

PATRICIA YAEGER



Dirt and Desire

Reconstructing
Southern Women's Writing

1930-1990



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Chicago & London

2000

ily in this land that can't trace a domestic worker somewhere in their history" (Childress 1956, 3).

We can take one measure of this marginalized drama about the "secret" of unacknowledged labor in *Delta Wedding*, a novel set amidst Mississippi's wealthy cotton plantations in 1923. Here a little white girl sits down to dinner with her dead mother's family ("sighing, eating cake, drinking coffee") and discovers a series of precise vibrations. It is "the throb of the compress [that] had never stopped. Laura could feel it now in the handle of her cup, the noiseless vibration that trembled in the best china, was within it" (1946, 20). This is a splendid, prosaic indictment of commodity fetishism. What is vibrating in this china is not just the cotton compress, ceaselessly at work binding the just-picked cotton into bales, but the ceaseless vibrations of the pickers and the house servants, a vibration that trembles through the silverware and the best linens and every other expensive item in this house. What trembles in the china is the simultaneous awakening and repressing of commodity creation, of the productive labor that makes the leisured life possible, providing the capital that underwrites the most trivial acts of consumption. And the goods that decorate this wedding *are* trivial: "Papa said any kind of wedding I wanted I could have, if I had to get married at all, so I'm going to have shepherdess crooks and horsehair ruffled hats" (54). Meanwhile, at the horizon of the novel we catch the voice of the cook: "inside the house the light, tinkling sounds went on; Roxie's high laugh, like a dove cry, rose softly and hung over the yard. And from farther away the sigh of the compress reminded her of Dabney" (96). Pastoral always happens at someone's expense: "the songs of the cotton pickers were far away, so were the hoofbeats of the horse the overseer rode (and once again, listening for them in spite of the quiet, she felt as if the cotton fields so solid to the sight had opened up and swallowed her daughter)" (89). This dangerous, ghost-making world is portrayed as absolutely ordinary—filled with girls who don't see, or who always see past, the archival whiteness of cotton.

In the scene with the trembling teacup, Laura McRaven experiences—without consciousness—all the vestiges of labor power that have accumulated in the objects she holds; Welty's prose gives us the hidden genealogy of this labor. The teacup—an object of use, an object of beauty—is filled with but also hiding the machine's vibrations, which are in turn filled with the labor of the cotton pickers. But what I want most to emphasize is the epistemology, the way of knowing, that also resides in this teacup. What this object of everyday use brings to mind is a story *omnipresent but not heard*;

the vibrations in the teacup represent something that registers below the level of white self-consciousness but gets taken for granted.

If Faulkner's version of Dixie creates an endless echolalia in which it is possible to come to terms with miscegenation but to miss these laborious vibrations that are felt but not heard, the South memorialized in the differently canonized *Gone with the Wind* offers another set of distractions: another map for misreading southern women writers' preoccupations. Wanting to invent a new lexicon for reading southern women's fiction, I face a series of obstacles, including two powerful blocking texts that predispose us *not* to invent an archive detailing throwaway bodies or southern women's dramatization of "the unseen everyday." Whereas Faulkner's oeuvre has been given over to reading southern history as epic horror, Mitchell's story encourages a reading of history as epic nostalgia: both shut out a deal of light.

In spite of these shortcomings, I want to use Mitchell's novel to sharpen our sense of the epistemologies driving black and white southern women's fiction, its odd ways of knowing the South. That is, I want to dramatize the ways in which Mitchell's fiction examines "the" South's ideas of itself and to set forth one or two theorems in which southern racism looks less like an Eleusinian mystery and more like a repetitive, everyday terror—a set of practices so incessantly, so boringly enacted within the everyday that they seem to be hiding in plain sight.⁵

In *Playing in the Dark* Toni Morrison not only tells the story of the white canon; she describes a handful of white texts that struggle to rearticulate race, even as they succumb to racist conventions. She argues that novels such as *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are deliriously retrograde in their portraits of slave women. By trying to find aesthetic forms equal to telling the story of slave-owning women's dependency on and abuse of African American servants, Cather both fails and succeeds; she stretches to the breaking point her own narrative coherence (Morrison 1992, 18–28). Morrison is eloquent about the racist complexities of Cather's writing, her failure to see the parameters of the narrative problems that haunt her. But even Morrison's eloquence cannot mend the bigotry of *Gone with the Wind*, a story that drives through slavery and Reconstruction like the Energizer bunny—its racism just keeps going and going. As Ashley comments wistfully to Melanie:

