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Dirt and Desire

Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930–1990

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Chapter One

Southern Women Writers: A Confederacy of Water Moccasins

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

To explore the remnants of nostalgia clinging to such a time and place may seem unspeakable. And yet the chapters that follow flow inevitably from my own private quarrels with the South—from a sense that I was gargantuan or oversized in a world of petite and belle-like little girls; from a sense that my own right to testify, to speak out against familial, racial, and religious injustice was censored in school and at home; from a sense, as well, that I did not want to testify, or could not, or did not know how; from memories of the bizarre pressures of being a middle-class southern white girl caught between my father's southern Methodism and the world of my mother's hymn-singing, Bible-swinging Baptist past and of being someone destined by the age of five for my family's peculiar Scylla and Charybdis—the fatal need to choose between the Tri Delts, my Aunt Mary Louise's sorority, or Kappa Delta, my mother's—and clearly unfit, in my anger and awkwardness, for either institution. My identities and sympathies, then, are all with the southern grotesque, having been one and known more than a few. But I also hope that this personal take—these cumbersome private investments—will intensify rather than distract from the validity of these quarrels with the Souths I have known. Although caught in the delinquencies of my own southern past, the chapters that follow seek out a language for other people's experiences. I need to know: Why did the best women writers in the American South turn away from the beautiful body and toward the grotesque? Why do we encounter such consistent reconfigurations of southern body politics among a coterie of black and white women writers who felt at home within and yet deeply estranged from the South of the twentieth century? Why did these women write a series of in-your-face fictions that mangle, mar, and mistreat bodies of all shapes, sizes, cultural positions? What happened during this period to give women this fierceness, this power, this flagrant desire to abuse a form of cultural capital not traditionally their own?

Monstrosity

If we are to see this fiction in all of its power, we need to change the categories we use to think about southern literature. I want to begin with a parable—a story about beauty ravaged into bestiality, about the eruption of monstrosity in a climate and setting where one least expects it. We encounter this monstrosity in Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby,* in a tale within a tale that suggests new strategies for thinking about the relation between southern culture and the female body. The story is, first and foremost, about leisure and who has the freedom and space to enjoy it. The

setting sizzles with the usual "southern" vividness of place: it is a beautiful summer day, filled with "white August cumulus," "green mist of willows," "sickle of jet trail." And yet something ominous has accumulated around the edges of this "apocryphal tale of a water-skier that rolled like ball lightning through the Mississippi Delta during the late sixties." The heroine is a "a beautiful young [white] girl" who "is flying along the surface of one of the innumerable oxbow lakes that mark changes in the course of the Mississippi River." These changes marked on the landscape of the sixties, suggest a story laden with allegory. In a state altered by the civil rights movement, this body skating on surfaces prepares us for a crisis of whiteness in a place in which it has become impossible to be white in the old, accustomed ways. In fleeing these changes "something happens" to the white woman skimming the surface of the lake:

> the rope breaks or she loses her balance and falls. No big deal. It's happened hundreds of times before. But this time is different: screams of agony—a thrashing and churning in the water. The lover spins the wheel, brings the boat about in less time than it takes to write this sentence. The young girl's lovely face is contorted with pain. Barbed wire, she gasps. I'm caught in barbed wire.
>
> But there isn't any barbed wire. No. It's a writhing, tangled mass of water moccasins. She holds out a hand and he seizes it.
>
> Wait! Wait! she says.
>
> She's dead before he can drag her into the boat, snakes dropping away as she slips over the side. (1988, 130–31)

The skier becomes both a corpse and a female predator, a serpent-woman, or lamia, a southern Medusa who invokes predatoriness and pathos. By reinflecting archaic tropes to refigure a Sunbelt version of the southern gothic, Douglas gets the best of both worlds—she veers toward the southern grotesque while making her story au courant, clever, up-to-date. She gives us both the mystique of the white belle and vestiges of an older world of property relations: the speaker describes pieces of barbed wire—ruined estuaries—clinging to the white girl's fingers. But this is also an eerie description of a woman who, instead of striving to get back in the boat, refuses to get in. Intimating what?—a sudden opening of her eyes to the deadly conditions she inhabits? a desire to save her boyfriend from the grotesque fact of her death? Or does she secretly want to stay there, beneath the surface, communing with the water moccasins, imbibing their knowledge with their power?

Whatever the answer, the most remarkable aspect of this passage is its in-

sistent, languid connection of change with the sudden eruption of monstrosity. This is a pattern we will see repeated in numerous tales by southern women. In a culture dealing with crisis, unable to handle changes in the course of everyday life—the growing demand (from the thirties into the nineties) for African American equality, for greater access to education, citizenship, and economic resources—change erupts abruptly, via images of monstrous, ludicrous bodies.

In Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," a story published in 1954 in the *Sewanee Review,* images of monstrosity seem incredibly raw and vigorous. Here ethnicity, class, and the bizarre habitus of Jim Crow explode with premonitions of change when a Catholic property owner, Mrs. McIntyre, agrees to sponsor the Guizacs, a Polish family consigned to Europe's displaced persons camps. The story's images turn most ludicrous when a backwater region of Georgia has to contend with a minuscule immigrant population. As local gossip lumps Germans and Poles together as easy-to-identify enemies, old regional categories are thrown into disarray.

These changes are mediated by two monstrous events. When the hard-working Mr. Guizac displaces Mr. Shortley, the shabby white man who does chores around Mrs. McIntyre's farm, *Mrs.* Shortley sees future apocalypse: "Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of the hand. Who will remain whole? . . . Who?" (1971, 210). She fulfills these visions herself when she dies of a heart attack, creating a signature monstrosity as she grabs her loose-limbed daughters "and beg[ins] to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself" (213).

But the story approaches a more frightening moment of domestic and political change when Mr. Guizac arranges for one of Mrs. McIntyre's black laborers to marry his blonde, pale-faced cousin, who is still suffering in Europe's displaced persons camps. Mrs. McIntyre is aghast: "'Mr. Guizac . . . that nigger cannot have white wife from Europe. You can't talk to a nigger that way. You'll excite him and besides it can't be done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can't be done here and you'll have to stop. It's all foolishness. That nigger don't have a grain of sense and you'll excite . . . ' After a second he shrugged and let his arms drop as if he were tired. 'She no care black,' he said. 'She in camp three year'" (222–23). Suddenly everyone conspires to break Mr. Guizac's body: "She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone" (234). We return to the pattern that emerges at the death of Douglas's water skier. When new ideas are born,

when new practices and ideologies make their way into public discourse against resistance, what emerges is the figuration of monstrosity.

We gather an even larger sense of how this rhetoric of monstrosity works in a story Grace Paley tells about taking a bus trip to Florida to meet her husband during the war. Again we encounter a South confronting change. It is 1943, a time of rising expectations coupled with the painfully segregated mingling of black with white soldiers. Although Paley is not by any stretch of the imagination a southern writer, what I want to capture is the volatility of the world she rides into—the sense of encountering a political space so combustible it is ready to explode with violence or vulnerability. The result is an encounter not only with the South but with southern habits of troping. Paley connects with a racial imaginary that seems unthinkable and uninhabitable: she comes face to face with a rhetoric of monstrosity invented to cope with a situation of change.

On the bus, now deep in South Carolina or Georgia, Paley "had been sleeping, waking, reading, writing, dozing, waking. So many hours, the movement of the passengers was like a tide that sometimes ebbed and now seemed to be noisily rising." Like Douglas's water skier she is inundated—this time by a human tide—out of which struggles a black woman "holding a large sleeping baby, who, with the heaviness of sleep, his arms tight around her neck, seemed to be pulling her head down." Barely awake, and now in the last seat in the whites-only section of the bus, Paley offers this woman her seat with no thought of the segregationist anger such an act might incite. "She looked to the right and left as well as she could. Softly, she said, 'Oh, no.' I became fully awake. A white man was standing right beside her, but on the other side of the invisible racial border. Of course she couldn't accept my seat." Warding off the bad dreams all around her, Paley asks to hold the baby until "out of sheer exhaustion," the black woman "disengaged the child from her body and placed him in my lap. He was deep in child-sleep. He stirred, but not enough to bother himself or me. . . . I was so comfortable under his nice weight." She starts to doze but is jolted awake by the "face of a white man talking. In a loud voice, he addressed me: 'Lady, I wouldn't of touched that thing with a meat hook'" (1997, 43).

