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Dirt and Desire

Reconstructing
Southern Women's Writing

1930-1990



on
Kate Chopin

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We must pay attention to the difficult figure of the throwaway body—to women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed—who are *not* symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference—neither important enough to be disavowed nor part of white southern culture's dominant emotional economy.

Although Angelou and Du Bois describe human beings intended to be discarded after use, let me hasten to add that the literary counterparts to their stories are not always so tragically represented. Often we learn little or nothing about the black characters who float through white southern stories—except for their atmospheric density. In Welty's *Delta Wedding*, "Pinchy was setting the table and Aunt Mac was at the china closet loudly counting the glasses of each kind. Horace was hosing down the Summer's car. . . . Howard, with Maureen running about the foot of his ladder, was with almost imperceptible motions hanging paper lanterns in the trees, gradually moving across the yard like the movement of shade under the clinging sun" (1946, 260). Blacks and whites commingle to such a degree in *Delta Wedding* that an unwary reader may not know that Howard, Horace, and Pinchy are black, and Aunt Mac and Maureen are white. But African Americans can always be separated out in Welty's story, not only because of the constancy and degree of their labor but because of their habit of fading away; they inhabit novelistic worlds that can change them, in the twinkling of an eye, from a character into an atmosphere.

The wavering of Howard's body into the landscape "like the movement of shade" echoes the moment when Pinchy disappears "out into the light, like a matchstick in the glare, and was swallowed up in it." Welty continually replays these gestures of white minds that consign African Americans to ambience, mood, holding environment. Robbie Reid, one of *Delta Wedding's* many white ingenues, watches Pinchy blister in the heat: "her eyes fastened hypnotically on the black figure that seemed to dangle as if suspended in the light, as she would watch a little light that twinkled in the black, far out on the river at night, from her window, waiting" (194). This conversion of a young girl's pain (her body associated with the trauma of lynching) into lyric or pastoral is shocking. Welty not only lingers at a point of unregistered trauma where Pinchy fades into background or atmosphere, she explores a part of white southern cognition that sees this disappearing act—the evacuation of Pinchy's pain and materiality, as well as the loss of her story (in this scene she is isolated because she is in the midst of an emotionally charged conversion experience)—as normative, expected,

not worthy of repression, problem-free.⁵ Later I will argue that the simultaneous gift and horror of the grotesque is its ability to reverse this moment of fading—as throwaway bodies reaccelerate from ground into figure. But for the moment I want to ask another set of questions. First, how does a writer—white or black—create adequate icons for describing human beings whose lives are not properly registered, who are disposed of, taken for granted, not present (in the terms of the dominant culture—not really there)? How does a writer dramatize a world dense with unnoticed trauma? I am suggesting, first, that societies are driven by gestures that are often less sensuous and psychoanalytically thrilling than the metaphors of soiling that are so often invoked when critics study subaltern cultures via the magic of pollution. Second, I will argue that we lack an adequate critical language to explore the literary attempt to dramatize a southern culture of neglect.⁶

To see how this culture empties itself into southern women's writing, I want to turn to Kate Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde," a story from the turn of the century that is, in its own peculiar way, very much about dirt and desire. In this object-laden world, Manna-Loulou, a servant "black as night," is preparing to tell one of her stories "to Madame, who lay in her sumptuous mahogany bed, waiting to be fanned and put to sleep in the sound of one of Manna-Loulou's stories. The old negress had already bathed her mistress's pretty white feet and kissed them lovingly, one, then the other" (1991, 102). Here we find the invocation of pollution behavior dividing caste from caste, but we also find evidence of the black storyteller's "aphanisis," or fading. Even though Manna-Loulou is the teller of Zoraïde's tale, from the very beginning of Chopin's story she slips into the background. When Madame goes to sleep in a mahogany-colored bed (a reflection of the nurturing environment provided by her servant), Chopin suggests that in this Louisiana culture, African Americans are not so much people, characters, human beings as an atmosphere, a background, a mood.

"La Belle Zoraïde" exemplifies the plight of the disposable body: the body that is neither symbolically nor socially central, that is intended to be discarded after use. Chopin's story is framed by a narrative that uses images of cleanliness and dirt to schematize the degree of intimacy permissible between whites and blacks. But inside this carefully built frame such structuralist analogies fall apart; the story shifts from a description of Manna-Loulou washing and kissing the feet of her white mistress to an obsession with rubbish, trash, and throwaway bodies. In this culture of disposability a black woman makes a baby out of a bundle of rags and holds it to her

bosom until she dies; she is defined as insane by a culture that has thrown away her lover and her biological child.

Even more brutally than Welty's "Curtain of Green," Chopin's story prefigures Lorde's "Afterimages"; it replicates the poem's ritual mourning for Emmett Till, a brutalized, thrown-away child:

his 15 years puffed out like bruises
on plump boy-cheeks
his only Mississippi summer
whistling a 21 gun salute to Dixie
as a white girl passed him in the street
and he was baptized my son forever
in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

I have already explored southern landscapes mired with disposable bodies, suggesting a redefinition of the southern romance with "place." But Lorde focuses on these landscapes of occluded grief to describe the ways in which—even when discovered—Till's body still becomes paltry and immaterial. On street corners everywhere

. . . the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body
fingered by street-corner eyes
bruise upon livid bruise
and wherever I looked that summer
I learned to be at home with children's blood
with savored violence
with pictures of black broken flesh
used, crumpled, and discarded
lying amid the sidewalk refuse
like a raped woman's face.

