary in which it was not possible for Black men from John's impoverished background to own Cadillacs. Sally's purchase of the vehicle, however, is radical: she does so with her own money and without her husband's permission. The choice of a Cadillac reflects her sense that she has a right to participate in modernity, but her use (or disuse) of the vehicle is curiously domestic. She sees the purchase of the vehicle as a way to nurture John, telling him that she "ain't

got a chick nor a chile" (193) except for him, and John is the sole object of her domestic endeavors. Sally's understanding of her relationship to the car includes buying it as a space for her husband, but she will not use it. She tells John to use the new automobile to return to Sanford and show his old community his new life, but when John assumes she will join him, she refuses: "Me? I ain't goin'. Ah got mah guava jelly tuh put up. Ah don't trust ridin' so fur in dese cars, nohow" (193). Sally's understanding of her own relationship to mobility reinforces John's belief that wives are stable, fixed points that make masculine movement possible. Despite his protests that he does not want to spend a night away from her, Sally sends John forth in the Cadillac, believing that in the space of the car, John's identity as her husband will remain stable.

Mobility, once more, dissolves John's sense of connection to his home space. The automobile in particular imbues him with a sense of his own sexual and financial power. At first, he attempts to frame his control of these aspects of his identity as acts of service to his wife: as he travels, he thinks of how he will return and show Sally how carefully he spent his money. He also tells Hambo that he no longer feels sexual desire for anyone but his wife: "Ahm lak de cemetery. Ahm takin' in, but never no put out. 'Ceptin tuh Sally" (196). The influence of the automobile and its sexual possibilities soon dissolve John's boundaries. He begins spending money more freely and soon veers into the path of Ora, a woman whose obsession with money and automobiles reflects the stereotype of woman that John both fears and cannot resist. Ora voices John's sense of the sexual power his automobile grants him, and her pleading for "a ride" makes the Cadillac, purchased by Sally, yet another space in which John tries to exercise his sexual desires without disrupting his home space.

Ora, highly sexual and highly mobile, challenges domesticity and claims modernity for herself despite its associations with masculinity. She aggressively pursues John, calling him "stingy papa" when he hesitates to give her a ride in the Cadillac. Once he relents, she moves on to asking if she can drive it: "Lawd! Ah wonder how it feels to be drivin' uh great big ole 'Kitty" (196). Unlike Sally, Ora feels capable of driving and desires distance. John reads Ora's desire for mobility as inherently sexual, and Ora uses his attraction to her advantage, trying to gain more time in the automobile by sexualizing their time in the car together: "Dat's right sweet daddy. Let de wheels roll, Ah loves cars. Ride me 'til I sweat" (197). She eventually secures a ride with John, and he reacts to his own weakness with violence against Ora, shoving her from his moving vehicle and leaving her in Oviedo. Both Ora and her body are disposable to John—however, Ora seems to understand the trade she has made to exercise mobility in modernity. While she does not know why John is so angry that he received the sexual encounter he desired, she dismisses his anger: "Ah been strainin' up tuh git tuh Oviedo fuh de last longest and here Ah is….He done lef' me right were Ah wants tuh be, wid pay-day at de packin' house tuhmorrer. Jes' lak de rabbit in de briar patch" (199-200). Ora, though unable to purchase her own vehicle, has successfully leveraged automobility to place herself in what she sees as a better financial position. She intends, like John, to place distance between herself and traditional expectations of Black femininity. After leaving another mistress on the road, John attempts to flee back to the home space, hoping it will remain unchanged by his actions in the Cadillac. Though John regrets his infidelity, his faith in the road as a space of freedom remains: "The car droned, 'ho-o-ome' and tortured the man. False pretender! Outside show to the world! Soon he would be in the shelter of Sally's presence. Faith and

no questions asked" (200). Sally will not question his behavior while traveling because she believes in the Cadillac as an extension of their domestic space, but John's operation of the vehicle has altered the boundaries of their union.

John's sudden death occurs on his way home from his tryst with Ora in Oviedo. He drives his car onto a train track and is killed by the speeding train. This occurs, as the text says, while John is looking "inward" and not at the road ahead of him (200). Unlike characters in texts like "Pantaloon in Black" and "History Lessons," John is not lynched or killed by a white supremacist. John shares several qualities with these men—he is noticeably stronger and more attractive than his peers, and the few white men he does encounter are threatened by him. However, John is killed accidentally by a train. My reading of this text, set against the novel's treatment of the Great Migration and other forms of transience (Yitah 19), is that the white supremacist organization of the South has led to a conclusion in which John cannot exist. John is literally and figuratively removed from modernity via the train accident. His death ends his exercise in mobility and subjectivity, and the white community can blame his death on his inability to operate a vehicle. Though John and his automobility are primarily perceived by Black communities throughout the novel, the end of his life is mediated through the perspective of whiteness.

To the train conductor, John's death is both an interruption to the smooth transitions of modernity and a personal inconvenience. When John drives his car onto the railroad track, he literally disrupts modernity by placing an automobile where it should not be and blocking the train. The development of both roads and railroads in the South carried with it a philosophy of organized space, and John's presence at the crossroad and his lack of attention to the road caused a violent disruption. The train conductor, still

viewing the South and its racial politics from the train engine, sees John's behavior through racial stereotypes. Since John does not smell like liquor, the train conductor relies on another stereotype of Black southerners by asserting that John must have been asleep—"He musta been sleep or drunk. God knows I blowed for him when I saw him entering on the track. He wasn't drunk. Couldn't smell no likker on him, so he musta been asleep" (200). His reliance on stereotypes helps ease his fear for his job, which is contingent on his compliance with the speed of modernity: "Hell, now I'm on the carpet for carelessness, but I got witnesses I blowed" (200). The text does not include consequences for the train conductor, but the remainder of the text is consumed by the community impact of John's reduction to an interruption of modernity. While his family grieves, the machines that destroyed John's body return to motion.

Extending Southern Space in The Piano Lesson

Though connections between the African American diaspora like the ones described by Hurston can begin the process of reclaiming the South, other texts suggest that white supremacist, southern forms of automobility follow Black southerners despite their attempts to escape the South. August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987) uses automobility and transportation technology to consider how the South continues to haunt African American communities who have moved North during the Great Migration. In *The Piano Lesson,* part of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle and set in 1936, two southern transplants in Pittsburgh face the figurative and literal ghosts of their southern upbringing. The siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie Charles, have different strategies for overcoming the trauma of the South. Berniece, a widow and single mother who has moved to Pittsburgh, feels that physical distance has removed her from her trauma. Her

brother, Boy Willie, believes that the family's long history of trauma and enslavement can be erased through the purchase of the land on which their family was enslaved from the Sutter family. To purchase the land, Boy Willie wants to sell the heirloom piano that he and Berniece have inherited from their family. Berniece, believing that the piano represents the family's trauma, refuses. Both siblings learn that the piano contains both the spirits of their ancestors and the keys to addressing their own family trauma, but the play curiously emphasizes the role of transportation technology and the South in the family's lives. To conclude my chapter, I will consider the role of transportation technology in "perforating" the South's borders by taking southerners to new spaces while holding the trauma of the previous space.

The role of transportation technology in the lives of the Charles family is emphasized by the form of the play itself. Several scenes include the Yellow Dog train in Mississippi as well as the truck that Boy Willie and Lymon drive from Mississippi to Pittsburgh, and the presence of large transportation technology challenges the limitations of the stage. However, both the train and the truck also open up the play, reminding readers and audiences that the characters have emotional and physical connections that defy the easy spatial categories of North and South. The play's use of these devices also challenges temporal categories, maintaining that in 1936, the characters are still easily transported back to the challenges their families faced during the antebellum and Reconstruction periods in the South. The link challenges regional stereotypes that maintained that African Americans in the North were free of southern racism. As in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the systems that support white supremacy in *The Piano Lesson* are largely unattached to individual agents. Instead, the technological innovations

themselves—automobiles and the road systems—are imbued with the "agency" of white supremacy.

The agency of technology is often an accidental necessity of the English language. As Lisa Gitelman notes, "Media are frequently identified as or with technologies, and one of the burdens of modernity seems to be the tendency to essentialize or grant agency to technology" (2). In their discussion of much more contemporary technologies like computers and computer graphics, Bolter and Grusin lament the difficulty of navigating the "interaction of formal, material, and economic logics that slip into and out of the grasp of individuals and social groups" (79) that truly dictate the "behavior" of a technological object or medium. Literature can inhabit the slippage between the agency of an object and the intentionality of planning and design through symbolism and even anthropomorphism—in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example, it seems as if the car itself rejects the dirt roads onto which Bailey turns to give in to his family's demands to see the old, imagined plantation. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, it might be argued that the car itself takes John to Oviedo with Ora when he does not want to be unfaithful to Sally, or the car itself drives onto the train tracks. The literary slippage between subconscious desire, systemic oppression, and the design of the actual apparatus allows the reader to consider the depth of technology's incorporation into the literal and figurative space of the South. In *The Piano Lesson*, southern social configurations escape the South through automobility and continue to haunt the Charles family.