Everything is startling about this turn of speech. A baby, drifting into sleep, returns as a monster child in this man's lacerating invective; the child is objectified, made mechanical.[2] This forceful, repulsive image creates a category of pollution in which something very familiar—a sleeping baby—is made completely unfamiliar, estranged.[3]

But what is most uncanny about this behavior is that it is also a version

of the norm. Because of the shift Paley enacts in the plane of reality, something familiar and expected in the southern order of things—a black women nurturing white babies—turns into its mirror image—a white woman nurturing a black baby. In this new and threatening form it is denied or cast away; it returns as monstrosity.

This stretching of speech into oblivion is designed to create odd sensations in listeners and readers alike. An ordinary child, sleepy, at home on a white woman's lap, is made freakish, attacked by disanimating rhetoric, envisioned as a corpse, as pollution, as a "thing." This act has a variety of consequences. First, it becomes a metaphor for somatic knowledge, for the ways in which an entire culture has taught itself to think about race. Second, it suggests the bizarreness, the inherent uncanniness, of a culture that thinks this way, that produces such knowledge (in violent acts as well as violent rhetoric) as power. Third, Paley suggests the ways in which even small events can have the power of history making. "That is how history is made," says Julius Lester. "Ordinary people make a simple, human decision to live differently than their parents lived. Ordinary people make a decision to assert their humanness instead of continuing to live in deference to a collectivity that denies it" (1991, 31).

And yet collectivity triumphs here. Although the white man's rhetoric gives this story its edge, what startles most is Paley's and her black companion's inability, within these labyrinths of subordination, to meet one another's eyes: "I thought, Oh, this world will end in ice. I could do nothing but look straight into his eyes. I did not look away from him. Then I held that little body a little tighter, kissed his curly head, pressed him even closer, so that he began to squirm. So sleepy, he reshaped himself inside my arms. His mother tried to narrow herself away from that dangerous border, too frightened to move at all. After a couple of minutes, she leaned forward a little placed her hand on the baby's head, and held it there until the next stop. I couldn't look up into her mother face" (43). The allusion to Robert Frost ("Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say ice") is Paley's way of circulating a counterrhetoric; her need to say "*mother* face" suggests the importance of reanimating this mother's and child's humanity to disavow the force of the white man's lacerating words. And yet Paley also notes the Medusan power of a white man's metaphor. Petrified, unable to look, these women hover on a dangerous border where monstrosity squats in one man's eyes, ready to explode. (His words are not just linguistically intimidating; the meat hook is an implement of loathing; it intimates violence to come.) Warding off this petrifaction, we welcome the black woman's care:

"her hand on his head is quite small, though she tries by spreading her fingers wide to hide him from the white man" (43).

The anthropologist Mary Douglas explains that many cultures respond to anomaly by reordering unexpected events, reducing ambiguity to a new set of rules. The southern stories we've begun to analyze suggest an equally heightened response to dissonance. Instead of reducing disorder to rule, dissonance gets magnified or multiplied; anomaly gets figured as monstrosity, and monstrosity itself becomes a way of casting out or expelling the new. This suggests a poverty within southern culture's political idiom—an idiom that is not enriched by change but made hysterical. I am arguing that Douglas's and Paley's stories are primarily about resistance to change. When crisis erupts, when change grapples toward history, it is configured via appalling body images as something excessive, as monstrosity.

We see this clearly in Douglas's story about the skier and the water moccasins. Like Paley, Douglas touches on the power of local, vernacular speech by insisting on the repeatability of the water skier's story—its circulation as rumor or gossip, its shift from locale to locale. The snake-woman's fate changes into an incredible story about white panic—a sensational diatribe about convulsive white bodies.

By focusing on local rhetoric Douglas reins her story in; she flattens out her own anecdote, de-dramatizes it, insists that what's most interesting about the white woman's fate isn't her denouement but the valence of this story as gossip—its strange repeatability at a fragile moment of historical change:

> This tragedy, they say, occurred on Lake Bolivar, Lake Washington, Lake Jackson, Lake St. John, Catahoula Lake, Lake Chicot, Moon Lake, Horn Lake, Eagle Lake, Lake Providence, Lake Concordia. Sometimes there is another boat nearby, a crowd of witnesses. Again, the two young people are alone on the lake. Or only the narrator of the tale witnessed the accident. Or he heard it from a cousin of the girl's.
>
> But *you*—you're the one, I hear you say. You're the driver of this boat. You're pulling the skier. Is the story true?
>
> It's always true. Always true that a tangle of water moccasins lies in wait for the skier. Always, always true. (1988, 131)

Douglas turns her own gothic filigree into a question about public culture and the circulation of signs within this culture. By foregrounding this story's power as rumor, Douglas asks, Why does this story keep circulating, why does it keep reemerging in new locations as an effervescence of the

local? Douglas fingers the source of these southern monster stories; she asks, Where do they come from? Who invents them, what keeps them circulating? And what about the role of both black and white southern women writers in this circulation? In *Can't Quit You, Baby,* the white writer becomes the "real" driver of the boat—no longer the skier's helpless female double, but her antagonist, unsettling her bland southern beauty with a writhing mass of serpentine trauma. Why?

Answering this question will constitute the journey of this book. We will investigate a group of women writers from very different southern localities who keep circulating and recirculating grotesque stories about the South—stories preoccupied with figures of dirt, monstrosity, the throwaway, gargantuan women, old children, and the problem of arrested systems of knowledge. These common themes have a great deal to teach us about the intersections between race and gender in twentieth-century America, where racism has become the dominant economy. These fictions ferret out subsemantic obsessions about race and gender that invite a rethinking of some of the most basic categories that we use to think about American literature.

These texts deploy a series of strategies—the explosion of monstrosity or violence, the flickery image of injustice (which remains unconceptualized, unacknowledged but also well known), discomforting emblems of neglect, disregard, elision, the throwaway, gargantuan women, or hybrid bodies that try to move the reader toward unregistered precincts of knowledge. But beyond this, my interest in monster stories, in recurrences of the grotesque and repeated tales of dirt and desire, also emanates from the incredible suspense that these tales generate, from a sense that whenever you're riding through the lake of southern culture, some confederacy of water moccasins awaits you—intimations of occluded drama that disoccludes itself, that wells up—attacking the body and misshaping it.

In Alice Walker's *Meridian* this monstrosity erupts in a slave woman's tale, a story told to a group of spellbound white children:

> Encouraged by the children to become more and more extravagant in her description, more pitiless in her plot, Louvinie created a masterpiece of fright . . . the intricate, chilling story of the old man whose hobby was catching and burying children up to their necks and then draping their heads—which stuck up in rows, like cabbages—with wriggly eels dipped in honey. Long before the culprit received his comeuppance, young Saxon had slumped dead to the ground of a heart attack. He was seven years old. . . .

> Louvinie's tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one's tongue in one's mouth or in a special spot of one's own choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig. (1976, 43, 44)

Once again the convulsive white body marks the "southernness" of this story. As for Louvinie, her tongue is buried beneath a scrawny tree that grows huge and sacred. Its fate is duplicated in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman,* a tale in which a slave becomes a tree to escape his master's cruelty—a transformation that, finally, yields no protection. Both trees are chopped down, their great-rooted music riven. But these trees also turn into stories: Walker suggests that a scrap of Louvinie's tale has been saved in the library, its words copied out—ironically—in a white child's shaky hand.

The story of Louvinie's severed tongue finds its own bizarre cognate in Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby.* Whereas Louvinie is a black woman who loses her power of speech, in Douglas's novel we meet a white woman who refuses to hear. We first encounter the middle-aged Cornelia in the kitchen, trying *not to listen* while Julia, a black woman who has worked for her for more than a decade, recounts the sexual harassment she endured at another job. Julia's story about a sex-driven white man is so shocking to her white listener (how could Julia have been molested by someone Cornelia knows, how could Julia have complained to his *wife*?) that Cornelia refuses to take it all in: "The white woman is deaf and wears a hearing aid, a tiny shell in her ear with a cord running down to the battery and receiver clipped to her brassiere strap," making it easy to retreat into silence when Julia tells her about Wayne Jones: "He was a damn crazy man—crazy for black women." But the white employer hears nothing of this: "Such behavior is inappropriate even to Wayne Jones. The white woman does not wish to credit it. You mean he got after you down there—at the cafe? No" (4).