The extremity of this verse reflects not just the body *in extremis*—gouged-out eyes, flayed skin, "bruise upon livid bruise"; it also corroborates the ideas about pollution we have just examined: the ways in which defilement makes a child who has been socially peripheral become symbolically central. The South enacts horror, the North consumes it. But Lorde, like Chopin, changes focus. Instead of a polluted, broken body that becomes the object of everyone's gaze, Emmett Till becomes the body as throwaway—its image, the child's newspaper-afterlife, turned to refuse: "crumpled . . . discarded." Chopin's Zoraïde also reenacts this shift in economy, from the commodified body of a beautiful black woman capable

of reproducing children whose bodies can be turned into capital, to a woman who reads her culture too well and creates icons that reflect what has been so easily discarded.

The story Manna-Loulou tells begins with all the bittersweet promise of a fairy tale. Zoraïde is a mulatto slave "so dusky, so beautiful" that "she even had her own little black servant to wait upon her." But her destined husband, the light-skinned body servant, M'sieur Ambrose, is a man she detests. Instead, she loves "le beau Mezor," a man proud as a king, whose body "was like a column of ebony," who, when he was not dancing Bamboula in Congo Square, was "hoeing sugar-cane, barefooted and half-naked, in his master's field outside the city." (Once again African Americans become atmosphere, architecture, foundation; Mezor is a column-like figure supporting this banal surface world.)

While Zoraïde's lightness establishes her mistress's high social standing, Mezor is a field slave, a worker producing the wealth that makes such status possible. Furious at the idea of marrying her "café-au-lait" slave with one so low in rank, her mistress forbids the union. But Zoraïde meets Mezor privately and becomes pregnant by her lover. As she argues with her mistress: "I am not white . . . then . . . let me have from out of my own race the one whom my heart has chosen." Instead, the mistress persuades Mezor's owner to sell him at once: "Naturally, he lost no time in disposing of le beau Mezor, who was sold away into Georgia, or the Carolinas, or one of those distant countries far away, where he would no longer hear his Creole tongue spoken, nor dance Calinda, nor hold la belle Zoraïde in his arms" (104). It is this "disposal" that I want to draw attention to, because it becomes the primary metaphor of the story—and of the southern world Chopin describes.

To dispose of is to get rid of or to throw away; it is the fate of detritus, of garbage, of objects generally thought to be unclean or dirty, debris-ridden, worthless. As a young male sugar-worker, Mezor is very valuable, and yet this value accrues to his labor power and not to the young man himself, who remains within the phylum of the disposable, the interchangeable, the throwaway. He not only loses his friends and his lover but the connections with his own African history, fitfully embedded in his dances in the public square and his beloved Creole tongue.

This embedding of African Americans in the category of the disposable or the interchangeable did not end with emancipation. In *The Land Where the Blues Began* Alan Lomax describes the "Delta levee world" of the turn of the century as "the last American frontier, even more lawless than the Far West in its palmyest days, partly because there was, so to speak, open season

on blacks, considered less valuable than the mules they drove: "Kill a nigger, hire another; kill a mule, you got to buy another one" (1993, 216).⁷

In Susan Tucker's *Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South*, a black domestic worker named Clelia Daly describes her own participation in this homicidal economy: "I always had a feeling that people like you as long as you're able to do their work. My mother told me that. I told you she worked for a very rich family, and she was up in their house one day helping out with the old grandmother. And this old black man who had worked for them since he was a boy, he passed up there in the house with them. So my mother said, 'Oh, I know they're going to miss him.' And the old lady said, laughing: 'I don't know, Margaret. You can always get another darky, just as good or better'" (200). These stories are especially sobering because they involve loss of life, but I want to capture the indiscriminateness of this everyday rhetoric of disposability. One of Tucker's white subjects, Margaret McAllister, describes a similar relationship with her family's maid that progresses well past her childhood: "Today I feel so tired. I have these two children, and I'm pregnant, and I'd love someone to bring me breakfast! And Rachel came every day—well, six days a week—and did that. I can never remember her going on vacation, or anything. . . . She came at seven in the morning and left at six-thirty; after she'd fed us and had us all cleaned up" (62). The one who handles the family's dirt also makes its good life possible: "And so then Mama and Daddy would have their time alone." What's unexpected is the way in which Rachel, the black worker, and Margaret, her white ward, also make themselves into an optative couple; they dream of transcending the narrow grip of a culture that divides people into dirty and clean by fantasizing that Rachel will sing prophecies at the white child's wedding. In this story the black grownup and little white girl work to subvert the ideology of pollution—and yet these dreams die as easily as the Delta's muledrivers:

She'd always said she was going to sing the Lord's Prayer at my wedding. That was the thing we talked about, all the way growing up. She'd always sing it around the house, and we'd talk about it. That was her dream.