I see Twelve Oaks and remember how the moonlight slants across the white columns, and the unearthly way the magnolias look, opening

under the moon, and how the climbing roses make the side porch shady even at the hottest noon. And I see Mother, sewing there, as she did when I was a little boy. And I hear the darkies coming home across the fields at dusk, tired and singing and ready for supper, and the sound of the windlass as the bucket goes down into the cool well. And there's the long view down the road to the river, across the cotton fields, and the mist rising from the bottom lands in the twilight. And that is why I'm here who have no love or death or misery or glory and no hatred for anyone. Perhaps that is what is called patriotism, love of home and country." (1973, 210)

Notice the ways in which African Americans become atmosphere, but without the anxiety this produces in *Delta Wedding*. *Gone with the Wind* wears its racism on its sleeve; Mitchell is rarely disturbed when she catches her white characters in the act of making her black characters disappear.

Why traffic with *Gone with the Wind*? In part because of the bizarre power it exerts over so many white female readers' ideas of the South, in part because of its intriguing structures of thought: it forgets, on the level of plot, what it struggles to remember on the level of images. In fact, *Gone with the Wind* creates multiple modes of forgetting. It is a very long book with print so tiny that it makes me squint, a book whose racial politics are absolutely abhorrent, and yet in spanning its pages I find myself at odds with my own position as a libertine academic—empathizing with the Klan after they've brutalized the inhabitants of a shantytown, identifying with Scarlett as she abuses convict labor, admiring Melanie Wilkes, who is afraid to go north because her son might have to go to school with "pickaninnies." My black students do not share this sense of velocity and pleasure when reading Mitchell's book; her racism and white egotism, the erasure of the horrors of slavery, and the bigoted depictions of Reconstruction create outright anger.

How is it possible, then, to become so embroiled, so whitely forgetful, as I reread a story whose politics (and, for that matter, whose writing style) drives me over the brink? Granted, it is a brilliant stroke on Mitchell's part to make her heroine a villain, to invent a plot that moves swiftly from crisis to crisis, and to provide a classic dénouement—a reversal of fortune that, unlike all the novel's other reversals, depends on a discovery that is meant to feel, in the novel's terms, as earth-shattering as Oedipus's. Scarlett takes off her blinders, discovers she doesn't love Ashley but has desired Rhett all along—just at the moment when (as with Oedipus) such a discovery salves nothing.

I want to use the blindness driving *Gone with the Wind* to help shape the epistemological questions driving this chapter. We've explored the drama of jettisoned bodies that become a melancholy undercurrent of southern commodity culture—not as alluring ghosts but as trash or debris. Now I want to explore the omnipresence of ideas that are *known* but not *acknowledged*, the importance of what Christopher Bollas (1987) has called "the unthought known." Take the case of Eleanor Roosevelt in 1913, during her first sojourn in Washington under the "southern" administration of Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson was the darling of what would later be called the Dixiecrats. But northern progressives such as FDR allied to him with equal fervor. For them, race was simply not an issue. Indeed, among whites race had become an issue only for the very few progressives who had founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. . . .

Among Washingtonians, the subject of race was rarely discussed. There was one tense moment when Josephus Daniels expressed horror that Eleanor Roosevelt brought four white servants, and a nurse and governess, to Washington. He practically ordered her to fire them: Only Negroes, he felt, should do servile work. She was stunned by what she considered the "brutality" of his prejudice and subsequently referred to it as a "shocking" moment.

At the time, however, ER was largely undisturbed by the racism of prewar Washington. (Cook 1992, 204)

Can this biographical detail be accurate? What does it mean to register something as "shocking" but to remain "largely undisturbed"? What does it mean to register horrendous facts without thinking about them? For Bollas the "unthought known" is a residue of childhood imprinting us with expectations about the way the world will shape itself (or fail to shape itself) about us. These early experiences are lodged in the sensorium but not available to consciousness—hence known but unthought or unacknowledged. I want to wrest this idea from its psychological context and use it as a cognitive and political category for thinking about the South.