Douglas's narrator does not identify with Julia (or "Tweet," as she is known throughout the story), even though Tweet is one of the novel's best narrators. Instead, she allies herself, shamefacedly, with the not-hearing, self-deafening white woman, whose disabilities become a symbol for the fiction-writing disabilities of the author herself:

> Now . . . as I struggle with my own difficulties, with the near impossibility for *me* of grappling with these events—I think that perhaps—no, certainly—I am the one who is skiing, who cannot ac-

knowledge or express the complexity of all those layers of circumstance and imagining—in all our lives, but particularly in Tweet's. I thought I was at home in Tweet's life, that when she spoke, I heard her speak with her own authentic voice. . . .

But of course I never heard her speak, *except to Cornelia.* Does that trouble you as it does me? Again and again I have turned aside, shied away from knowing how she spoke at home, in bed at night with Nig, sitting in their crowded little house, the gas heater pulsing, with Robert and Rosa and their friends and neighbors. I wrote nothing, for example, of Martin Luther King's death, except that Tweet turned away from Cornelia's gesture of sympathy. What tangle of snakes have I been skiing over? (239–40).

Here, late in the novel, the author becomes both driver and skier, trying to navigate southern imponderables while deaf to African American culture's encyclopedic knowledge of race and class prejudice, its habits of protest and economic fortitude. "She is black," the narrator writes. "Cornelia is white. She is servant, Cornelia is mistress. She is poor. The measure of her poverty is that she considers Cornelia (who thinks of herself as modestly well off) immensely wealthy" (240).

The question that Douglas unearths, a question driving many of the stories we will read in this study, is frighteningly simple. *How do you write a story everyone knows but nobody hears?* How do you write annals for the very histories you want to annul? This white obliviousness, this act of writing without listening, finds its emblem in the deaf white heroine-employer, her hearing aid hooked to her brassiere, who becomes, in turn, the deaf white author, the nib of her pen deployed in criticism of southern culture but still refusing to encounter its margins.

Once again: How do you write a story everyone knows but white people rarely hear? How do you speak a story when your tongue as been severed? The grotesque offers one answer. It offers a figure of speech with the volume turned up, a body that entices one's hearing and speaking because of its anomalousness. But I want to add to this analogy by insisting that critics of American fiction are also at fault; we have been reading modern literature by southern women with its tongue cut out, ignoring the blood at the root; we have been reading this fiction with its volume turned down. Writers as diverse as Porter, Hurston, Welty, McCullers, O'Connor, Walker, Williams, Douglas, Gilchrist, and Ansa (not to mention the black women who write in equally stirring ways about ancestral southern roots, including Morrison, Clifton, Lorde, and Naylor) produce vociferous writing that is incred-

ibly responsive to political silence, body talk, and object obsession as well as to a series of ontological questions about rights to citizenship and self-possession that not only plague the South but have spread throughout the nation. The goal of this book is to turn up the volume on southern studies by providing a new set of categories for examining southern women's fiction, to find new terms for cataloguing its arrested systems of knowledge. How do we reinscribe a literature that keeps repeating stories about race-thinking that everyone knows but no one wants to hear?

Turning Up the Volume on Southern Women's Writing

Why do the categories dominating the study of southern literature need reshaping? We know the litany of terms associated with southern letters, the truisms. "The South [has] a tradition which is more oriented toward history, toward the family . . . toward storytelling, and toward tragedy," Walker Percy intones (1965, 95). But are these really the most interesting repetitions in southern women's writing? Let me suggest some alternatives.

Let's say, instead, that southern literature has a tradition that is oriented toward crises of whiteness: toward convulsive white bodies and the portrayal of white panic. Louvinie's story capitalizes on this panic. As she tells her white wards: "In deepest Africa, there lived a man blacker than the night, whose occupation was catching little white children . . . and planting them in his garden . . . because he liked to hear them wail and scream and call for their mothers" (1976, 44). The "shock" of discovering African Americans in unexpected places induces a strange sense of trauma for white characters in literature by both black and white writers.[4]

Are the uses of history, the family, storytelling, and the past as tragedy still more of a magnet than the "theme" of white panic? Then let's explore the ways that southern literature is tantalized by the discovery of hidden black mothers, not only at the end of "The Little Convent Girl" (where everyone who "wanted to say good-by" was also curious about "the mother. . . . Some expressed surprise in a whistle; some in other ways. All exclaimed audibly, or to themselves, 'Colored!'" [1995, 175]), but also at the end of O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and Cather's *Sapphira and Slave Girl.*[5] Or say that southern fiction is larded with portraits of throwaway bodies, or that it is obsessed with unusual morphological types—with female gargantua and dwarfish child narrators who tell uncanny stories ("Miss Amelia crossed the porch with two slow, gangling strides . . . and stood looking thoughtfully at the stranger. Gingerly, with one long brown forefinger, she touched the hump on his back" [McCullers 1971, 9]).

Is this too slender a paradigm shift? Then let's go on. Say that southern literature is obsessed with arrested systems of knowledge, with redefining racialized object relations in a post-Lockean world where people's identities are always coterminous with what they own. Or say that this literature is obsessed, especially post-emancipation, with describing the objects and people who pass back and forth between black and white culture. Say that southern literature is most itself *not* when it re-creates miscegenation as tragedy but when it examines genealogies of labor—foregrounding the extraordinary costs to African Americans of lives trapped between the spaces of domestic and agricultural labor.

To these new categories—(1) convulsive white bodies, (2) covert or hidden black mothers, (3) jettisoned bodies pointing to (4) arrested systems of knowledge or "the unthought known," (5) crossover objects defining a weird zone of contact between black and white cultures filled with anxiety, and (6) stories attesting to the daily trauma of domestic and agricultural labor, add a seventh, (7) a sense of blackness as something to be inventoried—that is, reduced, in white fiction, to an atmosphere or part of a list. Whereas southern literature by white women is obsessed with rehearsing (and sometimes criticizing) the lists in which African Americans figure as objects, get turned into atmosphere, southern literature by black women is obsessed with extracting blacks from such lists.[6] Or, while we're on the subject of lists, say that white southern literature is obsessed with (8) repetition—with stories that will not go away, that keep repeating themselves endlessly, helplessly, in a kind of literary stutterance that creates a rich field of intertextual neurosis, while black literature about the South contributes to the exorcism of this repetition by ringing these stories backwards, providing white nannies for black babies and digging children out of ditches as fast as white culture flings them in.[7] Is it any wonder that (9) southern literature is obsessed with migration and with the problem of public time in unexpected ways? ("'Been waiting long?' Sam Guidry asked me. 'About two and a half hours, sir,' I said. I was supposed to say, 'Not long,' and I was supposed to grin; but I didn't do either." Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* [1993, 47].)

If we want to emphasize the ways women's writing challenges the public sphere, have we noticed that southern women are more interested in (10) the secrets of political economy, with the ways in which politics gets discussed in the kitchen, than in who is playing politics at the state house? Or that it portrays the civic discussions parleyed between white children and their black caretakers as more progressive or, at any rate, more daring?[8] No? Then say that (11) literature by southern women often eschews romance but asks

about who gets to work at the post office, who owns the ballot box, who gets to plan utopias; or (12) that southern literature is obsessed with dirt—who owns it, who cleans it; with bodies that go into the ground but also with white pollution: with landscapes so glaring in their whiteness that they lacerate any reader who cannot turn away. Say that (13) southern literature is concerned with the usual sites of American commerce—agriculture, factory work, domestic labor, sales, construction—but that this literature explores the ways in which each of these sites is inflected by race. Say that (14) place is never simply "place" in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape, or that (15) bodies of water—the great Mississippi, Lake Okeechobee, the Pearl River, Moon Lake, Silver Lake, Lake Okatukla—are never simply sites for leisure or hauling cotton or crossing over but sites for recycling sadness. Say that (16) the grotesque is not just another trope designed to confirm our belief in the South as "the Sahara of the Bozart" but a technique for positioning texts at the edges of southern disorder, and that this disorder is worth studying because it has become an American habit of disorder as well. Finally, say that southern women writers are interested in (17) occluded knowledge—for white women, the gender and race practices that their characters know by heart and yet rarely acknowledge, for black women, a longing for lost epistemologies—the names, customs, revenants, and remnants of Africa.[9]

Or, if you still can take a breath, say that (18) this is a literature obsessed with its own limitations, that asks us to think about America's burgeoning brands of consumerism as we move from the South of the twenties to the South of the seventies and eighties,[10] or note that (19) southern women's literature carries a double burden: it focuses on the mechanical, the expected, the everyday, and yet it represents this world in terms that are fantastic, unexpected, and perpetually uncanny.