Well, when it came time, I just couldn't let her. When I called her, she said, "Oh, I'll get to sing at your wedding!" I mean, she had a nice voice, but . . . I didn't want her to sing at my wedding. It would have been real different, for Mississippi especially. But I think I hurt her feelings. It was one of those childhood promises, but you still worry about breaking it. (62–63)

What's notable is the casualness of this disregard, the easy neglect of this "childhood promise." It is this random sense of neglect that I want to return to in "La Belle Zoraïde," for the pyrotechnics of disposability do not end with the heart-breaking loss of le beau Mezor. Desolate at her beloved's absence, Zoraïde waits for consolation, for the birth of her child. She almost dies in its delivery, but back from the dead she asks to hold the baby in her arms. "Où li, mo piti a moin? (Where is my little one)" she asked imploringly. Mistress and nurse each reply in turn "To piti à toi, li mouri" ("Your little one is dead").⁸ But Zoraïde's child is not dead; it has been thrown away, disposed of, "removed from mother's side" and sent to "Madame's plantation, far up the coast" so that Madame can "have her young waiting-maid again at her side free, happy, and beautiful as of old" (105). We return to Du Bois's metaphor: all this "show and tinsel" is simply "built upon a groan." But what climbs out of this rubble is not a ghost body but rubbish, waste, a "senseless bundle of rags."

Finally acquiescing to her betrothal to M'sieur Ambrose, Zoraïde makes an icon out of disposability itself. On the eve of her ceremony, "with a look of strange and vacuous happiness on her face," she asks for quiet, insisting that her young one is sleeping. "Upon the bed was a senseless bundle of rags shaped like an infant in swaddling clothes. Over this dummy the woman had drawn the mosquito bar, and she was sitting contentedly beside it. In short, from that day Zoraïde was demented. Night nor day did she lose sight of the doll that lay in her bed or in her arms" (106). These rags become a kind of fantasmatic supplement, knitting together the fates of her family's thrown-away bodies. This "senseless bundle" also suggests a high degree of unthought, castaway material that white Creole culture overlooks, that it refuses to think.

Desperate to undo the spell of this rubbish, Madame tries to reawaken her slave; she brings back Zoraïde's flesh-and-blood child—a little "griffe girl": "Keep her; she is yours. No one will ever take her from you again." But Zoraïde only clutches her rag bundle more tightly and suspects that a plot is afoot to deprive her of her child. The little girl of flesh and bone is sent back to the plantation, "never to know the love of mother or father" while Zoraïde lives to be very old—"always clasping her bundle of rags—her 'piti.'" In making such a moving icon out of everyday refuse, what does this story accomplish? First, it punctures the myth of replaceability ("You can always get another darkie") by divesting the gothicism of Mezor's and Zoraïde's story of any shred of romance. Gothicism survives, but in a sad, revolting form: to discard is to be haunted by rubbish. Zoraïde's bundle of

rags becomes a patchy emblem of the throwaway bodies that have collected throughout this story. As an aesthetic object as well as a "child," it defamiliarizes the "pity" we normally associate with such stories, creating an alienation effect that invades the reader's complacency that such events are bygone, that they took place in the past.

Second, although these rags are worthless items, of no importance to the culture that produced them, here they become the kernel of the real, as if this remnant of identity, this remainder (something we think of as very small) is really quite large and carries enormous material freight.

Third, this story uses emblems of the throwaway body to get at the question of the gap between what is articulable and what has been lived. Hearing the end of Zoraïde's story, Manna-Loulou's white mistress continues to use the language of disposability: "Ah, the poor little one, Man Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died!" (107). In response, I want to suggest that southern women's fiction strives to create a history for these disposable bodies—for a world too easily experienced, too little conceived.

I have suggested that in "Zoraïde" the rag becomes a fantastic supplement describing a high degree of unthought, castaway material that white Creole culture overlooks, that it refuses to think. In the rest of this chapter I want to associate the rag as "supplement" with the throwaway, to argue that rags perform unexpected work in several southern cultural traditions, and that we need to pay attention to the enormous symbolic properties invested in so minor an object. In *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* (1854), Ball recalls a morning in which an overseer drove 168 near-naked slaves into the fields to work:

A wretched looking troop we were. There was not an entire garment among us.

More than half of the gang was entirely naked. . . . There was neither bonnet, cap, nor headdress of any kind amongst us, except the old straw hat that I wore. . . . Some of the men had old shirts and some ragged trousers, but no one wore both. Amongst the women several wore petticoats and many had shifts. Not one of the whole number wore both of these vestments. We walked nearly a mile through one vast cotton field before we arrived at the place of our intended day's labor. (1837, 146-47)⁹

Ball contemplates a moment from his own past: a group of half-clothed people walk through a vast cotton field where they are forced to produce the material for other people's clothing. Are there words wide enough to describe the abyss between owner and owned? Here rags become an emblem

for a lacerating inequity, an emblem of the separation between white profiteers and black laborers who are naked in each other's eyes and must endure without clothing's shelter and dignity. Rags take on an extra political valence in an economy in which African Americans labor for white capitalists to produce cotton as a cash crop. "His clothes is full of patches, / His hat is full of holes, / Stoopin down picking cotton / From off the bottom boll." This Texas sharecropper's song suggests how frequently rags come into play in southern culture as an index to the object-poor, sub-subsistence world spawned by the lower South's surreal one-crop economy: "Po farmer, po farmer, / Po farmer, / They get all the farmer make" (Lomax 1993, 96). In songs as well as stories, remnants of clothing surface emblematically at moments of everyday crisis, describing subjects at the limit of their status as subjects, and objects at their limit as artifacts. "Give my clothes to my sister, give Papa my diamond ring, / Give my shoes to my sister, don't give my wife a doggone thing. / If my mother don't want my body, cast it in the deep blue sea / Where the catfish and the alligators can fight over me" (299).

We will see that clothing in general and rags in particular offer another language, a subset of overlooked images, for the discarded body in a variety of southern texts. But before embarking on this project, we need to note the complex analysis that African American singers and speakers have already bestowed on the trauma of witnessing or becoming a discarded body.