To see this idea in motion, we will need to examine *Gone with the Wind*'s misrecognitions, the way this novel's stereotypes jangle with its peculiar use of color, its unthinking substitution of white characters for black and vice versa. For all her moral ineptitude and repugnant stereotyping of the races, Mitchell can drive us closer to tracing the racial shape of the world that many white southern women writers of the thirties struggled to reconstel-

late. Scarlett's misrecognition of her love for Rhett Butler is not just a romantic convention but a mood deeply implicated in the novel's racial blindness.

This double structure of misrecognition mirrors a crucial argument Drew Faust makes about what goes wrong with Mitchell's project. She sees *Gone with the Wind* foundering upon a blindness about race and a misrecognition of the connections between race and gender:

Mitchell lacks the critical vision of the South that gives [*Absalom, Absalom!*] its moral and literary power. Unable herself to understand the cruelties of white racism, Mitchell is incapable of translating any such insight into her fiction or into her portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara. Thus, for all her ability to see through and to challenge certain basic assumptions of southern life, Scarlett, like Mitchell, remains blind to the most fundamental reality of all: that southern civilization rested on the oppression of four million African Americans whose labor made southern wealth, gentility, and even ladyhood possible. (1999, 13)

Here we approach the problem within white southern epistemology we need to take up next. Mitchell is blind not only to racial oppression but to the inseparability of race and gender that drives *Gone with the Wind*'s definitions of ladyhood. But we also need to see that the romantic structure that allows Scarlett to make her way to one recognition (the discovery of her own "erotic truth") is also a structure primed to ward off another set of political recognitions about race as the very ground that makes Scarlett's infatuation with whiteness possible. In other words, misrecognition is not just the heroine's fatal flaw but the author's problem as well. What does this do to habitual readings of *Gone With the Wind*? What happens when we read through the lens provided by this double plot—this need to read the novel by seeing double acts of not seeing: the most popular romance of the twentieth century spawned by a monstrous twinning in which erotic misrecognition and political misrecognition go hand in hand?

The questions of misrecognition, arrested symbol systems, sequestered centers of thought (or nonthought), and the motif of throwaway knowledge (of what is over- or underlooked) are dominant, underrecognized concerns in twentieth-century southern literature. *Gone with the Wind* offers an unwitting anatomy of *the spectacle of unknowing* built into very structures of white southern life.

For example, in Tucker's *Telling Memories Among Southern Women*, the author-interviewer is struck by this repetition. She meets a series of

white women who launch into stories about their black domestic workers, speaking eagerly until

halfway through, I could tell from their slowed voices that they were not quite sure they should have begun. . . . The taboo against discussing race and a fear of saying something inappropriate (a fear born of changed attitudes toward race) made two reasons for caution.

For these reasons, a number of white women would not sign release forms. They had told stories that they had heard all their lives. . . . Yet they heard these stories anew when they realized they would be written down. . . . Our unedited words are often those that are most familiar and also those that tell us more than we want to know about the culture we live in. (1988, 139)

Tucker describes a world brimming with arrested systems of knowledge, a culture that depends on the nonconceptualized, on that which hasn't been visited by a concept. I'm referring here to the nature of everyday southern thought, to what can be consumed by modern, interwar southern culture as knowledge and what cannot—a refusal to think about what one already knows.

Another spectacle of unknowing emerges from an anecdote about the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization formed in 1919, in the decade just before *Gone with the Wind* was written, to promote dialogue among leaders of black and white communities as a first step to renovated race relations. This was a group that proceeded too cautiously: its goal, as Patricia Sullivan puts it in *Days of Hope*, was simply "to move beyond mutual ignorance." Clark Foreman, secretary of the Georgia CIC, was especially shocked by whites' lack of knowledge of the struggles of blacks to make a livelihood, stay healthy, or gain even minimal literacy, so in the 1920s he convened a group of prominent black and white citizens in Augusta for the purpose of mutual education. "During the first meeting, the white participants appeared genuinely shocked to learn that municipal services and paved roads did not extend to the black sections of town." The whites' feeble gestures toward change represented the merest of panaceas—and Foreman eventually turned to other modes of organizing (1996, 32).