If this list feels exhausting, still, it is only half done—and this raises a crucial question. Can we really change the categories we use to analyze southern literature so easily—or, for that matter, so compendiously? In another of the memorable, axiom-producing interviews that famous writers are prone to give, Eudora Welty provides these moving maxims: "We in the South have grown up being narrators. We have lived in a place—that's the word, Place—where storytelling is a way of life. . . . Our concept of Place isn't just history or philosophy; it's a sensory thing of sights and smells and seasons and earth and water and sky as well" (1984, 95).[11] Let's begin this transformation of categories at their root, by examining the sensory resonances of place, of "earth and water" in southern literature.

Since every literature with a setting invents or reflects a locality, the southern claim to "place" always strikes me as peculiar. And yet, perhaps we can find a smidgen of truth here; perhaps there is a different phenomenology of place in southern literature? If so, it is not a vision of place associated with romanticism or the virtues of rootedness that Welty describes.

Take the figure of the dead white woman who gets pulled from the lake in Douglas's novel, her lost body clinging to a waterscape that becomes a cover for white anxieties about the changing South. This trope about a body that merges with water or earth occurs frequently in southern literature; it is an event, a preoccupation, shared by white and black writers alike, one that takes diverse forms.[12] But for the most part the bodies merging with southern landscapes are black—or at least, culturally defined as black. The white-looking mother who discovers she has given birth to a black-looking child in "Désirée's Baby" presupposes her own African Americanness and commits simultaneous suicide and infanticide:

> She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmonde. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.
>
> She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. (1979, 406)

The white woman who discovers in "The Little Convent Girl" that her mother is black drops into the landscape:

> No one was looking, no one saw more than a flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water.
>
> The roustabout dived, as the roustabouts always do, after the drowning . . . but she had gone down in a whirlpool. Perhaps, as the pilot had told her whirlpools always did, it may have carried her through to the underground river, to that vast, hidden, dark Mississippi that flows beneath the one we see; for her body was never found." (1995, 176)[13]

The black youths playing at the swimming hole in Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" are cruelly flung into the water:

> CRACK!
>
> Buck stopped at the edge of the embankment, his head jerked backward, his body arched stiffly to one side; he toppled headlong,

> sending up a shower of bright spray to the sunlight. The creek bubbled. (1965, 28–29)

Easter, the dirt-bespangled white orphan in Welty's "Moon Lake," is haplessly knocked off the dock by a black youth who works at her summer camp:

> She dropped like one hit in the head by a stone from a sling. In their retrospect, her body, never turning, seemed to languish upright for a moment, then descend. It went to meet and was received by blue air. It dropped as if handed down all the way and was let into the brown water . . . and went out of sight at once. (1949, 141)

Finally, Gus, the black child in Ellen Gilchrist's "President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," is invited by Robert, his white friend, to stay at Robert's mansion while his parents are away. Found out by Robert's parents, Gus jumps from the third-story window:

> Gus jumped into the heart of the crepe myrtle tree. He dove into the tree and swayed in its branches like a cat. He steadied, grabbed for a larger branch, found a temporary footing, grabbed again, and began to fall through the upthrust branches like a bird shot in flight. As Robert watched, Gus came to rest upon the ground, his wet black hair festooned with the soft pink blossoms of the crepe myrtle. (1981, 37)

In general parlance, literary characters who submerge themselves in water or earth provide a litany of romantic transcendence or transfiguration. But in southern literature extraordinary numbers of women, men, and children fall into the landscape and disappear. It is as if the foundation or basis for this world is made out of repudiated, throwaway bodies that mire the earth: a landscape built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture.

"Sights and Smells and Seasons"

How should we describe the sense of "place" that dominates southern women's writing? The answer will inevitably change across temporalities and localities, but let's look at four different ways in which southern characters inhabit space.

Reverse Autochthony

Autochthonous means "sprung from the earth, self-born"; it describes Cadmus's action at the founding of Thebes as he sows dragon's teeth to cre-

ate a pure race of men; it recurs in the powerful moment from *Paradise Lost* when, at the creator's touch, gallant creatures claw their way up from the earth: "The grassy Clods now Calv'd, now half appear'd / The Tawny Lion, pawing to get free / . . . the swift Stag from under ground / Bore up his branching head" (VII, ll. 463–64, 469–70). In Milton's poem the inanimate strains to get free; in contrast, Faulkner uses the myth of Theban autochthony to mythologize or hyperanimate Thomas Sutpen: "He now had a plantation; inside of two years he had dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and planted his land with seed cotton which General Compson loaned him" (1936, 40).[14]

But in southern women's writing we see a movement from relative freedom to disanimation, from the attempt to found a pure race by sewing dragon's teeth or dragging "house and gardens out of virgin swamp" to descriptions of bodies that fall in the opposite direction. The examples are legion: "In de swamps dey used to stake 'em out all day and all night, and all day and all night and all day wid dey hans and feet tied so dey couldn't scretch and let de muskeeters eat 'em alive" (Porter 1972, 342); Ellen Fairchild "felt as if the cotton fields so solid to the sight had opened up and swallowed her daughter" (Welty 1946, 89); "He knew . . . that he had to baptize the child even as he drowned him" (O'Connor 1964, 422–23); "Mr. Paradise's head appeared from time to time on the surface of the water. Finally, far downstream, the old man rose like some ancient water monster and stood empty-handed, staring with his dull eyes as far down the river line as he could see" (O'Connor 1971, "The River," 174). In *Delta Wedding* Pinchy seems to disappear into thin air when Troy Flavin gives her an inedible morsel to eat: "Eat it or give it to the other Negroes. Now scat!" the foreman growls at her. "He clapped his hands at her skirt. Pinchy, with the cake, moved stiffly, out into the light, like a matchstick in the glare, and was swallowed up in it" (1946, 197). Finally, before the Okeechobee starts swallowing people in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston defines the pleasures of life on the muck: "Work all day for money, fight all day for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants" (1990b, 125). But when Lake Okeechobee is unleashed by the hurricane and feeds on everything in sight, this rich earth becomes a graveyard: "corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage" (162). Once again African American women and men are flung into the earth:

> "Hey, dere, y'all! Don't dump dem bodies in de hole lak dat! Examine every last one of 'em and find out if they's white or black."
>
> ". . . Whut difference do it make 'bout de color? Dey all needs buryin' in uh hurry."
>
> "Got orders from headquarters. They makin' coffins fuh all de white folks. . . . Don't dump no white folks in de hole jus' so."
>
> "Whut tuh do 'bout de colored folks? Got boxes fuh dem too?"
>
> "Nope. They cain't find enough of 'em tuh go 'round. Jus' sprinkle plenty quick-lime over 'em and cover 'em up." . . .
>
> "They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment," Tea Cake observed to the man working next to him. "Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law." (162–63)

We can now describe reverse autochthony as a site where both grownups and children are hurled into water or earth without proper rituals, without bearing witness to grief, without proper mourning. Oddly, this story was repeated as recently, as grimly, as 1998, when three white men dragged James Byrd Jr. to death behind their pickup truck. It was repeated as recently as 1996, almost sixty years after the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* in the story of Whitney Elaine Johnson, a baby born to a black father and a white mother, who was buried in Thomasville, Georgia, in an all-white cemetery. Three days later Logan Lewis, deacon of the Barnetts Creek Baptist Church, informed the family that the newborn's coffin had to be moved to another resting place. "He said they don't allow half-breeds in their cemetery," the baby's maternal grandmother told the press. "That's a 100 percent white cemetery." In his interview with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* Lewis explained: "there's not any mixing of cemeteries anywhere in this area. If someone white asked to be buried in a black cemetery, he'd be a laughing stock" (*New York Times,* 21 March 1996, 1). The deacons also argued that a black child's presence desacralized their holy ground, that "their tradition was in pieces," and the only way to make themselves whole was to move "the tiny coffin" elsewhere.