Ida Hutchinson, a former slave, describes the connection between murdered children and the unstinting labor performed by African American subjects prior to emancipation.

Blackshear had them take their babies with them to the field and it was two or three miles from the house to the fields. He didn't want them to lose time walking backward and forward nursing. They built a long trough like a great long old cradle and put all these babies in it every morning when the mother come out to the field. It was set at the end of the rows under a big cottonwood tree. When they were at the other end of the row, all at once a cloud no bigger than a small spot came up and it grew fast, and it thundered and lightened as if the world were coming to an end, and the rain just came down in great sheets. And when it got so they could go to the other end of the field, that trough was filled with water and every baby in it was floating round in the water, drowned. They never got nary a lick of labor and nary a red penny for any of them babies. (Lester 1968, 38)

Hutchinson demonstrates a complex understanding of slavery as economic practice; she insists that white slaveholders registered these deaths neither

as personal nor as moral trauma but as the loss of labor and capital. As Julius Lester says, "To the slaves it was clear that slavery existed for two reasons: free labor, and the money that was gotten from . . . that free labor and from selling slaves" (38). Black narrators in fiction and autobiography are hyperconscious about the connection between throwaway bodies and the commodification of African American subjects. Moreover, once African Americans cease to be viewed as commodities and demand the status of free subjects, white culture's violence and neglect become even more vehement. In a book published almost seventy years after emancipation, *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston tells about the murder of black men in tones as ironic and matter-of-fact as Ida Hutchinson's:

During the Christmas holidays of 1926 [Babe] had shot her husband to death, had fled to Tampa where she had bobbed her hair and eluded capture for several months but had been traced . . . and lodged in Bar-tow jail. After a few months she had been allowed to come home and the case was forgotten. Negro women *are* punished in these parts for killing men, but only if they exceed the quota. I don't remember what the quota is. Perhaps I did hear but I forgot. One woman had killed five when I left that turpentine still where she lived. The sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely. (1990a, 60)

This is the quintessence of the throwaway body: the quick translation of white-on-black murder into economic terms, the quicker translation of black-on-black murder into nothing.

The throwaway bodies of men who "drop dead in the furrow" may be symbolically central to Hutchinson, Hurston, Du Bois, and Chopin, but they do not seem to matter to mainstream white southern culture. To assess this difference we need to examine two parallel economies of representation. First, we've looked at stories depicting white people who take these throwaway bodies for granted—who participate in a culture of violence or neglect. But other stories seek a language or genre to describe the history of the throwaway. Thus if Hurston describes white officials' casual approach to murdered black men satirically in *Mules and Men*, Ben Simpson, a former slave, recounts this story flatly, as tragedy:

Massa have a great, long whip platted out of rawhide, and when one of the slaves fall behind or give out, he hit him with that whip. It take the hide every time he hits a slave. Mother, she give out on the way, 'bout the line of Texas. Her feet got raw and bleeding, and her legs swoll plumb out of shape. Then massa, he just take out his gun and

"AND EVERY BABY . . . WAS FLOATING ROUND IN THE WATER"

shot her, and while she lay dying, he kicks her two, three times, and say, "Damn a nigger what can't stand nothing." You know that man, he wouldn't bury Mother. Just leave her laying where he shot her at. (Lester 1968, 55)

Who can make the throwaway matter in a world in which it did not matter? Who can respond to a world where a man could "just leave her laying where he shot her," where "every baby . . . was floating round in the water, drowned"?

In Caroline Gordon's "The Long Day," Henry, a white child, is forbidden to go inside the cabin of Joe, a black man sentenced to life on Henry's parents' plantation. Faced with this interdiction, Henry has intensive fantasies about the cabin's meager cloth contents: "Inside the cabin Joe walked to and fro. Blang—blang—blang! There was one loose board that flopped up and down every time he stepped on it. All that walking around was to wait on Sarah. But how could he wait on her? There wasn't anything in the cabin but the pallet that Sarah was lying on and a table that Joe had made and one chair. There was a closet in one corner, though. Maybe they kept their clothes there. Sarah changed her dress sometimes, and Joe had some Sunday clothes" (1990, 78). (Juxtaposed with this absolute penury, the carnivalesque scenes of pants-making in *The Color Purple* take on new dimensions.) As in "La Belle Zoraite," a number of texts by black and white southern women coalesce, surprisingly, unexpectedly, around images of rags—a contradictory site for measuring the effects of black sharecroppers' trauma.¹⁰

In "The Long Day" Joe's face has been cut and Sarah remains invisible; she is "feeling po'ly"—badly hurt in a domestic dispute. But Sarah's pain and the couple's turmoil remain opaque to Henry, a white child who fishes with Joe and confides in him. Throughout Gordon's story Joe is abstracted and distressed ("I never cut that woman," he said. "Before God, I never cut that woman!"), but the pace of the story is slow, almost languorous, as the reader waits, with Henry, for Joe to gather up his pole and go fishing:

"Joe," he said, "you want to go fishing?"

"Yes," Joe said, "I'd like to go fishing." He stepped down from the porch and walked a little way toward the sycamore tree, then stopped. "I can't go fishing right now, Hinry," he said. "I have to stay round here a while and wait on Sarah. She's feeling po'ly."

"All right," Henry said. "I'll go dig some worms."