Like both "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, characters in *The Piano Lesson* are familiarized with transportation technology through their experiences with the train. Berniece and Boy Willie's uncle, Doaker Charles, is a semi-

retired “railroad man” now working as a cook for the same railroad for which he laid track in his youth. Though it detaches him from his southern roots, Doaker’s success on the railroad is source of pride to his southern family. After coming north from Mississippi, Boy Willie remarks “Doaker can’t turn that railroad loose. He was working the railroad when I was walking around crying for sugartit. My mama used to brag on him” (18). Doaker has given twenty-seven years to the railroad, and like the characters in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, he is aware of the role that Black laborers played in building the railroads in both the North and the South. He claims to have built the Yellow Dog (the Yazoo Delta Railroad in Mississippi) “stitch by stitch” (18). Like both Spunk Banks and John Pearson, Doaker’s mobility is connected to his sexuality—even in his advanced age, it is public knowledge that women wait for him at the train station. Doaker insists those women are only interested in the steady railroad paycheck that allowed his family to move to Pittsburgh. Doaker is not a southern patriarch surrounded by close family. Instead, his family is scattered—his estranged wife is in New York, other family members are in the South, and others like Boy Willie and Wining Boy roam throughout both regions looking for economic opportunities.

The train also represents the attempts to arrest Black movement in the South. Though labor on the railroad loosened the fixity of the Charles family, white supremacy still dictates the job opportunities available to Doaker, and the family is not free from the trauma of racism faced in the South. The Yellow Dog line, the same line that Doaker contributed his manual labor to, was used to destroy his family. Boy Charles, the father of Berniece and Boy Willie, believed that as long as the Sutter family owned the piano carved by the Charles patriarch, the Charles family would still be in slavery. In 1911, Boy

Charles and his brothers Doaker and Wining Boy stole the piano. When Boy Charles realized that Sutter suspected him of the theft, he caught the "3:57 Yellow Dog" (45). The train, so long believed to be the marker of progress and a mechanism of escape from southern white supremacy, did not save Boy Charles. Sutter, the Sheriff, and a group of white Mississippians stopped the train on the tracks. The white men exercised their control of transportation technology to burn Boy Charles and four other train hoppers alive in the boxcar.

The belief in escape from the South, class mobility, and literal mobility divides the Charles family. Though almost no white people, other than the ghost of Sutter, are present in the text, the challenge of reclaiming their lives from the white supremacist South haunts the family. Berniece and Doaker have taken the advice represented by John Pearson's white father and tried to place distance between themselves and the location of their trauma. Their emotional burdens remain. Boy Willie, who remains in Mississippi, focuses on the literal, physical reclamation of the space on which his family was enslaved. His goal in the play is to purchase Sutter's land, being sold after his death. However, Boy Willie remains emotionally removed from his trauma, ignoring the risk of imprisonment and the deaths of his many family members, believing that ownership of the space will resolve that trauma. The tension between physical and emotional movement is represented by the piano containing the images of the Charles' ancestors. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy the land, and Berniece refuses to either sell or play the piano. The piano, then, functions contrapuntally to the texts' trains and automobiles: it remains fixed in place, containing unused possibility for emotional reclamation.

Boy Willie begins his attempts to reclaim the South spatially by moving North. The automobile he uses to do so, a barely functional pickup truck speciously owned by Lymon, represents the continuation of southern social structures into the North during the Great Migration. The presence of the automobile immediately concerns Berniece and Doaker, who examine Boy Willie and Lymon through the eyes of white supremacy, attempting to protect themselves by anticipating the accusations that a white southerner would place on young Black men who owned an automobile. Berniece and Doaker ask careful questions about where Lymon acquired a truck, and when they discover that he has come North to avoid the Sheriff, Berniece says "Might be looking for him about that truck. He might have stole that truck" (7). Doaker adds that he does not believe the men stole the truck, but "they might have stole them watermelons" (7). Both Doaker and Berniece are hesitant to allow Boy Willie and Lymon to stay in the home, and Berniece warns Boy Willie, "don't be going down there showing your color" (27). The machinations of white supremacy, especially the heightened surveillance of the Black community described in the previous chapter, remain in place in Pittsburgh, limiting the mobility Boy Willie and Lymon expected to find there.

In the absence of actual white vehicular violence like the kind demonstrated in Komunyakaa's "History Lessons," Wilson uses the complicated agency of the automobile to demonstrate white supremacy by design. The automobile takes on the characteristics of Black mobility in a white supremacist nation—though the pair are technically able to acquire an automobile, it is barely functional and operates only under certain conditions. Lymon pridefully explains that the truck "got a hole in the radiator but it runs pretty good. You have to pump the brakes sometime before they catch" (3). Most

importantly, the automobile seems to be aware of the racial and regional limitations placed on Black men in the South. Boy Willie and Lymon, both of whom have spent time in Parchman, are highly aware of the desire of white supremacist southerners to keep them in place. Boy Willie remembers the burning of the box car in which his father tried to escape Mississippi in 1911. Both he and Lymon were forced to do plantation-style labor while in Parchman. The white supremacist desire for Black fixity in the South precipitates their trip North—when Lymon is arrested for "not working" (37), a local white man named Stovall pays Lymon's bail without Lymon's consent. In exchange, the sheriff claims that Lymon must now work for Stovall without pay to earn the bail money. The exchange between the Sheriff and Stovall flimsily covers up their desire to re-enslave Lymon and Boy Willie. For other Black men in the South at this time, this type of false imprisonment led to the kind of work on chain gangs that built many roads in the South. By connecting false imprisonment, the inertia of white supremacist infrastructure, and Lymon's dreams of working only for himself, *The Piano Lesson* imagines both cars and roads as fundamentally complicit in fixing Black southerners to the landscape.

The almost-agency of the automobile in *The Piano Lesson* increases when Boy Willie and Lymon leave the South and, ostensibly, the surveillance of people like the sheriff and Stovall. When they finally arrive in Pittsburgh, Boy Willie complains about the truck's unreliability: "We broke down three times! It took us two and a half days to get here." (3). Lymon's elaboration shows that the truck broke down in significant places: "We broke down twice in West Virginia. The first time was just as soon as we got out of Sunflower. About forty miles out she broke down. We got it going and got all the way to West Virginia before she broke down again" (3). The southern borders delineated by the

truck's behavior during the road trip are both geographically and socially significant. The first breakdown, just outside of Sunflower County, Mississippi, occurs when Boy Willie is leaving the area in which his ancestors were enslaved. White supremacist control of transportation had also prevented his father from leaving Sunflower County on the Yellow Dog line, but the overt white supremacy present in the burning of a train car has dissipated into the design of the truck. Because of the road conditions in Mississippi, their haste in leaving town, their inability to rely on roadside help because of their race, and the decreased economic opportunities that force them to settle for a dysfunctional automobile, Boy Willie and Lymon cannot leverage their automobility as easily as a white Mississippian could. After leaving Mississippi, the truck breaks down again in West Virginia. In the text, West Virginia would represent the last ostensibly southern state in the men's route, which would have gone through Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia before arriving in Pennsylvania. West Virginia exists below the Mason-Dixon Line but did not secede from the Union during the Civil War, making it a place of blended northern and southern characteristics that would have challenged the automobile's ability to neatly transfer southern social borders across regional borders. Boy Willie and Lymon arrive in Pittsburgh, but the spatial regulation of their racial identity remains.

Boy Willie and Lymon's halting mobility does allow them to triumph over some aspects of southern white supremacy—they escape the Sheriff, and they do make some money selling watermelons. However, the automobile's unreliability continues in Pittsburgh. After making it across the West Virginia state line and to the African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh where their family lives, Boy Willie and Lymon

still cannot move freely. When Wining Boy asks why they are still in town, Doaker explains: "They trying to get out to where the white folks live but the truck keep breaking down. They go a block or two and it break down again. They trying to get out to Squirrel Hill and can't get around the corner" (29). The truck, imbued throughout the play with a suspicious pseudo-agency, attempts to maintain segregation. When they do arrive in the white neighborhood, Boy Willie and Lymon must rely on northern stereotypes of Black southerners to profit. Their customers are pleased with their novelty more than their presence in the town, and they believe Boy Willie's stories about growing watermelons in the South: "One lady asked me say, 'Is they sweet?' I told her say, 'Lady, where we grow these watermelons we put sugar in the ground.' You know, she believed me. Talking about she has never heard of that before. Lymon was laughing his head off" (59). Boy Willie, set on acquiring the land on which his family was enslaved, is willing to exchange some of his own dignity to recover his family's dignity. His focus on reclaiming land, however, does not consider the changes in American racism brought on by automobility. The Great Migration has failed the Charles family in many ways (Shannon 980), but the Charles siblings must face modernity by constructing a family network that can resist the trauma of their family's history without remaining fixed in one place. In this way, the Charleses can address the white supremacy of automobility by avoiding violence (as depicted in "History Lessons"), unfixing themselves as roadside spectacles (as depicted in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"), and resisting automobility's tendency to fracture African American families (as depicted in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to track a movement in southern literature from literary depictions of overt vehicular violence to literary questions about the white supremacist roots of automobility. This shift is not linear, but rather a cycle that develops as white supremacy requires tactical changes to maintain its power. Literal instances of vehicular violence do remain in both literature and culture in the South, as can be seen in the brutal 2020 murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, GA. Arbery's killers, white men who did not believe he belonged in the mostly white area, pursued him in a pickup truck and shot him in the street. During the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, white supremacists across the country rammed their vehicles into protestors on at least 104 occasions (Wiel). Though the roots of white supremacy spread in multiple directions across the United States, nineteenth and twentieth century southern literature about the automobile predicts a pattern of national progress that not only excludes Black Americans.