"Reverse autochthony" presents a peculiar literary pattern in which figures of speech lose their shape and are put back into the ground, into the space of earth and materiality, revealing a Machiavellian allegiance with base rather than superstructure. (When Daphne becomes a laurel tree she becomes a named, locatable entity; she is not equated with inchoate matter, nor, for that matter, is Wordsworth's Lucy.) But these southern, subter-

ranean bodies are kin to the throwaway bodies I will describe in chapter 3, and they present "place" not as the nostalgic location of "sights and smells and seasons" but as a trash heap with profound economic resonance, describing a world whose foundations have been built on men and women who have "worked all day" and been thrown away.

Landscapes of Melancholy or Occluded Sadness (Or, Place as Crypt)

If "reverse autochthony" founders as jargon, presenting a gladiatorial mouthful, I still want a phrase describing a southern pastime that is anything but glamorous: people disappearing into water or earth—bodies disposed of, cast away without funerals, left unmourned. I've suggested that a deliberative accumulation of capital is at work here, but if we find a rapacious economy, we also discover a frightening psychology: the creation of landscapes loaded with trauma unspoken, with bodies unhealed or uncared for, with racial melancholia.

This melancholy (rather than the self-magnifying guilt we sometimes find in Faulkner's or Warren's fiction) is the particular subject of Katherine Anne Porter's short stories, which depict white children digging in the earth—with no strong sense of what they're after. In "The Fig Tree," a story from *The Old Order,* Miranda, an avatar for Porter herself, buries a baby chick who "was spread out on his side with his eyes shut and his mouth open. . . . 'Lazy,' said Miranda, poking him with her toe. Then she saw he was dead" (1972, 355). The children in Porter's fiction are always making coffins, climbing in and out of open graves, and scratching about in the earth:

> It wasn't hard work digging a hole with her little spade in the loose dry soil. Miranda wrapped the slimpsy chicken in tissue paper, trying to make it look pretty, laid it in the box carefully, and covered it up with a nice mound, just like people's. She had hardly got it piled up grave shape, kneeling and leaning to smooth it over, when a strange sound came from somewhere, a very sad little crying sound. It said Weep, weep, weep, three times like that slowly, and it seemed to come from the mound of dirt. (356)

Miranda is haunted by something, but what does she hear?

> "Hurry up, Baby, you'll get left!" Miranda felt she couldn't bear to be left. She ran all shaking with fright. Her father gave her the annoyed look he always gave her when he said something to upset her and then

> saw that she was upset. . . . "Stop getting so excited, Baby, you know we wouldn't leave you for anything." Miranda wanted to talk back . . . but she was still listening for that tiny sound: "Weep, weep." She lagged and pulled backward, looking over her shoulder, but her father hurried her toward the carry-all. But things didn't make sounds if they were dead. They couldn't. That was one of the signs. Oh, but she had heard it. (356)

"You'll get left." This threat, and the exorbitant threats of the former slave, Uncle Jimbilly, echo throughout Miranda's obsessions with creaturely weeping.

The suspicion that Miranda participates in a world where living things can be buried alive drives her story toward the borders of the fantastic, mingling ghost story with realist melodrama. This is an ambiguous tale about a little girl who is too sensitive and overreacts to everything, but it is also a fantasmatic tale about a world filled with factual ghosts, with disobedient slaves staked out in the swamps, black babies malnourished when their mothers suckle white children: a material foundation for a culture that contains too many uncounted bodies. Which of these two readings should we believe—the psychoanalytic or the historical? Avery Gordon argues that they must be read simultaneously: "Freud's science will try, once and for all, to rid itself of all vestiges of animism by making all the spirits or the hauntings come from the unconscious, from inside the troubled individual. . . . Freud will try to demystify our holdover beliefs in the power of the *world at large,* hoping to convince us that everything that seems to be coming at us from the outside is really coming from this now shrunken inside" (1997, 47–48). In other words, these uncanny experiences are both internal and relentlessly social, reminding us that "what lies between society and psyche is hardly an inert empty space" (47–48).

This is a world encumbered with endless melancholy.[15] While Miranda's grandmother has given birth to eleven children and lost three of them, Nannie Gay, a slave purchased to be Granny's playmate and then forced to nurse Granny's white infants, has lost more; out of her nine children only three remain. Is it any surprise that Miranda hears weeping? The grown-ups may be dead to these voices, but Miranda hears sorrow without ceasing. The landscape of *The Old Order* is filled with real and hypothetical bodies—with buried children, buried chickens, and the bodies of tortured slaves.[16] In the secret world of the child, these voices come to life again. Their weeping marks not only the child's individual loss but her culture's predations.

If for Welty "place does endow," what it endows in Porter's landscape is the burning sense that all around us, and all around the child, there is an excess or remainder. Something is calling out from Miranda's past that escapes the control of its concepts, that continues to weep. The child becomes the agonized vehicle for this lost remainder.[17]

White Detritus

If the depths of southern "place" yield the remains of foundation-bearing black folks who lie beneath the earth (the subjects of lynching, shooting, drowning, murder, beating, suicide, being ignored, or being worked to death), what's going on for the white folks at the surface, in the exterior spaces of this world? Given the literary patterns we've examined, one would expect a white landscape in which blackness becomes the core around which concentric, dominant whitenesses can be formulated. But instead, literature by southern women explores a radically dislocated surface landscape filled with jagged white signifiers and pallid detritus that bespeaks a constant uneasiness about the meaning of whiteness.[18]

This suggests a third gestalt for examining a "southern" phenomenology of place—one in which an odd white pollution hangs in the air, as if these writers are hyperconscious about trying to thematize something about whiteness that passively resists articulation. I want to argue that a series of uncanny white surfaces fill women's texts with fragmentation and unevenness. In *Delta Wedding* the air is heavy with cotton lint from the compress, requiring constant black labor. In *Sapphira,* the air is flecked with flour dust—freckled with scraps of dead, unusable skin—floating signifiers of whiteness that possess a form but lack any narrative trajectory.

This suggests a new take on Toni Morrison's descriptions of the ways whiteness works in American fiction. In her analysis of "the parasitical nature of white freedom" (1992, 57) Morrison describes what happens "at the end of literary journeys into the forbidden space of blackness" (58). She argues that the usual suspects (white male canonical authors) portray their heroes as "the inheritors of the blood of African Kings" as they dance over fields of "frozen whiteness." Snow becomes "the wasteland of unmeaning, unfathomable whiteness" in Poe or, in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King,* the sign of "a new white man in a new found land." In each of these fictions (by Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway, as well as Poe and Bellow) blackness is "evil and protective . . . fearful and desirable—all the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless,

unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say" (58).