He picked up a can and went around the back to the hen house. The hen house hadn't been used for so long that it was falling to pieces. The best worms were there under the fallen planks. (76)

As Henry digs in the warm earth Gordon strikes a contrast between the emotional richness that Joe's house and company provide for the white child and the object-poverty and quiet misery of the black man. Henry is in love with Joe and his way of life, but slowly, sentence by sentence, the damage this environment wreaks on its black inhabitants seeps into view. Sarah moans soundlessly while the boy and the hungry man share Henry's lunch; Henry shares the cloth contents of the big house with Joe as well:

"Yo ma has got some old rags up at the house, hasn't she?" Joe said. "Clean, white rags?"

"Yes," Henry said, "she's got a whole drawerful. In the entry."

"Can you get 'em without anybody seein' you?" (79)

Rags are objects reduced to their material nature, to denatured stuff. But as material that used to have a form, rags still have a purpose—to absorb dirt and bodily fluids, to stuff the cracks in broken windows, to keep sweat out of a laborer's eyes or wrap her head, to take the place of shoes. As disintegrating objects, rags seem quite separate from the world of solid objects, which protect and stabilize human life. Men and women, as Hannah Arendt says, "can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table" (1958, 137). In fact, the rags hidden in the white folks' entryway also offer a kind of object-continuity. Clean and white, they have the status and solidity of implements used to keep this entry beautiful. But once they cross the boundary into Joe's house something disturbing happens; they scatter into emblems of helplessness and dehumanization; they collect around the body, reducing people to objects, becoming the agents of reverse autochthony (as Joe disappears into a field of goldenrod) and the wrappings of death:

As [Henry] came around the corner of the house, Joe stepped down on the porch.

"Joe," Henry said, "Less go possum hunting one night soon."

Joe did not answer. He stood there a second, then he jumped off the porch and ran toward the field. He ran, crouching like a dog, until he got to the edge of the field. He straightened up then and dived into the tall weeds. The goldenrod rippled where he made his way. Henry watched the yellow ripple spread slowly across the field. When the whole field was still he turned around. The cabin door was open. He could see Sarah lying on a pallet on the floor. The white cloths that were about her head and neck were stained with blood. Her eyes were wide open. He took one look at her, then he ran as fast as he could to the house" (83)

With her wide-open eyes, her body stuffed and surrounded by death rags, Sarah becomes a fleshly counterpart to Zoraïde's rag baby, an icon of soul murder. Nell Irvin Painter defines *soul murder* as "the violation of one's inner being, the extinguishing of one's identity," a state of psychic, economic, or physical atrophy induced by the conditions of slavery and its aftermath. The "sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, and physical and mental torture" enforced by white ownership created within its victims "feelings of degradation and humiliation, impaired identity formation, suppression of vitality and creativity, deadening of feeling of self, anger, hatred, and self-hatred on the individual level and violence on the social level" (1995, 128).

Painter distinguishes her work from that of Stanley Elkins by emphasizing the network of communal support slaves created to resist irreparable psychic damage and by outlining the ways in which this system inflicted terrible burdens on both *owner and owned*. I want to add to her paradigm by suggesting that, in Gordon's 1930 story, the post-emancipation plantation world is also the site of soul murder for African Americans and, at times, for white children. In saying this, I have no desire to efface Joe's suffering or Sarah's death by shifting our attention to the fate of a little white boy. What I do want to register is the complexity of what Gordon is trying to see: the underanalyzed attachments in the postbellum South between a well-to-do white child and an impoverished black man who becomes his designated sidekick and baby-sitter. The story uses the terror wrought by Sarah's corpse and the bloody rags piled around her, first, to describe the crisis of immobility and poverty that leads this black couple to violence and death. Second, these rags enact a shift in perspective—the text veers from Sarah's death to a little boy's first dose of white panic.

In "Soul Murder" Painter explores white fathers' roles in "inculcating manhood" in the antebellum South, "which included snuffing out children's identification with slaves." When a Virginian named John M. Nelson tried in his childhood to stop slave children from being beaten, when he mingled "my cries with theirs" and felt "almost willing to take a part of the punishment," he felt the full weight of his father's retribution. In response, the child "became so blundered that I could not only witness their stripes with composure, but *myself* inflict them, and that without remorse" (143). For the white boy in Gordon's story the bloody rags defining Sarah's dead body represent a sadistic site of transformation; they enforce his separation, his nausea, his return to the big house, his flight from identification with African Americans who have been damaged to make his privilege possible. This is a story in which rags have a double valence, in which a white

child makes a customary journey; he learns to see African Americans not as people but as throwaways.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that things "demonstrate the owner's power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy," revealing the self's continuity over time and giving solid "evidence of one's place in a social network" (1993, 23). But rags suggest more than social status; rags covered with blood carry multiple messages of mortality. As Julia Kristeva describes the body's excretions: "Such wastes drop so that I might live, un-til, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver" (1982, 3). If the body's embarrassing fluids describe the border between living bodies and dead ones, if body and waste are never separable since flesh is always immersed in its own dead skin, perspiration, and waste, then the flight from the decaying body can also be conveyed via rags, or clothing in the position of decay—by something falling off or beyond the body. Bodies in rags are closer to the limits of the human, closer to the body itself as rubbish or waste. Faulkner seizes on the power of this metaphor in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "[Clytie] lay on the bare floor of the scaling and empty hall like a small shapeless bundle of quiet clean rags. When he reached her he saw that she was quite conscious, her eyes wide open and calm; he stood above her, thinking, 'Yes. She is the one who owns the terror.' When he raised her it was like picking up a handful of sticks concealed in a rag bundle, so light she was" (1972, 370–71).