In the texts I have considered in this chapter, the automobile holds not only the promise of individuality and authority over space, but the constant threat of betrayal and disaster. Some acts of vehicular violence, like the relegation of non-white southerners to roadside in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or the automobile-assisted lynchings in "History Lessons," are clear evidence of white supremacist uses of the automobile to secure the nation's perceived progress for white southerners. However, as the automobile disrupts the South's borders, making automobile ownership, mobility, and the Great Migration possible avenues for reconsidering southernness, direct acts of white supremacist spatial control are more difficult to expose. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John's

accidental death from driving onto train tracks does not result from any one white actor's violent intentions. Instead, the text presents John's death in the context of a system that rejects his very existence because of his mixed-race identity and irrepressible mobility. Though John's Cadillac provides him the ability to revision his own southern identity, the spatial and racial organization of Florida forbids Black men to move without consequence. In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie and Lymon (young southern men like John), do leverage automobility to escape the South and join family separated from them during the Great Migration. However, their automobile continues to behave in accordance with the laws of the Jim Crow South. Their automobile, another haunted machine like the millsaw in Hurston's "Spunk," represents the embedded white supremacy that thwarts the promises of progress for many Black southerners.

The tension between the automobile's liberatory uses and the oppression of the systems in which those automobiles are produced and used is not resolved in southern literature. Freedom and danger coexist within the space of the automobile and are reflected in southern literature by the constant threat of violence, accidents, and breakdowns. As the white supremacist South, however reluctantly, became more connected with the rest of the nation, the agency of white supremacists in the South as a source of vehicular violence becomes more difficult to locate. The texts I have considered in this chapter maintain that paradox as questions of agency for the driver, the southern community, and the automobile itself. In these texts, Black southerners persist in reimagining, reclaiming, and revising southern spaces and technologies. In the next chapter, I will use literature about photography to consider how southern white

supremacy behaves when faced with a technology that can cross not only regional borders, but the boundaries of the human body.

CHAPTER 4

DISEMBODIED RACE, DISLOCATED SOUTH: SOUTHERN LITERARY REACTIONS TO THE CAMERA

Introduction: Light-Writing in a Black and White South

Like the mill, the camera could visually and symbolically fix its subject to a single time and place. Like the electric light, the camera shifted and extended methods of witnessing southern racial hierarchies. Like the automobile, the camera and the images it produced were portable, troubling the borders of the region and the region's control over racial boundaries. The material and representational portability of the camera, despite its white supremacist design, held potential to expose southern racial violence. Lynching photographs smuggled out of the South turned from souvenirs to objects of ire that galvanized the civil rights movement. Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, the bereaved mother of Emmett Till, permanently changed the visual logic of racism in 1955 by allowing photographs of her murdered son to be taken and distributed. In a more contemporary, national iteration of these uses of the camera for counter-surveillance, Darnella Frazier, only seventeen years old in 2020, used her cell phone camera to record a police officer as he murdered George Floyd on a public street in Minneapolis. The images and recordings she captured revolutionized both public policy about and American narratives of policing. This chapter will consider literary depictions of the camera by Eudora Welty, Zora Neale

Hurston, and Alice Walker, arguing that the camera's presence in literature disembodies and dislocates, but ultimately empowers Black southerners.

Welty addresses the threats that accompany the separation of a person's image from their body in "Where is the Voice Coming From?" when images of Roland Summers bring awareness to his civil rights work and allow the story's narrator to locate and kill him. The narrator himself expresses that double legacy (Henninger 114), both using the portable newspaper image of Summers to identity his victim and lamenting that he himself has never been the subject of a photograph. Though the camera performs many functions in southern literature, this chapter will characterize literary reactions to photography as tension between overexposure, the threats of vulnerability outside a given context, and underexposure, the threat of erasure from a regional space or narrative. Because the camera occupies a complex space between technological apparatus and representational medium, I follow Richard Dyer's lead in considering photography "a technology of light" (83). The texts in this chapter consider the dangers of photography with differing stakes, but they all understand that the camera is a non-neutral, value-laden technology with the potential to move images out of their regional, social, and racial contexts. The camera as a weapon is considered most literally in Welty's "Kin" (1940) when Uncle Felix mistakes the camera for the guns of the Union Army. "Kin," however, presents southern anxiety about the camera at its lowest stakes—the white citizens of Mingo are concerned about the northern itinerant photographer's ability to misrepresent their southern town. For Black southerners in the work of Hurston and Walker, weaponized uses of the camera linger in characters' contentions with images of themselves not just as backward or lower class, but as objects of colonial, racial, and

sexual violence. To combat those histories and deweaponize the legacy of the camera, the authors in this chapter, including Welty, suggest that the camera's material limitations require supplementation with narrative and memory. Hurston, writing about her own efforts to represent the southern African American experience in *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (1932), improves upon Welty's model by negotiating with her subject and resisting some of the objectivity of her anthropological training. However, Hurston's desire to "capture" her subject for her employers places the camera at odds with Hurston's process of discovery. Walker, revising both Welty's and Hurston's negotiations between underexposure and overexposure in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), imagines a camera that can capture the multiple identities and embodiments of a Black southern woman.

In southern literature, the camera is often simultaneously old and new, present and absent. In most texts, it is a novel or at least advanced technology that is linked to much older practices of image-capturing. The ancient idea of visual representation's nexus with an advanced, almost supernatural form of image reproduction created a wealth of literary explorations of the technology. These fictional representations of photography, according to Katherine Henninger, were reciprocal, affecting the public conception of the practice of photography at the same time that photography influenced literary art. Henninger argues that "[i]f a few photographs can supplant thousands of words, it is only because thousands of words have trained us to 'read' photographs" (1). Those thousands of words have naturalized certain visual hierarchies of race and elided the camera as value-laden object that mediates and changes the South to which it bears witness. Many early observers of photography believed that the photograph was an immediate truth, perhaps

even more accurate than the human eye: “Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, photography had been vitally linked to modern rationalism and empiricism, which invested vision with an unquestionable capability to uncover truth and validate knowledge. The photograph, in its irrefutable, indexical representation of reality, came to embody modernity’s scientific and objectifying gaze” (Wood 75). The focus on the photograph over the camera in the same way the viewer might focus on a painting over a paintbrush makes logical sense in such a cultural milieu; however, southern literature about photography exposes the phantom presence of the camera and its ability to separate subjects from their locations and even their context.

Early American photography followed many of the traditions of earlier visual art, including the cultural values that determined which photographic subjects belonged to which genre of photography. Wealthy white southerners tended to be photographed in ways that reflected traditional portraiture (Williams 15-16). African American southerners were sometimes able to afford such an event, but in some cases white citizens, aware of the threat of Black self-representation, would forbid itinerant photographers to photograph Black citizens (Henninger 35). However, the freedom to be photographed did not confer automatic privilege. In her study of fictional photographs, especially the early nineteenth century daguerreotype, Susan S. Williams claims that in some cases, women who were (white and) beautiful enough to be photographed were often objectified in favor of a “stable masculine subjectivity” (26). Henninger adds that in early twentieth century photography, “Modern ‘southern ladies,’ real and literary, occupy the uneasy position of a fetish: they are a substitute for (and thus a type of acknowledgment of) a lost past of white southern racial, gender, and class hegemony and

at the same time a 'natural,' living denial that such a past ever ended" (87). The white woman's status as arguably the most desirable subject for a photograph is undercut by the white man's status as the mostly likely operator of that camera—the image is the woman's, but the vision is the man's. This dynamic, embedded from the time of the daguerreotype, influences what Dyer identifies as a visual culture that makes whiteness both invisible and default: "Though the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority" (3). The camera, then, was both designed and used to center whiteness in both visual and written narratives.

The centrality of whiteness, as Morrison reveals in *Playing in the Dark*, relies on the consistent presence and fixity of Blackness (6-7). This is especially true for the operation of the camera, which relies on the reflection of light (Dyer 83). Nineteenth century photography of Africans and African Americans focused on the same types of pseudoscience that prevented European Americans from considering them part of modernity. In a combination of both theory and design, photographs of Africans and African Americans were usually used to display their "primitive" nature in comparison to white Americans. Photographs of an anthropological nature were used to study the inferiority of Black Americans through craniometry and phrenology (Dyer 23). The public also consumed photographs of enslaved or formerly enslaved Americans and the wounds they incurred during slavery. Browne records that even in the twenty-first century, photographs of formerly enslaved Americans like Wilson Chinn are collector's items (103). Browne characterizes these images as part of the legacy of biometric technology that racializes and dehumanizes Black American's bodies (103). As Williams

notes, Civil War era photography is not easily categorized in literature: "although the fictional portrait appears with such regularity that we can identify it as a literary topos or convention, it also repeatedly resists becoming a fixed convention that always operates in the same way" (33). When racialized photography appears in literature, this resistance becomes more complex, blurring the line between violation, like in the case of Wilson Chinn, and revelation, like in the case of lynching photographs used in antilynching pamphlets in the late nineteenth century.