But images of frozen whiteness speak very differently in fictions by white southern women. When Frankie dispenses with her black caretaker, Berenice, frost silvers "the brown grass and the roofs of neighbors' houses, and even the thinned leaves of the rusty arbor" (McCullers 1975, 151). Miss Snowdie MacLain, a white albino, is the epitome of protected femininity who lives in a shower of whiteness in Welty's *Golden Apples,* while in Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby,* Cornelia begins to talk to an imaginary Tweet—for the first time—in a New York snowstorm: "I'm cold. The wind is blowing. This crosstown wind. . . . And I have to watch my step every minute or I'll fall down. Listen. Cornelia put her foot on a slanting icy mound, slipped, recovered her balance" (1988, 193). As Tweet begins to speak and Cornelia to listen, what she hears are Tweet's hallucinatory stories about the heaviness of things:

> Wait, Cornelia says, This is heavy. Too heavy. . . .
>
> You think you know heavy? You hadn't drug a cotton sack twelve or fourteen hours a day, have you? Carried a load of somebody else's wash on your head. Carried two buckets of water from the cistern? That's heavy.
>
> Whatever this is, it's heavy, too, Cornelia says.
>
> If it's wash, carry it home, wash it and iron it. Get you a red wagon and a basket and carry it back. Hold on, that's the message. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on. If it's water, drink with it, wash with it, cook with it. If it's a cotton sack, hmmm. . . . My advice, if it's a cotton sack, go get you a better job. (196)

Here whiteness becomes a burden, not because whites are victims but because they have no perspective on their own skins. Throughout southern women's fiction we find these weird images—part bodies, fragments of face paint or skin, texts where images of pallor spill out of the atmosphere like ghosts going to the wrong wedding.[19]

Instead of a gestalt in which "whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable," in the landscapes imagined by these women writers, whiteness speaks in water moccasin tongues; it erupts with too much meaning; it is terrifyingly dynamic, vulnerable, agitated, tortured, vertiginous. Or, it is partial, fragmented, an intensive source of labor, a site of confusion that gums up the works. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* the miller's cleanshavenness is reputed to be "unusual in a man of his age and station" be-

cause "a miller's beard got powdered with flour-dust, and when the sweat ran down his face this flour got wet and left him with a beard full of dough" (Cather 1968, 4). Things migrate or coagulate where they do not belong. This coagulation recurs in Sapphira's swollen white legs, and her body parts become near-totemic objects requiring black labor and vibrating with revulsion and fixation—as if some demonic aura of whiteness has dropped down on her body and immobilized it forever.

I've already suggested that this flour floats through the air like so much dead skin, like the leavings of some decaying albino body. It creates an intriguing sense of disconnection, unanchored identity, and fragmentation—an "anguished preoccupation with the mobility of meaning" (Bersani 1977, 59), a bizarre self-scattering. Why have we failed to recognize these persistent landscapes that are already in pieces but cling to the body like a funky, disintegrating amnion and cannot be brushed away?

Southern Geographies

These maps for tracing alternative phenomenologies of place in southern women's writing need not be multiplied exhaustively, but they do suggest several ways for redistricting a southern social geography that should make the quiddity of "southern" places more interesting.[20] First, in many of Flannery O'Connor's stories "place" is given a weird animistic force; it bites into the story's ending, gaining a bizarre oral power ("Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth" [1971, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 127]). Second, as we've seen in Porter and Welty (but also rediscover in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*), southern whites may encounter African Americans as landscape, background, atmosphere—as part of the furniture—although these perceptions may also be shared by bourgeois blacks in urban African American fictions: "Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grape-fruit" (Larsen 1986, 184). Third, in looking again at *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* we get a bifocal sense of place as the novel moves from dreams of a black town's self-creativity to the nightmare of the hurricane's earth-shattering volatility. After constructing a town out of nothing (Eatonville, like Sutpen's Hundred, seems magically dragged from the earth), Hurston reproduces an incredible instability of place; she sends her African American characters southward and lurching for shelter as the hurricane explodes and white people seize the only locus of safety ("White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room," 156). Finally, in "Neighbors," Diane Oliver's story about the violence surrounding desegregation, a bomb as destructive as a

Florida hurricane rakes the home of a black family who have been preparing their little boy for his first day at a whites-only public school. In the bomb's aftershock "Ellie stood up and crept toward the living room crying to prepare herself for what she would see. . . . There were jagged holes all along the front of the house and the sofa was covered with glass and paint" (1991, 479).

This litany of places could go on, from the commercial romance of the Louisiana racetracks in "Old Mortality" to the diverse rural and urban spaces described in *Meridian,* to the losing battles over Mississippi property rights depicted in *Can't Quit You, Baby,* to the bulldozer revolution that dominates the end of *The Golden Apples.* We need to contemplate both the *phenomenologies* of place that bind such texts together and the multiregional facts and perspectives on place that change from decade to decade and blow texts apart. (As Foner comments, "from the earliest days of settlement, there had never been a single white South [but] areas with sharply differing political economies" from the plantation belt to the up-country inhabited by small farmers and herdsmen engaged in mixed or subsistence agriculture [1988, 11].) We could add that there has never been a single black South either, and that the "sharply differing political economies" involving race have become even more distinct over time. And yet some critics might argue that this very diversity confirms Welty's sense that "place does endow," since southern writers, black and white, are so caught up in writing out of and redefining the meaning of place. Very well. But I would add one more proviso. If place is so weighty and important in twentieth-century southern literature, it is because its central feature (even after the sixties) is so constant. It is, and remains, the specter of segregation.

In Thomasville, Georgia, after a great deal of press coverage and pressure from the Southern Baptist Convention, the church fathers of the Barnetts Creek Baptist Church allowed Whitney Elaine Johnson to stay in the white cemetery where she was buried. The minister, Mr. VanLandingham, insisted that "we are all aware that God is no respecter of persons. We are also aware that we are part of an imperfect world and in our own imperfection we find ourselves having to make uninformed and or misinformed decisions and then having to live with the outcome" (*New York Times,* 21 March 1996, 1). Here doctrinal equality—a God who does not discriminate—meets with barely veiled contempt for the baby's "imperfections" and a regret about the loss of this graveyard as the site of a ghostly white autochthony. As Rick Bragg reported in the *Times* article, "Unlike schools

and lunch counters, it was just one of those invisible lines in Southern life that no one seemed to care to cross, for as long as people here can recall."

Place, then, may be beautifully limned in southern fiction, but what it endows is almost always racially marked, as we discover on a trip to the cemetery in Welty's *Golden Apples:* "Virgie leaned out to look for a certain blackened lamb on a small hump of earth that was part of her childhood. It was the grave of some lady's stillborn child (now she knew it must have been Miss Nell Loomis's)" (1949, 260). The least visible but most prominent thing about this hallowed place is its "invisible line," the fact that there are no African Americans here except for the laborers. As Virgie moves closer to her mother's burial site, she sees her father's grave "and the red hole torn out beside it. In spite of the flowers waiting, the place still smelled of the sweat of Negro diggers and of a big cedar root which had been cut through and glimmered wetly in the bed of the grave" (262). Sights and smells and seasons, indeed.

Anatomizing the Grotesque

If "place," that time-honored term for thinking about southern literature, can be so variegated, what should we do about the "southern grotesque," a form that is often reviled? Flannery O'Connor began to diminish our appetite for this southern stereotype in her well-known lecture "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction": "Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (1961, 40).

More recently, and with a progressive politics in mind, Mab Segrest urged lesbians and other minority writers to steer away from the grotesque's obtuseness and decadence. In *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture,* Segrest argues that the grotesque characters who populate southern literature only marginalize the already marginal. "I knew in my guts that my strongest feelings, for women and girls, put me somehow on the outside, set me apart. Although I did not know what *lesbian* was, I felt myself a closet freak" (1985, 20). For years Segrest found an outlet for her "freakishness" in an affection for the outlaws, deaf-mutes, and idiots of southern writing. "If paint peeled or a porch sagged on my parents' house, I would sigh, 'Ah, Compson, Oh, Sartoris.' [Faulkner] seemed to be dealing with race more than any other Southern writer I knew, so I thought his politics were profound" (21).

But in "Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness,"

Segrest argues that the grotesque appeals to outlaw southerners for neurotic reasons. To identify with the grotesque is physically dangerous when southerners tortured by their own "normalcy" choose "the most vulnerable among [us] to punish for their own secret alienation, to bear the burden of strangeness" (24). For Segrest the grotesque serves reprehensible political ends: "It fastens the creative imagination on images of deformity and despair. Backed by patriarchal myth, it persuades us that this is reality, i.e. not to be questioned or changed. People in power stay in power: it's god-ordained. The grotesque limits the creative imagination by causing divisions within the self so that the individual is cut off from her deepest parts, from those oracles and visions that could tell of a different reality, of the possibility of wholeness" (29). After such indictment, what forgiveness? Why salvage the southern grotesque?

First, the grotesque is worth looking at simply because southern literature displays such an extraordinary penchant for broken bodies and peculiar corporeal citations. It is fascinated with a set of metaphors that describe local cultures by means that are not entirely local but shared across regions and nationalities. In other words, the South has no special purchase on the grotesque; other cultures call on its features as well. But grotesque bodies provide a particularly condensed and useful figure of thought for presenting a set of problems plaguing the South; it offers, among other advantages, a way of previewing what is known but not thought—a set of unacknowledged political coordinates.