We have begun to see the power of cloth remnants, dirty or clean, for gathering up a constellation of social problems, for calling up an atmosphere of neglect, desuetude, or dehumanization—foregrounding the background of a society that throws people away, that treats them as objects. But as Sutpen's never-acknowledged black daughter, what exactly is it that Clytie owns? The lightness of her being glosses over what should be most heavy—not only the long line of neglected, disowned, never-acknowledged children but the marginalized acts of neglected, disowned, never-acknowledged laborers—the naked black men who "tear" Sutpen's Hundred out of the earth, the never-mentioned being of Clytie's never-mentioned mother, the way the white architect clings to his mildewing vestments to separate himself from black men who are never quite acknowledged as men. Clytie may be a Haitian rebel who burns down the House of Sutpen, but she is reduced, by the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, to "a rag bundle," to fuel for the fire, grist for the mill. In Faulkner's novel the white female characters, Rosa and Judith, make things out of rags, but Clytie becomes the thing itself. The quick transition from

Clytie as rag to her possession of "the horror" suggests the horrors Faulkner doesn't explore, the trauma of loss and grief he transposes from Sutpen's black daughter onto the white Wash Jones and his daughter, who move away from Clytie's melancholic position to become a felt source of tragedy. In the death of Milly and her baby the reader is pressed toward tears, is invited to grieve over Jones's moving effort to prevent his granddaughter and her baby from becoming Sutpen's throwaways. ("They just heard him moving inside the dark house, then they heard the granddaughter's voice, fretful and querulous: 'Who is it? Light the lamp, Grandpaw' then his voice: 'Hit wont need no light, honey. Hit wont take but a minute,'" 291.) The primary characteristic of the throwaway, in life as in literature, is the absence of this climate of mourning. (In *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Song of Solomon* Jefferson's and Hagar's deaths receive extensive attention, I would argue, in order to resurrect the possibility of literary mourning for black characters, to say, as Pilate says of Hagar, "And she was loved!" [1977, 323]). But elsewhere rags or cloth remnants convey the state of being uncared for, of a landscape of un-grieved grief, a state of pollution beyond pollution. One hardly expects cloth to have this powerful, overlooked resonance.¹¹

Of course, clothing offers a potent emblem across a wide spectrum of histories and cultures, providing marks of station and the evolution (or de-volution) of hierarchy. In southern writing the problems of sumptuary status are hardly limited to African Americans, for in numerous texts blacks are better dressed than whites. Grace Elizabeth Hale points to a scene in "The Artificial Nigger" in which a poor white kid from the country is amazed at the sartorial splendor of a "huge coffee-colored man . . . in a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin" (O'Connor 1971, 254) but fails to recognize that this man is black. In Faulkner's "Delta Autumn" the nameless black woman who wants Cass MacCaslin to acknowledge that he has fathered her child is better dressed than Isaac McCaslin. But cloth continues to separate the races. In "The Artificial Nigger," when the white boy and his grandfather go to inspect the dining car where they cannot afford to eat, the coffee-colored man dines with his companions behind a "safron-colored curtain." Both Faulkner's and O'Connor's nicely clothed African Americans receive their comeuppance—as the grandfather gleefully explains: "they rope them off (256)"

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* clothing takes on a similar intensity within the black community: "Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang. So she put on one

of her bought dresses and went up the new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red. Her silken ruffles rustled and muttered about her. The other women had on percale and calico with here and there a headrag among the older ones" (1990b, 39). Headrags recall an earlier period of poverty ("the other women were the gang"); when Jody wants to repress Janie's sexuality he insists that she keep her head under wraps ("This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store," 51).

In text after text cloth becomes interfused with the power of status and interdiction. James Agee dedicates more than twenty pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to a description of the clothes that poor white tenant families wear:

The shirt is home made out of a fertilizer sack. The cloth, by use and washing, is of a heavy and delicious look: as if pure cream were pressed into a fabric an eighth of an inch thick, and were cut and sewn into a garment. The faded lettering and branding is still visible, upside down, in red and blue and black. It is made in earnest imitation of store shirts but in part by heaviness of cloth and still more by lack of skill is enlarged in details such as the collar, and . . . is sewn with tough hand stitches, and is in fact a much more handsome shirt than might ever be bought: but socially and economically, it is of like but less significance with Ricketts' cornshuck hat. (1966, 248–49)

With its "pure cream" surfaces and delicious upside-down writing this fabric spells out a universe of meaning for the writer, but such universals seem unavailable to the owner of this shirt. Agee constructs a dignity for this clothing that only *he* can describe; this shirt loses its aesthetic power when he shifts to the perspective of the poverty-stricken, class-bound white subjects he wants so desperately to anatomize and venerate (249). But even in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* rags suggest a deeper pollution; they describe a world drifting away from the human. In Agee's opening citation (as the bookend to his citation of Marx's "workers of the world, unite") Lear confronts the "poor naked wretches" of the heath; seeing their "loop'd and window'd raggedness," he cries, "O! I have ta'en / Too little care of this." Throughout Agee's text rags become emblems of social injustice. He devotes pages to bedding and "patchwork quilts . . . in various degrees of raggedness, age, discoloration, dirt absorption, and a sense-of-vermin, stuffed with cotton and giving off a strong odor" (157).¹² Rags represent humanity immersed in dirt: the body in extremis, in crisis.