Photography of enslaved African Americans was an effective abolitionist tool, but the visual tradition of the disempowered, wounded enslaved African American had psychic consequences for American culture. Before and during the Civil War, northern white Americans hyper-focused on the racialized bodies of enslaved people. This use of the camera to record wounds often deepened them—as Browne records, cartes de visites of formerly enslaved people could violate the privacy and reduce the humanity of the photo's subject (104). The visible cruelty expected from these abolitionist audiences could also undercut more subtle forms of violence. In *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854), Caroline Lee Hentz's apologist answer to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Hentz attempts to satirize northern opinions of the brutality of slavery. Her sophisticated, compassionate fictional slaveholder Russell Moreland has inspired such loyalty in an enslaved character named Albert that Albert cannot consider freedom. Moreland brags about Russel's loyalty: "I defy all the eloquence of the North to induce Albert to leave me" (15). The novel's attempt to sentimentalize the psychological abuse and dependency of Albert is unsuccessful, but Hentz more successfully criticizes the behavior of northern abolitionists influenced by violent photography. When Albert goes north, he is horrified

by the manners of northern men, reporting to Moreland that “they don't know nothing about us. They want to know if we don't wear chains at home and manacles about our wrists. One asked if you didn't give us fodder to eat. Another wanted to strip off my coat, to see if my back wa'n't all covered with scars. (30). When many of the northern characters in the text do not see the kind of visual evidence of southern violence that they expect, they become more sympathetic to Moreland’s argument that the hierarchy of slavery is the natural state of man. Because they have seen still images deprived of life, context, and the voice of the photograph’s subject, they cannot properly “see” either Albert or the South. Albert’s rejection of the culture of photographic evidence of slavery is subversive despite Hentz’s intentions. The invasive nature of abolitionist photography was both effective and, in many cases, disempowering. However, the text also reckons with the nineteenth century belief that the photograph was an accurate record of reality. The text argues that since the northern men would not have seen such scars and shackles on Albert, Moreland is absolved of the violence of slavery. The text, a product of nineteenth-century opinions on visual culture, does not consider the types of violence that cannot be photographed.

Though the history of the camera in the American South is complex, this chapter will look at the spectrum between cameras that invade (overexpose) and cameras that erase (overexpose), both of which appear in literature to trouble the camera’s claims to immediacy or objectivity. Portrait photography was often staged and used in very specific ways to make claims about class and race—for example, in the film *Birth of a Nation*, the southern Ben Cameron falls in love with Elsie Stoneman when he sees a photograph that her brother, a union soldier, carries with him on the battlefield. In the source novel,

Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905), the photographs of Elsie and her brother are in the possession of their father, who carries them as evidence of his love as well as his control over their lives. In *Invisible Man* (1952), the photograph that Mr. Norton shows the narrator portrays his deceased daughter as an object of simultaneous purity and desirability. Her death, beauty, and blood relation to Mr. Norton make her unattainable to him, but his ownership of the image suggests the camera's history of blurring the line between reverence and pornography. He wants the narrator to participate in this fetishism, but the narrator understands that his position as a *Black* observer of a photograph is fundamentally different and more dangerous. In this instant, the narrator is aware of both his gendered ability to sexualize the white woman through the photograph and his racialized potential to become a victim of violence if he looks at the image too closely. These disparate examples of fictional photographs emphasize the invisible presence of the camera, whose gaze may not be matched by Black witnesses or returned by Black subjects.

Even after abolition, the necessity of exposing the effects of white supremacist violence on Black Americans' bodies had ambivalent consequences. Amy Louise Wood records that lynching photography taken in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had the dual effect of visually reinforcing white supremacy within the South while undermining southern white supremacy outside of the South. In the context in which they were produced, Wood argues,

> The photographs were thus not simply secular mementos of a public spectacle but an iconography celebrating what were considered divinely sanctioned acts. As an iconography, the material manifestation of faith or belief, the images made visible

> and tangible the racial ideologies that the lynching purportedly defended: the black man as bestial, dehumanized "fiend," the white man as heroic savior of civilization. (74-5)

Even as violent spectacle lynchings became less common, Wood notes, the images themselves became effective at controlling and representing white supremacy in southern spaces. The image of the brutalized black man seemed, with the right audience, to reinforce prejudices. These images were sold as souvenirs along with items such as parts of the victim's body. The body could be revictimized with each viewing of the image, making the image itself a similar amputation of the body. But in some cases, souvenirs like lynching photographs were smuggled out of the South at great risk to the individuals who removed them. When they were published in other contexts, they were extremely effective pieces of antilynching propaganda. However, their evidentiary potential still had to contend with the original intent of the images, which inscribed white masculinity as the viewer and arbiter of all other forms of southern identity. The camera itself could symbolize this, and it was often reported that the crowd at a public lynching was full of Kodaks (Wood 77). To use lynching photography for anti-racist purposes required a use of both the image and the camera against its original design, and it took considerable effort for anti-racist publishers to make readers see Black lynching victims.

The design of the camera and its film also obstructs accurate representation of Black Americans. Photographic film was designed to represent white subjects, and most film did not accurately capture Black subjects' skin tones or facial expressions. This malfunction was, and still is, a consequence of the camera's reliance on light. Photographers (and later film directors) often struggle to properly record Black people,

especially when they are in a group with white people. Dyer records that this is an aesthetic logic that ultimately naturalizes whiteness as visually and morally superior to Blackness. He also challenges the design that led camera users to believe that such flaws were inevitable: "However, what is at one's disposal is not all that could exist. Stocks, cameras, and lighting were developed taking the white face as the touchstone. The resultant apparatus came to be seen as fixed and inevitable, existing independently of the fact that it was humanly constructed" (Dyer 90). The material reality of the camera underscores the psychological reality of Africanism in American thought: whiteness defines itself against Blackness and cannot see Blackness itself as a subject.

Literature about photography balances multiple anxieties about art and representation. Williams calls literary photographs "confounding images" precisely because of this varied treatment in literature (90). Literary artists were concerned about the artistic status of photography, she records, but literature did eventually have to contend with the presence of the camera (91). Karen Jacobs records that the modernist writing about photography was marked by a literary obsession with interrogating the distance between seeing and knowing and a growing distrust of mediation (19). In keeping with this legacy, Henninger predicts that fictional photographs in the work of contemporary southern women writers can illuminate the complicated history of southern visual representation (5). This chapter will be concerned with how southern literature engages with the camera and its potential to conceal and reveal. Using under- and overexposure as a guiding framework, I will consider how work by Welty, Hurston, and Walker contends with the camera's phantom presence as both witness and invader, especially for Black southerners. These texts, I argue, predict that the camera can

function to disembody and disempower Black southerners, but Black southerners can reclaim their visual legacy by negotiating between visibility and privacy.

"One of those Picture Cities": Welty and Southern Photography

Eudora Welty, a writer and amateur photographer in the 1930s, was aware of some of the racialized practices of photography. She combatted her anxieties about invading the privacy of her subject by asserting their shared sense of belonging in the Mississippi fields, yards, and streets she photographed. Welty had, or at least believed she had, tacit permission from the subjects of her photographs, and she did not believe there was "violation" on either side of her camera, though she acknowledged the potential for the camera to violate (Henninger 43; Welty, *Photographs* xiv-xv). Welty's photographs are uniquely frank, and Hale wonders at her success at navigating (or overlooking) the racial implications of her photography and creating intimate images of Black life, especially in sacred spaces like churches: "All these years later, I still cannot fathom the contradictory combination of audacity and sympathy, given Welty's whiteness, that the act of making these sensitive pictures must have required" ("Signs of Return" 37). She also understood her photography as reflective of the particular time and place in which she worked, representing Mississippi at the convergence of Jim Crow laws, the Great Depression, and unprecedented technological change. Both her fiction and photography engaged with these changes, though Welty ultimately favored fiction over photography as a representational art (Henninger 9).

Many of Welty's photographs consider the economic, racial, or even aesthetic consequences of technological advancement in Mississippi. In photographs from the 1930s, Welty often positions human subjects parallel to technological additions to the

landscape like streetlights or telephone lines. When seen in the context of Welty's focus on technologized southern social structures, these photographs have a unique focus on the technological apparatuses that other visual art of the century naturalizes. In one particularly symmetrical photograph, Welty captures a pair of white women and a pair of Black women walking towards each other on an elevated railroad track. The infrastructure, which would normally literally segregate these two sets of women, has made it impossible for them to avoid crossing paths. There is some suggestion, based on the movement captured in the photo, that the white women are walking more confidently than the Black women, who seem closer together and further toward the edge of the platform. Though the two pairs of women are ostensibly on equal footing, Welty's photograph captures the precarity of Black existence during segregation. In another photograph from the mid-1930s, several African American children play in a yard in Jackson, Mississippi, seemingly imagining that they are riding in one half of a broken-down automobile. The photograph, titled "Children and their Automobiles," ironically presents the half-shell of the back end of an automobile as an object that is worth owning. Welty, aware of the children's poverty and the southern Jim Crow laws that will make their aspirations to automobility difficult, captures the children gazing back at the camera. Though they probably had been playing, four of the five children in the foreground are looking at the camera with serious expressions. The curiosity, or perhaps annoyance, on their faces calls attention to the invasive nature of the camera's lens, but it also reminds the viewer of the presence of the camera in the moment and location of the photograph.