We need to focus on these white citizens' "genuine shock" at encountering a world that they see every day—suggesting, once again, a deliberate sequestration of knowledge. It seems remarkable, even laughable, that white families who drive maids home, ride through this section of town to get to church or go to the country, act as if they are blind to the conditions they see

all the time. But one of my hypotheses about southern women's writing is that it invents structures to get at this everyday world of white unseeing. We tend to think that the surface of things is less hidden than their depth. But I want to offer this crucial idea: the things at the surface are hidden in plain sight. Their very repetition is what conceals them. What these writers explore in their fiction is the structure of what is known but not thought, a misrecognized or fading epistemology—a cloud of unknowing that extends over everyday racial interactions.

White and black literatures about the South present this cloud of unknowing very differently. In *Dessa Rose* Sherley Anne Williams makes a white woman's discoveries about her own race-thinking both central and climactic. Taunted by Dessa, accused of not knowing "her" own mammy's given name (even as Rufel, the coming-into-knowledge white woman, is nursing Dessa's black child), Rufel sees the light. She begins to recognize the cost of her broken knowledge of the mammy she has "known" since childhood: "Rufel sniffed again and nodded. 'She treated me just like, just like'—She stuttered and could have wept again, seeing with an almost palpable lucidity how absurd it was to think of her self as Mammy's child, a darky's child. And shuddered. A pickaninny. Like the ragged, big-bellied urchins she had seen now and then about the streets of Mobile, running errands, cutting capers" (1986, 132). Once this riddle is imposed, Rufel can't stop contemplating the deficits in her everyday acts of unknowing: "I don't *think* I ever *thought* a *thought* during all that time that I didn't tell Ma—Dor—that I didn't tell her. . . . As if darkies could ever *know* the life she spoke of. . . . Had Mammy had children, Rufel *wondered* . . . it bothered Rufel that *she did not know*" (133–136, emphasis added). In contrast, in *Delta Wedding* this common lack of knowledge is never stated extrinsically, never climactic. As Welty says of Laura McRaven, "She could hear nothing, except for the sounds of the Negroes, and the slow ceiling fan turning in the hall" (1946, 69). This vanishing point, where blacks become atmospheric, where they vaporize into "nothing," becomes a repetitive litany: "There was no one there," except, that is, for "Vi'let, leaning on a stepladder . . . very slowly taking down the velvet curtains" (71). Finally, this leisured madness plays out very differently in the fiction of Faulkner, who, in a blaze of glory, conjures up race as an epic structure built on the foundations of guilt, giant torment, and oedipal drives that make miscegenation more culpable than incest. Fictions by Walker, Hurston, Welty, Cather, Porter, and McCullers ask us to think about how race and gender cohabit in the non-epic everyday, where African Americans who are defined as "others" become the site of

neglect, of the overlooked, the throwaway: the site of ungrieved grief that never bothers to come to white consciousness—a "nothing" omnipresent and utterly obvious and yet quite difficult to see.

To fathom this focus on surfaces, we can turn to Willa Cather, who comes back to her southern roots in her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The surfaces of this novel are utterly bizarre, especially in relation to the novel's racist plot and character structures: "The miller's furniture was whitewashed, so to speak, day by day, by the flour-dust which sifted down from overhead, and through every crack and crevice in the doors and walls. Each morning Till's Nancy swept and dusted the flour away" (1968, 47). This brand of whiteness, produced, of course, by black millhands, is unwanted but cannot be brushed off; it becomes a form of pollution, of whiteness as dirt, that coagulates where it is least desired. "Colbert changed his old leather jacket for a black coat, brushed the flour-dust off his broad hat, and walked up through the cold spring drizzle which was making the grass green" (49). After complaining about Bluebell's housekeeping, he "said no more, but went out into the hall and took up his wide-brimmed hat—this morning white with two days' flour-dust" (64).