Finally, however, rags work differently in fictions by black and white

writers; they mark another space where southern writers share regional preoccupations but also part ways. That is, Chopin, Gordon, Hurston, and Walker each surround black characters with rags to quarry the trauma of soul murder or to assess the status of the throwaway, but white writers such as Gordon and Chopin use rags as their text's climactic, as an image that reveals final trauma. In contrast, Hurston, Walker, and Morrison position rags (and their depiction of throwaway bodies) close to their novels' beginnings. These black writers' texts begin with the revelation of soul murder and then deepen this insight or work toward emancipation.

For instance, in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* John is angered by his brutal working conditions. As he works in the cotton fields, sweat drips into his eyes and he abandons both cotton and stepfather: "Confound yuh, gee! John Buddy, whar you gwine? 'Ahm goin' tuh git me uh sweat-rag wipe mah face wid. Ahm tired uh sweat runnin' intuh mah eyes" (1962, 78). Seizing this rag marks John's exit from sharecropping and new grasp of agency. In Hurston's novel rags connote crisis, but they are not turned to work and Ah'll throwaway; "Heah de rag yuh wanted, John. Go 'long back to work and Ah'll give Ned uh straightenin'" (80). In this scene Hurston asks who possesses—who owns the right to—the cloth that sharecroppers help produce but do not profit from. She also connects the ethic of care running from mother to son to the epiphanic plush of the train seats that cause John to marvel.

In Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* rags are once more connected with soul murder and bodily fluids. Brownfield's impoverished mother is not allowed to take him to work; she pulls baits for a living, and when her baby screams at the nightcrawlers' blind wriggling, Margaret is forced to leave him alone:

At first she left him home in a basket, with his sugartit pressed against his face. He sucked on it all day until it was nothing but a tasteless rag. Then, when he could walk, she left him on the porch steps. In moments of idle sitting he shared the steps with their lean mangy dog. And as the flies buzzed around the whiskered snout of the dog they buzzed around his face. No one was there to shoo them away, or to change the sodden rag that attracted them, and which he wore brownish and damp around his distended waist. For hours he was lost in a dull, weak stupor. His hunger made him move in a daze, his heavy eyes unnaturally bright.

When he was four he was covered with sores. Tetter sores covered his head, eating out his hair in patches the size of quarters. Tomato sores covered his legs up to the knee. (1988, 256)

The text moves from the comforting sugartit to the sore-covered body as rag. Since emancipation what has changed? We find too much continuity between the lives of modern black sharecroppers and those of "slave children, particularly those whose mothers worked in the fields, [who] were also very likely to suffer physical and emotional neglect, because their mothers were rarely allowed much time off the job to spend with their children. Child care by people other than mothers could be adequate, as in the case of the young Frederick Douglass, who began life in the custody of his maternal grandmother. But in other situations, the caretakers of children might be too old, too young, or too infirm to provide adequate supervision" (Painter, 1995, 134). In depriving Brownfield of his *right* to a caretaker, Walker is following the narrative path set by ex-slave tales showing "child-rearing patterns that forced hardworking parents to neglect their children and that, as a consequence, often denied babies the opportunity to attach to a parent or parental figure securely" (134). Once again, the sugartit that becomes a "tasteless rag" reveals his young vulnerability to child abuse that is inexcusable yet necessary. The rags that begin this novel and reveal the human cost of southern sharecropping and factory economies find another symbolic counterpart in an event that Walker names as her novel's origin: the death of Mrs. Walker, a neighbor woman, no kin to Walker herself, killed by a belligerent husband. In her afterword Alice Walker describes the horror of seeing this dead woman's body when her sister, who worked for the local undertaker, "invited me into the room where Mrs. Walker . . . lay stretched on a white enamel table with her head on an iron pillow. I describe her in the novel exactly as she appeared to me then. . . . Still, I see it; not so much the shattered face—time has helped to erase the vividness of that sight—but always and always the one callused foot, the worn, run-over shoe with a ragged hole, covered with newspaper, in its bottom" (343). Once again trash or refuse gathers around a body that has been cast away—the face erased, but not the rag, the conscripted newspaper.

The point of Walker's novel is not simply to remember these conditions but to suggest a point of exit—as Ruth does in the scene where a civil rights protest and the redemption of whole cloth come together: "Although she had seen marchers before on television she was amazed to see real blacks and whites marching together in her home town! There were trim white girls in jeans and sneakers with clean flowered blouses marching next to intense black girls in high heels and somber Sunday dresses. . . . Are they for real? she wondered" (323–24). If rags become limit-signs stopping the evidence of African American's humanity—a space where personal power

can only be dispersed, where it cannot be encapsulated—then the advent of a new identity can also be signaled by a new economy of cloth. We will return to this point again in chapter 7 when we examine Sethe's wedding dress—also made out of rags:

Well, I made up my mind to have at the least a dress that wasn't the sacking I worked in. So I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of her old sashes we used to test the flatiron on. Now the back was a problem for the longest time. Seem like I couldn't find a thing that wouldn't be missed right away. Because I had to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were. (1987, 59)

Zoraïde, Sarah, Mrs. Walker, Sethe—it is remarkable how often in southern literature rags move out of a background or blind field to achieve the status of emblem.

At the same time, rags are so very disposable, so invisibly there, that they come to represent what is undistinguished or unremarkable in people's day-to-day lives. Why haven't we placed rags at the center of our analysis of these texts before? Precisely because they mark people or things that can be overlooked. As Jules Prown has said, "A culture's most fundamental beliefs are often so widely understood, so generally shared and accepted, that they never need to be stated. They are therefore invisible to outsiders. Indeed, they may be beliefs of which the culture itself is not aware" (1993, 3). These texts foreground rubbish that remains unexamined but still carries within it the seeds of soul murder, seeds that flourish in a culture so casual about its throwaways that it fails to repress them.