Both her fiction and her photography suggest that Welty was highly aware of technological mediation of southern racial identity. One unpublished photograph from

her archives at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History demonstrates Welty's sophisticated awareness of the levels of technological mediation present even in the ostensibly backward, Deep South state of Mississippi. In the photograph, several well-dressed white men at a parade stand with their backs to Welty's camera as they position another camera, one for moving pictures, on the back of a flatbed truck. In the background are scores more white Mississippians—the photo was taken after 1936, and the parade likely would have been segregated, though Welty did occasionally photograph integrated parades—observing the parade as it happens. Welty often photographed parades and was interested in the raced and gendered ways that Mississippians expressed their citizenship. The act of filming the parade, which is already a representation of an idealized form of local southern identity, suggests a wider intended audience for the expression of identity, either through space (the film may be sent elsewhere in the nation) or time (the film may be watched later by other citizens of the town). The position of the camera on the flatbed reinforces the use of the automobile as moving vantage point to observe space, in this case probably a literal way to move the camera that will capture the parade. The film camera and the undecorated truck that is not serving as a parade float are unnoticed by the human subjects in the photograph. The two apparatus exist to create the illusion of immediacy for a later viewer of the parade, and they are not relevant to the present viewers. However, Welty challenges the illusion of immediacy by using a third apparatus, her own camera, to record this act of recording. At the beginning of the next century, Bolter and Grusin would call this heightened awareness of mediation "hypermediation" (33-34). At the time the photograph was taken, however, it created a visual representation of Welty's curiosity about which aspects of the South would fall

under the camera's lens and where those cameras might take their images.

In "Kin," the camera is introduced as a thrill and threat, a marvel of the future mistaken for a harbinger of death. When young cousins Kate and Dicey arrive in rural Mingo, Mississippi to visit their relations, they find the house crowded with well dressed visitors and lit with a "queer intensity" (657). They assume they have arrived unexpectedly upon the funeral of their Uncle Felix, but their more distant relation Sister Anne informs him that a northern itinerant photographer is using the home's parlor for his appointments. Uncle Felix, a survivor of the Civil War, believes that the photographer is a Union soldier, and his camera is a gun. When the girls search for him through the crowd, punctuated by loud cracks accompanied by blinding flashes and the smell of gunpowder (662), they discover their Uncle confined to bed in a back room. He tells them to hide: "Hide, gasped the old man…And I'll go in. Kill 'em all. I'm old enough I swear you Bob. Told you. Will for sure if you don't hold me, hold me" (668). When Anne will not explain Felix's state, they speculate, "Do you suppose she told him today there was a Yankee in the house? He might be thinking of Yankees?" (674). There was, of course, a Yankee in the house, but his modernized weapon was a camera that flashed and smelled like a gunshot. Felix's memories of the Civil War were triggered, but his awareness of the regional divide emphasizes to Dicey and the reader that Mingo is still stuck in time—the Black citizens are not allowed in the house to see the photographer, the economy is still primarily agricultural, and the town itself has been both forgotten and (ironically) preserved by a highway system that avoids it entirely. Dicey, who has come from the North to visit Kate, realizes that she "had forgotten or never known how *primitive* the old place was" (638).

Felix is correct in his suspicion that the photographer is a northerner, and his demand that the girls hide does mark one southern method for engaging with the camera to avoid exposing or control the exposure of southern life. Influenced by Kate's mother, Kate and Dicey believe themselves to be a better class of southerner than the citizens of Mingo. The town's excitement about the camera is gauche and distasteful to the young women: "Isn't this just– like– her!" Kate sighs to Dicey when the girls have discovered Anne's plot (639). Kate and Dicey, who look down upon Anne because of her spinsterhood and her imperfect manners, are scandalized that Anne has exposed their family to such a spectacle. Though the camera is not a gun, as Felix fears, the young women do hide from it, refusing to have their picture taken in such a context. Because of their sense of sophistication, they have a different understanding of the appropriate subjects for photographs. To these young women, who expect their social status to be very different from Sister Anne's when they are older, the idea that any resident of Mingo is photographable is laughable. They wonder, especially, why Sister Anne believes anyone would want a photograph of her. Their understanding of the camera reflects traditional portraiture in which the camera captures an already "worthy" subject. They pronounce Sister Anne "common" (681), and despite their free habit of gossiping about both their own family and the African American citizens of Mingo, they present the camera as an unwelcome witness to the family dysfunction so common in southern culture. Sister Anne and others in town seem to have the opposite opinion of the camera, expecting that the act of being photographed will make them worthy subjects for art.

The presence of the camera is invasive both to the family and to the region. Sister Anne explains to Dicey and Kate that the photographer is from the North: "He's of the

Yankee persuasion, but that don't matter any longer, eh, Cousin Dicey?" (662). As Dicey and Kate try to get an explanation for the chaos from Sister Anne, their confusion is enhanced by the sounds and smells of the camera flash: "There was the blinding flash again—curtain or not, it came right around it and through it, and down the hall" (661). Kate remarks that the flash is accompanied by the smell of gunpowder, and Sister Anne responds, as if the observation were a compliment, that it may be gunpowder. Though flash light bulbs had been developed by the 1930s, Kate's description suggests that the itinerant photographer is using a slightly outdated method of igniting his flash with magnesium powders. The outdated camera is still, as Sister Anne remarks, the most modern spectacle that may ever have occurred in Mingo—"They've left the fields, dressed up like Sunday and Election Day put together, but I can't say they all stopped long enough to bathe, ha-ha! April's a pretty important time, but having your picture taken beats that!" (663). Sister Anne sees the intrusion of common people from Mingo as evidence that her home (to which she actually has no claim) is modern marvel akin to the demonstrations of lights and new inventions at the World's Fair: "Don't have a chance of that out this way more than once or twice in a lifetime" (662). To Sister Anne, the family's status and relative wealth are part of the spectacle—when she finds two people investigating the home's plumbing-equipped bathroom, she reacts with pride, "didn't take them long to find out what *we've* got" (665). Mingo and Sister Anne may believe that the camera has configured them as modern subjects, but the camera man does not align his work with their view.

The text observes the camera's accoutrements more than the apparatus itself—Felix hears and smells the camera, and Kate and Dicey see the lights from far off. Though

the young cousins will not be photographed, they want to witness the spectacle of Sister Anne's turn as the photographic subject. When she takes the photographer's final appointment, he positions her against a backdrop that obscures the parlor of which she is so proud. The parlor has red wallpaper with "a cinnamon cast" from the flash powder (673). Sister Anne had added "White flags and amaryllis in too big a vase, where they parted themselves in the middle and tried to fall out" (673). The photographer does not aspire to objectivity or regional specificity—instead, his backdrop travels with him from location to location. Sister Anne, adding the floral signifiers of "a country wedding" (673) adds elements of idealized southern culture that the camera excludes entirely:

> What would show in the picture was none of Mingo at all, but the itinerant backdrop—the same old thing, a scene that never was, a black and white and gray blur of unrolled, yanked-down moonlight, weighted at the bottom with the cast-iron parlor rabbit doorstop, just behind Sister Anne's restless heel (674).

The photographer, "one with his camera and flash apparatus" (673), functions only to operate the camera within its existing design. He does not challenge the spatial organization or regional homogenization suggested by his backdrop (Chouard 259). Sister Anne fails to narrativize her experience of the camera or collaborate with its operator. After he takes his last photograph, the photographer flees the home in what seems like disgust. The young women speculate that Sister Anne has kissed him, or perhaps tried to seduce him, and he fled in embarrassment. Welty's use of the figure of the itinerant photographer, however, suggests that the photographer is as likely to be taking advantage of southern ignorance as he is of a southern spinster's romantic desperation. He disappears with his camera paraphernalia into his Ford and abandons the

town, still stuck in time. It remains doubtful that anyone will receive their photographs by mail, and the citizens have no control over where the Ford transports their images.

The camera, which sees and defines the southern citizens of Mingo, contrasts with the stereopticon, an apparatus that allows Dicey to access forgotten memories of her family and her own sense of self as a simultaneous southerner and outsider. She finds the stereopticon in the back room with Uncle Felix, and like the smell of gunpowder triggers Uncle Felix's war memories, the sight of the stereopticon triggers Dicey's childhood memories (Chouard 261). Instead of reproducing what Dicey sees as a bleak, undignified falsehood like the camera, the stereopticon presents Dicey with context and imagination. She remembers viewing the images and feeling as if she is in two places at once—her mind, following her eyes, travels to the images on the device, but her body is aware of the presence of Uncle Felix by her side. She remembers Felix providing her only with the single word names of the places on the slides, and she marvels that she has now "gone to live in one of those picture cities" (671). Her mobility surprises her because of her appreciation of southern family structures, but her whiteness allows her to easily move to a "picture city" and take ownership of the image in a way that Black viewers of the image could not. White engagements with photography in Welty's work suggest the belief that white subjects of photographs can be represented and relocated while maintaining their previous level of personal power.

The young women's embarrassment at the violating presence of the camera suggests that even in white communities, southerners held suspicions about the new technology. Katie and Dicey do not understand why Sister Anne would welcome voyeurism because their sense of their class and race position forbids it. Their brief

suggestion that Sister Anne might as well have allowed the photographer to photograph Black citizens of Mingo as well suggests that they understand the camera through prototypical whiteness, but they also position their Black neighbors as the expected victims of such voyeurism. Welty did understand that for Black southerners, the lack of privacy engendered by centuries of surveillance during slavery and Jim Crow would have developed a different relationship to the camera—though her characters find the idea of a Black southerner wanting to be photographed in the context of portraiture laughable, Welty's other fiction as well as her photography suggest that photographs of Black southerners can be reimagined past the violations of anthropological photography. Zora Neale Hurston's work with and about the camera collides in her anthropological narrative *Barracoon*, written in 1930 and published in 2019. In *Barracoon,* Hurston navigates under- and overexposure alongside Oluale Kossola,[1] who exercises artistic influence as the subject of both the photographs and the interview to reconsider his trauma and relocate himself within the South.