This strange figure of thought, this whiteness that floats about like detachable pieces of the body, or part-objects, and settles everywhere, is utterly unlike the icon of the throwaway.⁶ First, it drifts through the air to cover everyone, blacks and whites alike. Second, these vagrant signs never coalesce into a taut symbol or image; that is, Cather never converts this polluting flour from nonce detail into symbol.

My suggestion is that this whiteness—which is so very much there and yet so "natural" a part of this environment that it is nearly invisible as a signifier—serves as the "glue" of the real; it is essential to the realistic surface of Cather's novel and yet uncanny or obsessive as a symbolic site. This floating whiteness becomes a haunting signifier of *what cannot be thought or organized*, either in the nineteenth-century historyscape of the novel or in the white landscape of the 1930s from which Cather is writing. Whiteness functions as a form of detritus that floats like so much dead skin in the cold southern air. These floating particles coalesce into an almost present *structure of feeling* that has not yet emerged as a *structure of thought*—a site of uncanny, unassimilable emotions, of an "epistemological disarray" (Bersani 1977, 60) that fails to organize the underanalyzed structures of race and racial oppression that drive Cather's novel.⁷

If this allusion feels like coy, overtheorized, literary-critical sleight of hand, then why does this shredded whiteness recur so incessantly in stories

and novels by white women from the 1920s to the 1980s? "A creature in a blousy white overall with ruffles . . . with bone-white skull and chalk-white face" (1972, 433) terrifies Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda with his inhumanity. *Delta Wedding* describes a world covered with lint from the cotton gin—a terror to clean, sticking to ceilings and lampshades "like a present from the fairies that made Vi let moan" (1946, 8). McCullers and Douglas create similar scenes focusing on polluting, dislocating, unrecognizable figures and fields of whiteness that create another set of figures for the "unthought known."

How do these surfaces of fractured whiteness and ambient blackness play themselves out in *Gone with the Wind*? As we have seen, blacks are caricatured unmercifully in this novel as not fully human. And yet Mitchell's novel is also driven by textual quirks that seem to outrun the author's control. For example, the way color works in Mitchell's novel is decidedly weird. In the first paragraph we learn that "Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it." Her face is a composite—part Irish, part French, but also part white and part black: "her thick black brows slanted upward, cutting a startling oblique line in her magnolia white skin." Lest we think this perforated whiteness is an accident, when Scarlett slaps Ashley at Twelve Oaks, his face is oddly colored, incised—"the red mark of her hand showed plainly on his white, tired face." These lineaments are reversed in the description of Rhett Butler, whose dark face is all blackness and bristle, but with a slash of white teeth.

Mitchell is hardly an apt deconstructor of her own brand of whiteness, for elsewhere in the novel white is the color of comfort, of big houses, genteel women: the proper pallor for aristocratic anxiety. It is also the color of money, as in the milky reassurance of cotton bolls dancing above the red and green earth. But by the end of the novel these constantly, cheerfully iterated references to whiteness almost disappear, to be replaced with a dangerous festival of darkness and blackness: not just the surging presence of groups of freedmen who so terrify unreconstructed whites, but Rhett Butler himself gets darker and darker, Bonnie Blue Butler is afraid of the dark and because of this cannot be buried in the earth, and in making love Rhett and Scarlett are swallowed by blackness, while at the novel's end Scarlett thinks not about Rhett but about Mammy:

She stood for a moment remembering small things, the avenue of *dark* cedars leading to Tara, the banks of cape jessamine bushes, vivid green against the *white* walls, the fluttering *white* curtains. And Mammy would be there. Suddenly she wanted mammy desperately,

as she had wanted her when she was a little girl, wanted the broad bosom on which to lay her head, the gnarled *black* hand on her hair. Mammy, the last link with the old days. (1024, emphasis added)

This rhythmic play of black and white is astonishing. But the point is not that Mitchell is a protointegrationist; segregationist principles lacerate the novel to the end.

What this novel shares with some other texts by white southern women is a sense of writing from a rich and troubled field: a site of overwhelming narrative desire to talk about whiteness and blackness even while refusing, on the level of plot, to recognize the difficulty of their relationship.