Segrest, of course, grants the grotesque's omnipresence; what she rues is its political intent. But I want to describe the grotesque's political fierceness as well as its transitivity: it has great mobility across a range of fields and feelings. Although I'm convinced that the grotesque reproduces the possibility for confronting the strangeness of southern culture, other theorems suggest its liabilities as well as its refining fires.

The Grotesque as Semiotic Switchboard

First and foremost, the grotesque can be understood as a prose technique for moving background information into the foreground of a novel or story. We see this most clearly in that famous *northern* story about the South, *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Two men sit "alone over their wine, in a well-furnished dining parlor"—a slave dealer and slave owner who are bickering over the price of Uncle Tom. With his uncouth diction and slovenly dress, the slave dealer Haley ("a short thick-set man, with coarse commonplace features") speaks in obscene aphorisms while Mr. Shelby has "the ap-

pearance of a gentleman." Stowe heightens the contrast between these men only to drive home their similarities. When an African American child enters the room—a beautiful boy with eyes "full of fire and softness" who becomes another object for sale, the two men toss him bits of food:

> "Hulloa, Jim Crow!" said Mr. Shelby, whistling, and snapping a bunch of raisins towards him, "pick that up, now!"
>
> The child scampered, with all his little strength, after the prize, while his master laughed.
>
> "Come here, Jim Crow," said he . . . the master patted the curly head, and chucked him under the chin.
>
> "Now, Jim, show this gentleman how you can dance and sing." The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the Negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.
>
> "Bravo!" said Haley, throwing him a quarter of an orange.
>
> "Now, Jim, walk like old Uncle Cudjoe when he has the rheumatism," said his master.
>
> Instantly the flexible limbs of the child assumed the appearance of deformity and distortion, as, with his back humped up, and his master's stick in his hand, he hobbled about the room, his childish face drawn into a doleful pucker, and spitting from right to left, in imitation of an old man.
>
> Both gentlemen laughed uproariously. (1966, 11–14)

Bent over and gray, this sudden grotesquing of the child's body skewers the "background" features of slavery and shoves them into the foreground; the child's old body maps for the reader the slaveholders' predations. Little Harry becomes a "semiotic switchboard" (Eagleton 1981, 145) for a world of grief and pain; this world's primary code—a child playing games before a jovial adult audience—is scrambled into its antithesis: a child who becomes old before his time, and two men who are bent on his aging. The body of this "southern" child becomes a site for reading cultural depravity; in the superimposition of Uncle Cudjoe on Harry's young body, the very young are swallowed by the very old, and the horrendous implications of Haley's and Shelby's everyday acts come to life. Ground is turned into figure as the child assumes the burden of future deformities.

The Grotesque as Monstrosity, as a Figure Resisting Change

If the grotesque serves primarily as a figure of condensation that helps us read a particular character's social or political sphere (inscribing the social

on the ungainly parameters of the body), we have also seen the ways in which its avatars can be less than politically progressive. Instead of recreating repressed ground as figure, tropes of monstrosity can create so much distraction that emerging politics (especially those that might become ground-breaking or foundational) simply recede. Monster tropes become switching points in a stratified culture overloaded with change: a culture whose categories have short-circuited precisely because they carry too much information.

If monstrous bodies connote (and produce) social explosions, they are also the stuff of rumor, allowing entire populations to resist social change. As we've already seen, O'Connor's "Displaced Person" plays out this hysteria (displacing it from race to ethnicity) when Mrs. Shortley has a vision of two languages—Polish and English—at war with one another. "She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward . . . gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words . . . piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel" (1971, 209), as if the only result of political disagreement can be dirt and atrocity.

When monstrous images roar in, political contestation becomes so heightened, so labile, that a sense of civil or political content disappears and what emerges instead are chaos-centered paradigms that deride or banish the possibility of reasoned political speech. A monstrous public response can have this result: ideas that are trying to make their way into public space disappear—overtaken by the chimera of horror. Still, the messy, untidy, fiendish bodies that emerge suggest the eruption of forces outside the system. And the result, at least in fiction, is a brilliant imagistic strategy for defining the ways in which conservative white southern populations deal with change.

The Grotesque as Figure for the Literal

Already we're acquiring a sense of the rich field this body-bent fiction tries to work over and through. But amid these hyperbolic figurations, a third version of the grotesque may seem at first woefully short on imagination. The wounded, nonintegral body becomes a trope for reproducing the literal—that is, for displaying what happens to bodies in real time and space. As Farah Jasmine Griffin describes black migration narratives

from the twenties and thirties: "The texts are filled to the brim with the portrayal of an institutionalized terrorism that daily inflicts itself on the lives of black characters. Lynching becomes a metaphor for all such acts of violence on Southern blacks. The black body—be it lynched, raped, working in the fields, working in kitchens, or acting in resistance—is a site of struggle. The power of the South is one of spectacle and torture. It infiltrates black bodies, leaving them dismembered, bent, old beyond their years" (1995, 16). We see this attempt to find metaphors for the literal in Porter's Uncle Jimbilly, whose hands are so gnarled from working that he cannot unbend them. We also find a "figural literalism" in Welty's Pinchy as her body follows the automaton of the law; when she is expelled into the noontime heat for a white woman's convenience, her body provides a spectacle "like" that of torture or lynching. The sweatbox in *Dessa Rose* offers more literalism. Sherley Ann Williams focuses on the implements slave-owning cultures designed for creating pain: "Know what that is, Mis'ess? It's a closed box they put willful darkies in, built so's you can't lie down in it or sit or stand in it. . . . I don't know how long they had her in that box. Her face was swolled; she was bloody and dirty, cramped from lying up in there. I didn't think she could stand up; but she did" (1986, 142–43). In *Dessa Rose* Williams invents a Dantesque punishment for a white slave dealer who has been purchasing house slaves and field hands. Set upon by the slaves in his coffle, he loses an arm: "The slave dealer . . . was quite literally mad. . . . A crackle of laughter or perhaps only the blinking of an eye and he would be plunged into tears and raving. . . . Most often Wilson cursed the darky, 'treacherous nigger bitch,' and her cohorts, 'fiends,' 'devils'—'Oh stop the bloody bastards, Nate!' his empty right sleeve waving as the nub within it jerked. It was an affecting spectacle. To see a white man so broken by nigras went quite against the grain" (14–15). Here, the grotesque becomes a quick way of presenting the beggarliness of this white man's worldview (fitting the parameters of the grotesque as semiotic switchboard) but also suggesting what happens when "institutionalized terrorism" turns back on itself.

Why describe as "literal" a prosody so highly wrought, so figurative? I'm suggesting that these highly embroidered bodies offer a way of reproducing official terrorism that is both surrealistic and all too real. Confronted with the spectacle of torture, of the body bent, overworked, suffering, tossed aside, it may be difficult to find metaphors exaggerated enough to describe systematic oppression.

The Grotesque as a Figure for the Horror of Whiteness

So far these images seem racially interchangeable, deployed by black and white authors alike. But don't racial differences also inflect the southern grotesque? For example, African American fiction often uses dismembered or monstrous bodies as a figure for the horror of whiteness. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," ferocious, open-mouthed dogs inculcate the costs of a predatory whiteness:

> He braced himself, ready. Then, he never exactly knew whether he had lunged or the dog had lunged—they were together, rolling in the water. The green eyes were beneath him, between his legs. Dognails bit into his arms. His knees slipped backward and he landed full on the dog; the dog's breath left in a heavy grasp. Instinctively he felt the dog twisting between his knees. The dog snarled, long and low. (Wright 1965, 50)

> The dog shook up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. . . . They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone once. (1990b, 157)

In each instance the dog offers a somatic alphabet for the angry white world each author wants to depict with swiftness and economy. The grotesque becomes a figure of condensation and displacement in which a fragment represents a whole gamut of actions that, in Hurston's case, define white cruelties both after and during the storm. In her novel the dog is, in fact, a miniature version of the hurricane, "lashed up [in] his fury"; like the white people who claim the hill, he commands the high ground and turns on Tea Cake with vituperative fury (just as the white men do when the waters have subsided and Janie and Tea Cake walk into town).