The rag becomes, then, another emblem of the body as rubbish, the body as abject or throwaway: an emblem so well established by the late 1940s that Flannery O'Connor can parody its effects in *Wise Blood* when a mummified man attracts Enoch Emory in his visit to the local museum. "There were three bowls and a row of blunt weapons and a man in the case. He was about three feet long. He was naked and a dried yellow color and his eyes were drawn almost shut as if a giant block of steel were falling down on top of him" (1949, 98). Enoch Emory steals the mummy, worships it for a while, and then "negrifies" it: "He couldn't understand at all why he had let himself risk his skin for a dead shriveled-up part-nigger dwarf that had never done anything but get himself embalmed" (176). As he gives the

mummy to Hazel Motes and Sabbath Lily Hawks to become their "new Jesus," the mummy gets trashier and trashier: "Two days out of the glass case had not improved the new Jesus' condition. One side of his face had been partly mashed in and on the other side, his eyelid had split and a pale dust was seeping out of it" (184). But Sabbath Lily Hawks adopts the ragman with affection; she insists on playing house:

Haze stood motionless. . . .

The hand that had been arrested in the air moved forward and plucked at the squinting face but without touching it; it reached again, slowly, and plucked at nothing and then it lunged and snatched the shriveled body and threw it against the wall. The head popped and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust.

"You've broken him!" Sabbath shouted, "and he was mine!"

Haze snatched the skin off the floor. . . . and flung out what he had in his hand. The rain blew in his face and he jumped back and stood with a cautious look, as if he were bracing himself for a blow.

"You didn't have to throw him out," she yelled. "I could have fixed him!" (187-88)

Who owns the terror now? As in *Absalom, Absalom!* a son turns into trash and is discovered to be dust all the way down. In this simulacrum of the throwaway child, O'Connor parodies white culture's fetishes and retells the story of its compulsive will-to-neglect.

I have tried, in this chapter, to make a distinction between things that are thrown away because they are horrifying and can't be confronted and things (or subjects) that are disposable, of no account, and can be safely thrown away. *Wise Blood's* Hazel Motes is terrified by the new Jesus—it represents righteous needs that obsess him—but when Walker or Chopin uses rags to connote the enormity of soul murder, they are also exposing an ethos of disposability, conveying the weightlessness of acts of neglect in a society where "neglect was routine, abuse was rampant, and anger was to be suppressed" (Painter 1995, 134). Finally, rags become such crucial emblems of throwaway bodies because only an emblem low down on the social scale can do such strange work across both black and white texts—defining an act, or the remains of a human being who becomes central not as pollution or waste but as nothing.¹³

This is the odd fate of Chopin's Zoraïde. For "La Belle Zoraïde" does not end with the mulatto heroine's revelatory embracing of her little rag child. Instead, we turn back to Manna-Loulou and her mistress, back to the narrative frame:

"AND EVERY BABY . . . WAS FLOATING ROUND IN THE WATER"

"Are you asleep, Ma'zelle Titite?"

"No, I am not asleep; I was thinking. Ah, the poor little one, Man Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died." (1991, 107)

The mistress has heard the tale, but she has already thrown away its moral; all she remembers is the sorrow of the child, and all she wishes for is the repeated trauma of the child's easy death. Once again we encounter the thoughtless pleasure—for the powerful—of the throwaway. For the white mistress this is only a bedtime story; it evokes pity for the child but invisibility for Zoraïde, for Mezor, and perhaps even for Manna-Loulou, the storyteller, as dark-skinned and cannily restless as Mezor himself. As handmaid and servant, is Manna-Loulou also a stand-in for Zoraïde, does she practice a clarifying insanity? Does she want to imagine that her mistress is also disposable—a thing made of rags? Chopin wants us to hover at a point of uncertainty. Not content to tell this ending once, she tells it again:

But this is the way Madam Delisle and Manna-Loulou really talked to each other:—"You pré droumi, Ma'zèlle Titite?"

"Non, pa pré droumi; mo yapré zongler. Ah, la pauv' piti, Man Loulou. La pauv' piti! Mieux li mourir!" (107)

Hearing these words in another language, estranged, defamiliarized, leaves the reader suspended. Does Chopin repeat Creole speech as a way of emphasizing the reader's own inability to recognize what she hears, leaving us in a perpetual state of misrecognition?

At the least, this story suggests the strange preoccupations that need to be excavated in thinking about southern literature. In this story about a black heroine who throws away the very thing she loves but recaptures this love in its "true" cultural form, in a bundle of rags, Chopin reminds us that southern culture is riddled with throwaways, with people and things that get dismissed or forgotten, that don't matter enough to be repressed. As Suzanne Raitt has suggested, there is a major difference between things that are casually thrown away and other categories of pollution. Rubbish is something people look at all the time without onus or shame or desire, whereas waste is something that must be secreted away, hidden, a matter of attraction and shame.¹⁴ *Dirt and Desire* describes a literature still in need of translation: stories and novels searching for metaphors to describe *this* indifference: "You pré droumi, Ma'zèlle Titite?" "Non, pa pré droumi; mo yapré zongler. Ah, la pauv' piti, Man Loulou. La pauv' piti! Mieux li mourir!"