Not only is Rhett exchanged for Mammy, but from the very beginning there is a surprising fluidity between black and white positions. Brent and Stuart Tarleton accuse Jeems, their slave and former "playmate," of eavesdropping and then refuse to recognize that he knows more than they know about Scarlett. Then Rhett takes his place as eavesdropper as he pops up at the end of Scarlett's and Ashley's quarrel at Twelve Oaks. We first meet Scarlett's child, Wade, struggling in Prissie's arms, miserable with her bad mothering, but Scarlett quickly takes her place as bad mother, suggesting, again, an odd interchangeability.⁸ In addition, Gerald O'Hara's funeral service is nearly a scandal to the neighborhood because the Catholic service is so short; then Ashley saves the day by "reciting from memory the Episcopal burial service which he had often read over slaves buried at twelve Oaks" (701), setting up a site of exchange between the Wilkes's nameless slaves and the dead Mr. O'Hara (and bringing us back, with a start, to Gerald's initial status as a lower-class immigrant and outsider). But more startling, these invocations offer a supplement to the burial sites that mark the beginning of the novel, when we visit the graves of *three* Gerald O'Hara juniors (a repetition equal in its absurdity to Toni Morrison's deliberately ironic characters, the three deweys). As Ashley recites the invocation of the Anglican burial service he memorized while burying (how many?) slaves, the novel drifts toward a wider landscape of mourning and melancholia, of ungrieved grief for the thrown-away bodies of the black slaves who created Twelve Oaks itself.

Finally, Scarlett possesses an unlikely fluidity in the scene where Rhett ravishes her and she seems to love it. Critics have described this scene both as a rape and as the ecstasy of surrender, suggesting that Scarlett welcomes her own subordination. In fact, the color of this encounter is "dark . . . dark . . . she was darkness and he was darkness and there had never been anything before this time, only darkness and his lips upon her" (929). On the level of

plot, Drew Faust has argued that Scarlett's sexuality, her liberated power as a capitalist woman, is limited when the instigation of the standard rape-lynching plot curtails Scarlett's freedom. That is, the race-terror of Scarlett's world trumps her new mastery of male roles by imposing on Scarlett the ideological fragility of the white lady and creates the conditions that demand her retreat. But while the legends of gender and race can be pried apart on the level of story, as imagery they become more and more imbricated, until Scarlett winds up in the regressively, oppressively homosocial bliss of Mammy's arms. Is Mitchell blocked, ensnared, unable (as Faust argues) to imagine freedom for blacks and therefore unable to imagine it for women? Or, does the novel manage to appeal to some readers because it touches so precisely on a world (the white southern world of the 1920s and 1930s) that refuses to think what it knows about race—and therefore keeps reenacting the bizarre double structure of a character-driven plot that caricatures and dehumanizes blacks and an image-driven plot that makes black the color that one wants to become (in the service of recovering early object relations and desires) and makes white the most fractured, witless, and monstrous of surfaces?

I'm not trying to celebrate Mitchell's (or the narrator's or Scarlett's or the white reader's) confused, dehumanizing relation to blackness at the novel's end but simply to suggest that this relation is as confused as it is racist and that this confusion is both productive and normative in the creation of white southern fiction. So, although *Gone with the Wind* calls fixities such as patriarchy into question, compelling new recognition of the forces connecting the struggle for freedom and the negotiation of self (Faust 1999, 18), my argument would also suggest that *Gone with the Wind* grows out of a world that is compelled by misrecognition. Mitchell's novel dramatizes how compelling and necessary these misrecognitions are to the white South's economy of unknowing. Or, as the pious and by now slave-free Ashley says to Scarlett after the war:

"I can't make money from the enforced labor and misery of others."

"But you owned slaves."

"They weren't miserable. And besides, I'd have freed them all when Father died if the war hadn't already freed them." (967)

Gone with the Wind explores—without quite intending to—the cult of fetishized, never-seen surfaces, what is hiding in plain sight, the preoccupation not with "under" or "beneath" or "depth," but with the cult of "besides," of what is proximate, next-to, and therefore invisible. Thus Scarlett's

misrecognition of her love for Rhett Butler is not just a romance convention but a mood deeply implicated in the novel's racial blindness. Or, as Ellen Gilchrist says in *The Land of Dreamy Dreams*: "No matter how many husbands Alisha has, she always keeps the same old maid" (1981, 38).