What formal power do these figures offer? In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston has no desire to dwell on white culture's dominance across the breadth of her text. Instead she uses the dog and the hurricane to acknowledge white culture's power and momentum before exploring the results of this momentum on black communities. In contrast, Wright wants to show his black hero tackling white culture, defeating it, taking it on in the labyrinthine depths of the earth, where, Theseus-like, Big Boy battles this culture's Minotaurs before escaping north in a truck that looks nothing like kingdom come.

The Grotesque as a Figure for the Horror of Being White

Whereas black fiction uses the grotesque to reproduce the horror of whiteness, fiction by white southern women often deploys frightening, nonintegral bodies to depict the horror of being white in a culture that abuses people according to their place in the color line. When Porter's Miranda goes to the segregated circus (accompanied by her family and by Dicey, her black caretaker), "the flaring lights burned through her lids, a roar of laughter like rage drowned out the steady raging of the drums and horns." She opens her eyes to see a creature dressed "in a blousy white overall . . . with bone-white skull and chalk-white face" who is balancing precariously on a very high wire. As he pretends to fall, "the crowd roared with savage delight, shrieks of dreadful laughter like devils in delicious torment. . . . Miranda shrieked too, with real pain. . . . The man on the wire, hanging by his foot, turned his head like a seal from side to side and blew sneering kisses from his cruel mouth. Then Miranda covered her eyes and screamed, the tears pouring over her cheeks and chin" (1972, 344–45). Is this an image of self-loathing that communicates the horror of whiteness without self-recognition? Yes and no. Miranda is put upon by white grownups who send her home when her scream unleashes their cruelty. But when Dicey is forced to take her away, Dicey herself suffers an extraordinary sense of loss; her ticket into the whites-only circus is revoked, her demeanor legislated by this white child's needs. Thus Miranda reenacts the very thing that frightens her most. Her own terror about white sadism, masochism, repetition, and loss is reenacted by a clownish white body—one that becomes her own, in its cruelty and vertigo.

I'm suggesting that white writers investigate half-glimpsed, invisible ideologies of whiteness using metaphors of grotesqueness that differ from the grotesque valences of African American fiction. There the grotesque frequently offers a terrifying condensation of the forces that a range of black protagonists find themselves up against. White writers, in contrast, are both in and of the world they are trying to define or critique. Images of leakage, a sense of being unable to locate the self in the midst of a nameless, floating field of chalky, bone-white faces, create in Miranda feelings of vertigo, frightened overidentification, and nausea. These images of whiteness have the effect of the uncanny, in which something all too familiar is strangely defamiliarized.

The Grotesque and the Stripe of Segregation

Clearly the grotesque is not a static form. I've suggested five different ways this figure is useful to southern writers: in the first a predatory background be-

comes available for progressive acts of reading and perhaps even for change. The second involves the reenactment and exposition of a reactive politics, while the third reveals the grotesque's mimetic powers. Fourth and fifth, I've suggested that the grotesque's nonintegral bodies can be racially motivated or inflected: handled differently by black and white writers. To these I want to add a sixth mode of politicized writing, namely, the ways in which some southern bodies take on the stripe of segregation and are, quite literally, divided in half: split between white and black cultures—transgressively hybrid. I'm not speaking about mulatto figures here (although characters like Joe Christmas may well carry a grotesque valence in fiction by men). Instead, I'm interested in bodies that offer a literalization of Jim Crow ideology by incorporating the line of segregation itself, bringing apartheid deep into the self.

We'll see instances of these bisected figures in the fictions of McCullers, O'Connor, and Gilchrist, as well as a fascination with twinned bodies, suggesting a crucial point. As we move from the nineteen-twenties to the forties and fifties we find an increasing interest in hybridity. This is hardly surprising, given the South's ongoing political turmoil and the strange, unaccountable stories that emerge from this turmoil. Even though economic deprivation and Jim Crow illogic persisted as the twenties trudged into the thirties, during the New Deal, ideologies and expectations changed. As Arthur Raper, one of the founders of Southern Conference for Human Welfare, explained: "A lot of folks were standing on their feet and talking and expecting things that they had never expected before. . . . Here was a ferment, a very basic, vital ferment, and people needed to respond to it in some way" (Sullivan 1996, 67).

Southern literature responded to this ferment with increasingly bizarre bodily tropes:

> It had been a freak with a particular name but they couldn't remember the name. The tent where it was had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women but everyone could hear. . . . The girls heard the freak say to the men, "I'm going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way." The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal. . . . "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. . . . I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute hit." Then there was a long silence on that side of the tent. (O'Connor 1971, "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," 245)

These hybrid bodies multiply in the fiction of the forties and fifties, a time of angst about women's shifting roles and the slow redistricting of the color

line. By the sixties and seventies hybridized bodies often separate into two distinct but interconnected characters. Instead of McCullers's Berenice, a domestic worker with one brown and one blue eye, we meet characters like Gilchrist's Gus and Robert—black and white children whose bodies and fates are inseparable, or the purple hat ladies from "Everything That Rises Must Converge," or the drowning women from Ellen Douglas's "On the Lake."

This observation carries within it a simple proposition that "the" southern grotesque is subject to a wide range of historical variation. If the demeanor of these hybrid bodies is subject to historical whim, we see another dimension of change in *Can't Quit You, Baby,* where the main characters cease to be stereotypical grotesques and become characters who are disabled. Clearly the language used to describe southern bodies changes with time; by the eighties it no longer seems appropriate to throw about disabled bodies as tropes without an awareness of the harm to be done in using such bodies as symbols.

"God Made Me Thisaway"

At the beginning of this chapter I offered to round up the usual suspects of southern studies and send them all packing. Instead, I've gussied them up, reinflecting place and "the southern grotesque" by providing lexicons to confound the habitual. In the next chapters I will be less conciliatory. Chapter 2 asks what happens if you dynamite the tracks separating an "African American" from a "southern" tradition and rethink southern literary critical habits of periodization. Chapter 3 redefines the economy of dirt avoidance that Mary Douglas invents in *Purity and Danger;* it describes a semiotics of southern pollution that foregrounds rags and cloth remnants as racialized emblems of soul murder. Chapter 4 examines "the mind of the South" from the perspective of women's writing, investigating (1) the abyss between white and black ways of knowing the South, (2) the importance of the "unthought known" as an index of white culture's arrested systems of knowledge, and (3) the need to explore entire systems of surrogated knowledge about race and gender that have been subjugated to "official" ways of knowing. Chapter 5 will take on an undernoticed morphology in southern women's fiction: the prominence of gargantuan women whose giant bodies become a remarkable way of redistricting earth and reclaiming new southern territory; they involve the production of terrain for the disenfranchised but also conjure up a passel of old southern children who become a route to the politics of the everyday. Chapter 6 redefines southern literature's relation to "History"; it explores women writers' refusal of monumental and empirical chronicles of the southern past—of the South as "past." In casting Eleanor Roosevelt as an artist of the surreal, I explore the ways in which Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* contributes to and revises our reading of Roosevelt as an icon of the thirties and forties.

Chapter 7 is about the object history shared between black and white women; it creates a space where very disparate fictions about the South come together, and it moves outside the South, to the rim of Ohio: "*Nothing nastier than a white person!* / She mutters as she irons alterations / in the backroom of Charlotte's Dress Shoppe." In Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah,* white objects inspire invective as the air fills with white women's odors, the iron awakening "perspiration / and stale Evening of Paris" (1986, 63). Here I want to explore another kind of bodily residue: namely, what happens when an object owned by one culture crosses over—is split, shared, appropriated, or handled by another culture? What does it mean for southern women—black and white—to handle the same things, to address a similar object world of commodities and children, but from radically different political, economic, and semiotic perspectives?

If these chapters demonstrate that what gets mapped onto southern minds, bodies, and objects is always overinvested and overdetermined, chapter 8 explores the grotesque as a figure of testimony; it asks how bodies that bear witness become racially or sexually marked. But I also want to suspend the politics of the grotesque for a reading of its shivers and shiftiness and ask—what is the role of revulsion in southern women's writing? Finally, chapter 9 questions the relevance of southern studies within a world of globalized localities and explores the dirt-based economy—the pollution-play—that Zora Neale Hurston embraces in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*