"I Worried a Little Lest He Deny Himself to Me": Hurston, Oluale Kossola, and Exposure

Though "Kin" laments the potential misrepresentation of a region, the photographer in literature (or the literary photographer) is often more anxious about her own responsibilities related to art and representation. Though she did not trivialize the racialized impacts of photography, Welty often addressed those stakes by aestheticizing them, like when she represents the short, white, balding photographer in "Kin" as "one

[1] Oluale Kossola is referred to as Cudjo Lewis, Kazoola (in Roche's *Historic Sketches of the South*), and Kossula (within the text of *Barracoon*). After Emancipation, he chose Oluale, his father's name, as a surname. In keeping with Deborah Plant's editing, this text will refer to him as Oluale Kossola or Kossola.

with his camera and flash apparatus" (673). Hurston, and later Walker, developed a concern with the types of wounds that the camera could expose or, in some cases, inflict. The camera-as-gun confusion in "Kin" is not entirely ironic—Wood records "verbal associations between hunting and photographing" in *Lynching and Spectacle:* "The word "snapshot" itself was a British hunting term denoting a gunshot that went off too quickly, a term photographers began using in the 1850s" (98). Susan Sontag remarks on the camera's resemblance to a gun (15), and Jacobs suggests that in that context, "the camera penetrates, violates" (20). The texts that I consider in this chapter are not only interested in the "snapshot," but the "capture" of the image and subject. The camera, an apparatus and a medium, can both invade a space and relocate an image. Hurston and Walker complicate Welty's anxiety about the presence of the camera, raising questions about ownership and self-representation that expose the machinery of white supremacist social hierarchy.

Like Welty, Zora Neale Hurston was both a photographer and a writer. Hurston primarily worked with the camera in the service of her anthropological work. Hurston's fiction, her anthropological writing, and the texts in which the fictional and anthropological blend all contend with the presence of the camera as a technology that both marginalizes and empowers. Hurston's most well-known depiction of photography occurs in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie discovers that she is not white by seeing a photograph of herself and other children. Janie, examining the photograph, cannot locate her own image. When the other children indicate her place in the image, Janie is shocked by her complexion. Jacobs recognizes this moment as Janie's confrontation with the "objective camera eye" (129), but the camera is not objective.

Instead, the camera and its film add another layer of mediation to Janie's recognition of the self. Instead of seeing a mirror reflection of herself in the present, she must locate herself frozen in an already-passed moment in context with the other children.

The camera's partial ability to "see" Janie has further distorted her self-recognition, and it is possible that Janie does not recognize herself easily because the image is not entirely accurate. Camera film was not developed to capture the skin of African Americans or multiracial Americans. The photograph that Janie sees is not a mirror image of herself—it is a photograph affected by the processes of exposure and development. The other children in the image, especially if they are particularly fair skinned, would interfere with the proper exposure of the image. Though Janie does learn and important truth about herself from the image, that she is "colored," (9), the image itself is not a perfect representation of either her skin tone or her identity. The photograph foreshadows Janie's consistent misrecognition and misrepresentation throughout the novel, but it also fictionalizes Hurston's consistent battle with the camera as an imperfect tool for capturing a culture. Like Welty, Hurston supplements the inadequacies of the camera with literary embellishments to photography, ones that suggest that fictional elements can actually correct a photograph's imbalances.

Hurston's literary engagement with the camera can be characterized by the tension between over- or underexposure, or exploitation and anonymity. In "Kin," the camera represented the potential for pride and embarrassment in a rural white community, but Hurston's work demonstrates that the stakes of photography are higher for Black Americans. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* records Hurston's attempts to both know and represent Oluale Kossola, or Cudjo Lewis, who was believed

to be the last survivor of *Clotilda,* the last slave ship to land on American soil from Africa. The manuscript that Hurston completed in 1931 was rejected by editors and publishers, and it survived only in the Howard University archives before it was published in 2018. Though Hurston intended *Barracoon* to be part of her anthropological writings funded by Charlotte Mason, her voice creates a nonfiction text that does supplement her depictions of photography with literary elements. Indeed, *Barracoon* was rejected primarily because of Hurston's commitment to her own method of stylizing dialect. Hurston refused to reimagine Kossola's speech as "language" and forfeited the financial benefits she may have received from publishing a more palatable text (Kaplan 28). Both Hurston's methods in crafting *Barracoon* and the text itself challenge the camera as an accurate representation of the self, questioning both what can be represented about Black trauma and what *should* be represented.

The whiteness of both literal and metaphorical lenses through which Hurston examined folk culture interfered with her ability to capture both region and race. The camera, through prototypical whiteness and the "objective observer" policy upheld by Franz Boas, became a hypervisible medium between Hurston and the subjects of her writing. Like "Kin" and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the presence of the camera in *Barracoon* is both invisible within the photograph itself and a presence that influences the space around it. Hurston was aware that the trappings of her education both inspired her desire to collect folklore and removed her from her origins. In the late 1920s, Hurston studied and collected folklore under the tutelage of Franz Boas, and her work was primarily funded at this time by Mason, who saw herself as a white guardian of black folklore (Plant xx). A young scholar, Hurston was under pressure to produce results for

"Papa Franz" and "Godmother" Mason (*Dust Tracks* 128) or lose her funding and position at the university. However, she found that her interactions with white culture had made her an outsider, no longer privy to the secrets of black culture. The Black southerners with whom Hurston formerly identified perceived her as a threat:

> I knew where the material was all right. But, when I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, 'Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?' The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads. No, they had never heard anything like that around there. (*Dust Tracks* 128)

Their underexposure protected them, but isolated Hurston, who responded by reconnecting with her childhood dialect and culture, eventually coming to understand herself as an intermediary between both worlds. Her approach improved, and she became more successful in bringing black culture back to Boas and Mason as an insider. However, Hurston, perhaps overwhelmed by her dual citizenship in two cultures, struggled to establish an ethical approach to collecting folklore.

Hurston's first story on Kossola, also her first academic publication, was plagiarized from Emma Langdon Roche's 1914 *Historic Sketches of the South.* According to Plant, Hurston never plagiarized again in her prolific career, and some scholars theorize that Hurston plagiarized because she was upset with Carter Woodson, who was also funding her in exchange for historical data for his *Journal of Negro History*, for decreasing her pay. Hurston likely chafed against the confines of academic research, especially the "objective observer" method insisted upon by Boas (Plant 121). Most compellingly, Plant suggests that Hurston was simply overwhelmed by the details

of African participation in the slave trade that she learned from Kossola (124). Although I accept Plant's explanation of Hurston's actions, I question the almost unanimous disapproval of Hurston's plagiarism. The narrative in question belonged to Oluale Kossola, not Emma Langdon Roche. Sexton maintains that though Hurston did plagiarize, the only original parts of her piece were the places where she "removed Roche's racist hand, and replaced it with her empowering one" (190). Roche's approach to Kossola's story detaches from his humanity, supplements his information with information gathered from those who enslaved him, and often creates dramatic interest in the success of his kidnappers. Although it is not disputed that Kossola shared the story with Roche, I suggest that Hurston, as an African American woman with an increasing attachment to her own African heritage, may not have acknowledged Roche's work as a worthwhile representation. Speculation about the reason for Hurston's plagiarism is only marginally productive, however—she did plagiarize, and her plagiarism, whatever its motivation, reveals that Hurston and Kossola are connected by their need to navigate attempts to profit from the exposure of their connections to African culture.

Like Welty's "Where is the Voice Coming From?," technology directs the narrative turns of *Barracoon*. Kossola and his community are in the South because of the slave ship, which Browne interprets as a technology designed to maximize cruelty while minimizing profit loss in the form of death (46-47). To meet Kossola, Hurston drives her automobile to African Town and attempts to leverage access to the automobile into a friendship. At intervals, Kossola tells her the story of his childhood in Africa, his kidnapping, and his life in Alabama before and after Emancipation. He tells of being stripped before he is taken from Africa on the last slave ship to enter the United States:

"When we ready to leave de Kroo boat and go in de ship, de Many-costs [Kroos] snatch our country cloth off us….Oh Lor', I so shame! We in de 'Merica soil naked and de people say we naked savage. Dey say we doan wear no clothes. (55). By describing his shame, Kossola characterizes nakedness as something that, counterintuitively, conceals his identity and prohibits him from influencing others' perceptions of him. Kossola locates the ability to reveal his identity properly in his "country cloth" (55), which he believes can communicate both his national identity and his dignity to Americans upon his arrival in America. As Kossola equates nakedness not with his own lack of knowledge but with others' ignorance of him, loss of control over information emerges as the major source of his trauma during his kidnapping and enslavement. To respond to his loss of identity during slavery, Kossola practices concealing himself with dignity and power. During Hurston's interviews, Kossola strategizes to both reveal his identity to her and protect himself from unnecessary prying—he allows her to see him cry, but he often sends her away abruptly or shares information only on the condition that Hurston bring him food, drive him somewhere, or help him complete a task. At the end of Hurston's narrative, she details Kossola's direction of his portrait. The way that Kossola appropriates these technologies, especially the camera, to be known without being exploited suggests the possibility of imaginative reclamations of the camera as a method of both exposing and countering white supremacy.