Before devoting more space to defining the unthought known as an underrecognized component of white southern political life, I need to pause, to supplement the importance of this concept with its status as ideological luxury. In Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* another mode of knowledge is set in motion. Jefferson, a black man present at the killing of a white liquor store owner, is arrested, charged with the man's death, and sentenced to electrocution. "She knew, as we all knew, what the outcome would be. A white man had been killed during the robbery. . . he, too, would have to die" (1993, 4). This black man's death is a form of absolute knowledge. It is a hard fact, a concept that cannot be unthought or unknown by any African American man, woman, or child in this Louisiana community.

For whites the knowledge of Jefferson's death is also absolute, but Gaines goes to great lengths to suggest that the illogic of this absolute can be glimpsed even by white people. In a scene that is as crazy as the mad hatter's tea party, Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, visits the sheriff's wife to plead for visiting privileges in a more dignified room outside Jefferson's prison cell. "The sheriff's wife was stunned. She nearly spilled her coffee. What was wrong with the cell? Wasn't it big enough? Yes, but they couldn't all sit down. Was it necessary that they all sit down at the same time? Couldn't they take turns?" (133). The sense of Miss Emma's proposal, and the nonsense with which it is met, creates a resurgence of white panic. The sheriff's wife admits, euphemistically, that she longs for Jefferson's death:

She told Miss Emma she would see what she could do. . . .

"Just speak to him, if you don't mind," Miss Emma said. "I done a lot for you and your family over these years."

"Oh, Lord, do I know," the sheriff's wife said. "Do I know, do I know, do I know. I'll speak to the sheriff. Lord, I'll be glad when all this is over."

Miss Emma dropped her coffee cup on the floor and started calling on God.

"I didn't mean it that way," the sheriff's wife said. "God in heaven know I didn't mean it that way. Lou, Reverend Ambrose—can't y'all do something? The Lord knows I didn't mean it that way." (133–34)

Regardless of what she means, even "the Lord knows" how little consequence these hard facts have for her—except in this moment when her

everyday, taken-for-granted, strictly-for-white-people talk spills over into the black community. Her speech loses the sheen of the quotidian and shows forth in its monstrosity.

Gaines counters the *absolute knowledge* that always attends white supremacy with still another portrait of "the" mind of the South. In the moment of the white liquor store owner's death, Jefferson cannot think straight; he is trapped within a form of knowing that can only be limited, contingent, conditional: "They made me come with them. You got to tell the law that, Mr. Gropé.' . . . But he was talking to a dead man. Still he did not run. *He didn't know what to do . . . He didn't know whether* he had come there with Brother and Bear, or whether he had walked in and seen all this after it had happened. . . . *He didn't know whether* he should call someone on the telephone or run . . . *He didn't know what to do*" (6, emphasis added). Jefferson is caught between multiple wrong answers—like Richard Wright's black characters in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Like Gaines, Wright portrays the impossibility of thinking within and against this system of absolute knowledge, where every answer is fallible; he portrays the pressure of thinking at all in a southern world where the ascendant solution, the dominant way of knowing, is white-on-black violence: "She did not want to decide alone; she must make no mistake about this" (Wright 1965, 200); "he thought with despair" about whether to cross the white neighborhood without a shirt after he had been beaten (166); "his body grew taut with indecision. Yes, now, he would swing that axe and they would never tell and he had his gun" (92); "she tried to think just how it had happened" (106). Faced with two wrong answers, thinking is a terrible labor. In Wright's stories the mind-numbing work of survival is so exhausting that characters sometimes sink out of thought into some other reverie: "She was thinking of nothing now; her hands followed a life-long ritual of toil. Spreading a sleeve, she ran the hot iron to and fro until the wet cloth became stiff. She was deep in the midst of her work when a song rose up out of the far off days of her childhood and broke through half-parted lips" (182). Each of these characters enacts the hardship of thinking in a world laced with too many wrong answers. This state of in-betweenness is the precondition of multiple moments of southern knowing—from the metaphysically impacted opening of Gaines's novel ("I was not there, yet I was there," 3) to the sheriff's wife's deeply ridiculous "Oh, Lord, do I know. . . . Do I know, do I know, do I know."

In this chapter I have suggested three related postulates: (1) southern literature often probes or reflects an abyss between white and black ways of

knowing, (2) to know the mind of the (white) South is to know what it refuses to think, and (3) to know this abyss as it is met by the vacuum of the "unthought known" (of white ways of not knowing) is to admit a third knowledge system into our lexicon—the importance of exploring unofficial information systems that have been subjugated to nominally "higher" ways of knowing. Now we must add two more postulates: (4) that aspect of the mind of the South that is shaped by white supremacy and gives blacks the status of sacrificial nonentities also creates *an absolute knowledge* about the direction of violence in any given moment of racial crisis within the Jim Crow South, and (5) the result of this absolute knowledge can be *an absolute unknowing*, a desire not to think at all in a world where any challenge to the "fact" of white supremacy can transform an African American subject into a sacrificial nonperson, a scapegoat.

But even these theorems are hardly exhaustive, suggesting a sixth. To know the mind of the South is to recognize the weirdness and illogic that pertains in each of the first five theorems. To couple white society's absolute knowledge about violent racial practices with a portrait of white people skating on surfaces, oblivious to the weight of the unthought known—this seems absurd. To couple the importance of excavating African Americans' unofficial knowledge with moments of crisis in which no knowledge seems possible—this also seems counterintuitive. But the need to think counter-intuitively is exactly what Annette Gordon-Reed seizes on in her comments about southern race-thinking as an American phenomenon. From an African American perspective, Thomas Jefferson is simply

a fairly garden-variety version of a white man, struggling (not too hard) to come to grips with this ultimately weird relationship with black people. His slaves labored for him, they evoked responses in him. Emotionally and practically, he could not *ignore* them. I don't see how we can *begin to know* him without knowing something of the black people who attended him from birth to death. His struggle with racial issues, to the extent that he was struggling, seems very modern . . . a large percentage of the American population still hold comparable views, believing as Jefferson did that blacks are less intelligent than whites, that whites look better than blacks, that there should be no wholesale mixing of the races. This is why most black Americans can think of Jefferson as an average white person, while whites—at least those who write about him—*claim not to be able to recognize* him. To settle for the cult of Jefferson the mystery man strikes me as a distancing mechanism by those who *refuse to recognize* how commonplace his attitudes about blacks are today. (1998, 24, emphasis added)

Gordon-Reed makes several amazing points. First, she notes the impossibility of knowing Jefferson without knowing both what he knew and what the slaves around him knew. Second, she describes the unthought known as a habit of mind practiced by every scholar who mystifies Jefferson, who claims "not to be able to recognize him." Finally, she argues that the details that are least recognized, least available to intellection, are part of the commonplace, the everyday—what's most on the surface. In the next chapter I will argue that the epic status of the everyday is what southern women's writing is most about.

*
Chapter Five

**Beyond the Hummingbird:
Southern Gargantuas**

*

Why southern gargantuas? It should be clear from the previous chapters that I want southern women writers to take up more space. But I will also argue that there is something intrinsically interesting in the question of scale in southern history and literature. What is the place of the epic? What is the place of the miniature in descriptions of both literary and material history? A newspaper in Georgia responded to the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching's campaign in an editorial that characterized the delegates who attended the first annual meeting as "all fat and forty. . . . We cannot imagine an association of twenty prize fighters and wrestlers, more independent or able to protect themselves than the group picture indicates these women to be. But they forget that all women are not endowed with such a formidable line, and if attacked, would be helpless" (*Macon Evening News*, 4 December 1930). But attention to scale is not simply a matter of attending to gender. The task of creating southern capital also yields strategies of scale. As an example of the monumental task of creating southern capital, I want to begin with a complex story: that of the black mule skimmers who built the Mississippi levee and left in their wake an immense wall of earth "higher and longer than the Great Wall of China, very likely the biggest thing that man has ever made," stretching all the way from a point south of New Orleans to Cairo, Illinois. This wall was "more than a thousand miles as the crow flies, but immeasurably longer as its thirty- to forty-foot-high embankments, one on each side, follow the endless winding of the stream" (Lomax 1993, 212). In *The Land Where the*