The wound at the center of *Barracoon* around which both Hurston and Kossola must navigate is African participation in the slave trade. In her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes:

> One thing impressed me strongly from this three months of association with Cudjo Lewis. The white people had held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true and exploited us. But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw, was: my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me. That did away with the folklore I had been brought up on—that the white people had gone to Africa, waved a red handkerchief at the Africans and lured them aboard ship and sailed away (145).

The possession of Kossola's story and an unacknowledged truth so threatening to African American identity troubles Hurston. In her foreword to *Barracoon,* Alice Walker echoes Hurston's pain: "Reading *Barracoon*, one understands immediately the problem many black people, years ago, especially black intellectuals and political leaders, had with it (x). Walker believes that by writing *Barracoon*, Hurston reveals a wound to other African Americans. At the same time, however, Walker argues that Hurston also offers her readers "the medicine" (ix), calling *Barracoon* a "Maestrapiece," or "the feminine perspective or part of the structure, whether in stone or fancy, without which the entire edifice is a lie" (x). In *Barracoon*, Hurston and Kossola both consider ways to repair the edifice of their own black identities, shattered by cruelty and surveillance. Sexton argues that *Barracoon* is a "testimonial text" primarily motivated by the desire "to hear the story of those who had been silenced because of the institution of slavery" (191), but that the text ultimately fails because the testimony of one victim of slavery cannot replace the many voices lost to the slave trade (207). However, I argue that the text is not a testimonial text, but rather a text that moves the lens onto information not often included in American depictions of slavery. Kossola does not expose his trauma for public

edification, but rather because he hopes that one day someone will be able to tell his family what happened to him: "I want tellee somebody who I is, so maybe dey go in de Afficky soil some day and callee my name and somebody dere say, 'Yeah, I know Kossula'" (19). Kossola shifts the camera's direction in *Barracoon* not to protect Hurston from the pain of slavery, but to protect himself from further dehumanization. He conceals and reveals information in specific ways to reconstitute the privacy he lost after being taken from Africa, and this practice allows him to heal from the trauma of both slavery and betrayal.

Near the end of their time together, Hurston photographs Kossola. The photographs, directed and planned by Kossola, represent the success of his strategic concealment and revelation. While Kossola is empowered by communal life in African Town, he is in some danger of being overexposed by his interactions with Hurston and Mason (Kennon 76). He maintains the power to reveal only what he wants of his identity through Hurston's photography. "I want see how I look," he tells her. "Once long time ago somebody come take my picture but they never give me one. You give me one" (89). The individual who never gave Kossola a copy of his own likeness was likely Roche, but Kossola feels that with Hurston as the intermediary between himself and the public, he can control his depiction and possess his own likeness. Without asking Hurston what he should wear, he goes into his home, puts on his best suit, and removes his shoes. "I want to look lak I in Affica, 'cause dat where I want to be," he tells Hurston. Hurston ends the chapter by pointing out simply, "He also asked to be photographed in the cemetery among the graves of his family" (89). Kossola uses his own clothes as well as his placement in the photograph to create some spatial ambiguity—within the limited,

discrete frame of the photograph, he may indeed appear to be in Africa. Both Hurston and Kossola choose to hide and expose certain aspects of the photograph to create an image that empowers Kossola to communicate his own identity. Decades after his violent stripping by slave traders, Kossola chooses not only what he will wear but how and where he will be seen in the photograph. Sexton argues that "the words of one cannot compensate for the words of all the humanity that was slaughtered, all the tribes destroyed, for the slave trade," but Kossola's successful re-empowerment ensures that future generations of Americans will see him in his "country cloth." This strategic relocation of his body, enhanced by the selective framing of the camera, provides some correction to an American legacy of invading, dissecting, and profiting from the images of Black people.

Zora Neale Hurston's record of her time spent with Oluale Kossola, the last "black cargo," reveals that the authority of the exposed subject can deweaponize the camera. Kossola's voice was occasionally clouded by Hurston's plagiarism, her occasional intrusions into his privacy, and her obligations to white scholars and benefactors. However, Hurston's skill as an intermediary between the majority white academic world and black folk culture did create a medium through which Kossola could tell his story. Though Plant likens Hurston to a priest hearing Kossola's confession (xxv), and Sexton likens Hurston to an audience hearing his testimony, Hurston served as an interlocutor for Kossola, who, after experiencing decades of trauma marked by oppressors controlling what he did and did not know, chooses not to reveal all of his story. Instead, Kossola and Hurston talk around the grief of the past, sometimes directly addressing it, and sometimes distracting themselves by eating watermelon and crabs.

Kossola remains in control of what he reveals, and in the process of the interview, Kossola models new strategies for Africans and African Americans to combat their surveillance and silencing by white supremacist social structures. Hurston's use of the camera in *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* is radical not because it reveals a story of black torture for white consumption, but because it depicts the black subject combatting his objectification by taking ownership of space and technology.

"How Different She Could Look from Picture to Picture": Walker and the Camera

In her foreword to *Barracoon*, Alice Walker claims that "Those who love us never leave us alone with our grief. At the moment they show us our wound, they reveal they have the medicine" (ix). *Barracoon* and the joyous moments that Hurston and Kossola located in the tragic story are an example of her belief. Walker's foreword identifies the wound as "the atrocities African people inflicted on each other" (x) before the traumatizing experience of chattel slavery in the United States. Walker's foreword sympathizes with the reluctance to look at such a text, though she maintains that the exposure of this wound is necessary for its healing. To consider this discourse of exposure, of "being shown the wound" (x) as a philosophy of technology, Walker must depart from both the compulsion to hide from shame and grief that appears in "Kin" and the temptation to expose for profit that Hurston and Kossola face in *Barracoon.* To revise the camera in southern literature, Walker provides a model of authority and memory in *The Temple of My Familiar*. In the novel, Walker considers the layers of time, single moments, and singular spaces, that the camera can expose. In contrast to Welty and Hurston, whose short story and anthropological narrative consider what should and should not be photographed, Walker considers what cameras can and cannot capture.

Walker's status as a literary successor to Hurston, both writers ahead of their time and looking forward to new futures for Black women, has been noted by critics including Henninger and Davis. Though she does not include *Barracoon,* Henninger's reading of Walker and Hurston argues that in *The Temple of My Familiar*, "Walker builds on Hurston's use of the camera to assert and provide 'real' evidence of the 'unreal' of African history and its living presence in African American culture" (132). By reading Walker after Hurston and earlier Black women writers in the South, Henninger claims, critics can "trace a southern, 'womanist' history of African American reappropriaton of photography to transgress boundaries and reorder representational politics within the anthropological and literary fields" (118). Davis claims that Walker's work rethinks "how black people in the South from her grandmothers' and mother's generations to her own created and survived, and how they had managed to do so with an understanding of their intersectional identities and of the potential of power resident within some few spaces—ever expanding and never collapsing" (272). In *The Temple of My Familiar*, the camera that photographs Lissie affirms her multitudinous, cross-temporal, and cross-spatial existence. Jablon points out the connections that Lissie makes between human memory and technology, suggesting that memories and dreams both affect Lissie's ability to confound the camera (140-141). I conclude with Walker because of her understanding of the camera as a technology that punctures time, space, and embodiment. Writing later than Welty and Hurston, Walker emphasizes the palimpsestic nature of the South, which is never fully rid of its past, and the camera itself, which even in contemporary form contains the ghosts of its past uses to objectify and contain the Other. In *The Temple of My Familiar,* Walker affirms that the literary and even fantastical elements added to the

fictional photograph can serve to make the camera at once more accurate and less objective, potentially liberating Black subjects from oppressive representations.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Lissie and Hal are the eldest of the three couples with whom the novel is concerned. Though the lives of each couple intersect, this section of the chapter is concerned only with the interactions of Lissie, Hal, and Suwelo. Suwelo, a middle-aged Black professor of literature, returns to the South and meets Lissie and Hal because he inherits a home from his Uncle Rafe. When he examines his inheritance, he is beguiled by dark spots on the wall where pictures had clearly been removed from a gallery of family portraits. The missing photographs depict Lissie, the wife that his Uncle Rafe shared with his best friend Hal. However, Lissie's photographs were not removed by Rafe to hide his wife. Instead, Suwelo learns that Lissie herself, now an elderly woman, removed the photographs to control who viewed the images. The photographs, taken throughout the decades that Lissie, Hal, and Rafe lived together, reveal Lissie as she appeared throughout centuries of her past lives. Later, when Suwelo has accepted Lissie's radical re-visions of the camera, she gives him the photographs of herself in the forms of her multiple lives as a gift, and he returns to San Francisco with both the photographs and "self-portraits" of Hal and Lissie, each painted by the other. Hal and Lissie's empowering understanding of privacy, surveillance, and photography suggests that they, as Black southerners born in the early twentieth century, understand empowering uses of technology better than their modern, cosmopolitan descendants. Though Henninger refers to Suwelo as an "informed viewer" because of the respect with which he receives Lissie's photographs (135), Suwelo is not originally an informed viewer. He becomes capable of viewing the photographs, and of transporting them out of

the South to California, by accepting that there is information he will never have. Before he becomes the heir to the philosophy of technology held by Rafe, Hal, and Lissie, Hal and Lissie deconstruct the patterns instilled in Suwelo by the exploitative design of the camera.

The camera, which continues to advance in Suwelo's present, first appears as an emergent technology to Lissie and Hal during their youth on the islands off the coast of the Carolinas. Hal recalls its appearance to Suwelo:

> We were just fascinated by the thought of picture taking, of which we had heard, though we had never seen a live picture taker before, and he was a colored man! We tiptoed about his tripod and knocked a couple of times on the big black box that the man said made the picture, but our true feeling was, we didn't want to be bothered, that the new picture-taking science was just fine and dandy, but we had better things to do, like lay up. (101).

Newly married, Hal and Lissie are only interested in the camera as novel, visual evidence of the technological progress they have not yet seen on their small southern island. The Black photographer, Henry Laytrum, is also a marvel to them. While Welty unifies her white photographer entirely with the apparatus of his camera, Hal and Lissie are surprised to see a Black man as the herald of technological advancement on their island. Laytrum's position as an African American photographer seems to mitigate the violating potential of the camera, but Hal, Lissie, and Laytrum still must negotiate the pain caused by both under- and overexposure. Decades of collaboration and revelation about Lissie's lives and Black identity result from Hal and Lissie's willingness to use the camera to look directly at their own wounds.

Lissie and Laytrum discover that Lissie never photographs as the same woman twice. Her embodiment defies the camera entirely — instead of remaining fixed, she becomes fluid in both time and space. Even after leaving their romantic relationship and returning to Hal, Lissie feels the need for the camera to confirm her memories of her past lives. To correct the power imbalance caused by the apparatus, Lissie refuses to tell the photographer the secret of her past lives. Henninger sees this as "a radical reversal of the 'photography as exploitation model'" in which "Lissie turns trickster" (92). However, rather than taking advantage of Laytrum or excluding him entirely from the benefits of his art, Lissie instead creates a collaborative model. In their balance of power, her memory competes with his camera. And Lissie does technologize her memory metaphorically, telling Suwelo that her brain cells are like batteries:

> Since I know they did exist, in my rational mind, I have to assume that those brain cells I would need to remember them, being so many thousands of years old, have atrophied. But on the other hand, I do not remember with my brain itself anyway, but with my memory, which is separate somehow, yet contained within it.
>
> Charged, I feel my brain is, with memory. Yes, as I said, like a battery. (52)

Even in old age, Lissie's brain emerges as the superior technology- the camera cannot reconcile Lissie's multiple existences across time periods, places, and species. Lissie, however, can fully understand the camera, nearly all of her past lives, and the lives of her loved ones. When the camera can only record her existence at one time and place, she fixes it rather than allowing it to fix her. Anthropological images of Lissie are never simply an image of an African Pygmy like the ones pictured in the stack of *National Geographic* magazines Suwelo found in Rafe's room, nor are images of her broken body

simply spectacles in the vein of lynching photography. The human machine of Lissie's memory, like Kossola's memory, imbues them all with more accurate context and backdrop. Nevertheless, Lissie values the proof that the photographs provide her, and Hal marvels at the "scientific" acknowledgement of Lissie's stories.

Like the young anthropologist Hurston studies Kossola, Suwelo studies Hal and Lissie. Though he is a trained scholar, he releases any pretense to objectivity in his relationship with the couple. He entertains some hope that their wisdom can help him reunite with his estranged wife, but Hal and Lissie confront him harshly with his own exploitation of women through photography. Despite having seen quite invasive images and films of women, Suwelo misunderstands intimacy. He tells Hal and Lissie that his girlfriend had no intellectual substance and that his wife, his "rightful stuff" (243), refused to wear the lingerie he bought her. Hal and Lissie mock him for this misunderstanding, and Lissie tells him, "men are *dogs*" (247). By contrast, Suwelo refuses to look at a portrait of his parents on his uncle's wall. He understands the falseness of its backdrop and pose, suggesting a harmony within his parents' marriage that was not present: "And, sighing, he passed his father's brash look, his mother's air of helpless captivity, and moved up the stairs. He could not, would not think of them; he wanted to be happy" (30). Suwelo can look through the portrait to the violence his father inflicted on his mother. Hal teaches him to look at the violence that men inflict on women through sexualization, and Lissie teaches him to look through colonialist images of the African past to see the wisdom in what the camera coded as primitivism.

Hal, though not a photographer, is a painter who goes blind when he does not create art. The constant need to create for the maintenance of his vision has sharpened

Hal's ability to see his loved ones accurately. The stories he tells Suwelo about his childhood create a connection between sexual exploitation and violent forms of representation of Black people. When he was a child, his father was raped by his best friend, a white man who had been attached to Hal's father all his life. Hal does not seem to know for certain if his father shared the white man's longing for a sexual relationship, but he tells Suwelo that he is certain his father hated gay people because he hated the violence his former friend committed against him. After that trauma, Hal remembers, his father never engaged with journalism about lynching in the same way. "Whenever my father read about a lynching of a black man by whites," he tells Suwelo, "and that they'd cut off the man's privates and stuck them in his mouth, he said he understood the real reason why….That he understood there was something of a sexual nature going on in any lynching" (136). Hal's own rejection of sexual violence and objectification goes as far as refusing sex entirely, and he learns from Lissie's fluidity that interpersonal connections can outlast the damage caused by white heteropatriarchal society. Hal's stories, like Lissie's, emphasize that the camera is a technological extension of the existing human impulse to objectify others.

Though her stories emphasize the joy she feels in her multiple embodiments and identities, Lissie's lives correspond with exploitative forms of photography like anthropological photography, pornography, and voyeuristic photography of enslaved people. In one life, Lissie lives as a pygmy alongside her "cousins," primates who teach her many of the lifeways that she maintains in her present as an elderly, southern woman. Colonization and contact with the European world destroyed Lissie's relationship with her cousins. Lissie laments centuries of misrepresentation of the proper human

relationship to animals but cherishes the photograph of herself as a pygmy, "the happiest-looking of all the pictures" (93). In another photograph, Lissie appears as a plural wife in a "harem," where despite her sexual exploitation, she reclaimed her power through a romantic relationship with a fellow captive wife named Fadpa (107) The only other life that Lissie lived in the American South, according to Laytrum's camera, was a life lived as an enslaved woman who, like Kossola, who had been sold from Africa by her own family members. Lissie recalls to Suwelo that after attempting to liberate herself from slavery, she was captured and beaten, dying shortly after from despair. Suwelo recognizes her memories within the photograph: "It wasn't that you could see her injury—the missing foot and leg—it was just that you looked into the ashen face, in which the spirit seemed already to have been given up, and you knew" (93). In each of Lissie's lives, she became more equipped to resist suffering and maintain her identity. However, in novel's present, the camera and the conventions of portraiture provide a significant remedy to her trauma, allowing her to claim scientific knowledge of her past and restore a battered sense of dignity. Her restored dignity, facilitated by the camera, provides Black, feminine leadership for the other characters in the novel.

Suwelo's final lesson from Hal and Lissie is how to deploy technology and memory carefully. After his initial violation of her trust, Laytrum learns to defer to Lissie's authority over herself and her photographs. She is not the disempowered subject of the camera—like Kossola, she functions as a director and collaborator. Her memory gives her authority over the technology of the camera, which does not have the kind of representational or spatial authority over that is has on other subjects. Suwelo realizes that the exposure of Lissie's multiple lives brought peace to the shared life of Lissie, Hal,

and Rafe, “for they had connected directly with life and not with its reflection” (192). Their sense of immediacy does not come from a prelapsarian southern rejection of technology, but rather from Lissie’s assurance that the technology of the camera cannot function without the authority of her memory. If the camera and her memory do not “corroborate each other exactly” (92), they are as meaningless as the false happiness in the photograph of Suwelo’s parents. There are flaws in Lissie’s model of deweaponizing the camera—though she is able to exercise authority over her image, her photographs will not be widely distributed. However, Welty, Hurston, and Walker together present a model of a deweaponized camera with the potential to both disseminate proper representations of Black people’s bodies across regional borders and to return control over those bodies to the photo’s subjects.

Conclusion

Welty, Hurston, and Walker suggest that the threats represented by the camera can be redirected with the additions of narrative, memory, and the authority of Black photographers and photographic subjects. Their readings confront the continued necessity of exposure, or looking at the wound, that creates such a painful cycle for Black writers and photographers trying to reclaim the South. The simple exposure of white supremacy and Black resilience, a reversal or widening of the camera’s lens, does not repair the violence of prototypical whiteness perpetrated by the camera. Black Americans continue to have their images stolen and colonized. Liberating uses of the camera, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, are possible, but deweaponization of the camera will require complete revision of its white supremacist underpinnings. As I have argued in this dissertation, even non-neutral technology that is oppressive by design can be reclaimed.

The narratives I have considered in this chapter and throughout the dissertation disrupt narratives of American progress that erase the agency of white supremacists by positing a straight line of evolution through slavery, its artificially intelligent replacement, and the many mechanized steps in between. The South faces an increasingly digitized future marked by immense promise, algorithmic injustice, and what Benjamin calls "the new Jim Code" (5-6). Where white supremacy attempts to dissipate into the physical or digital landscape, storytelling follows, calling attention to the racial logics that can be dismantled only by Black reclamation of southern space and antiracist philosophies of technology.

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