

**Against Melancholic Pleasure:
Care and Affect in Twentieth-Century Southern
Literature**

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Abstract

“Against Melancholic Pleasure: Care and Affect in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature” examines how white desires for particularity and exceptionalism create structures of feeling that use notions of desert to incite perverse pleasures. These structures of feeling perpetuate the status quo of gender, race, and economic inequality through static anticatharsis. Drawing from theories on affect, critical race, ethics, and politics, this dissertation maps how desires create feeling structures that confuse and constrict agency.

Chapter One looks at how American whiteness develops a narrative of desert in three texts: Robert Earl King’s song “Swervin’ in My Lane,” William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning,” and Walker Percy’s *Lancelot*. Arguing for melancholia and indignation as inversions of each other, this chapter focuses on how white indignation stems from false notions of what one deserves, particularly the sense that white men should not have to experience vulnerability. Chapter Two studies the modernist aesthetics of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to argue that his text shows how southern structures of feeling work to fragment empathy. Chapter Three turns to the role of apathy in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* to examine how the plantation-owning, paternalistic Fairchilds perform delightful quirkiness, which enables systematic apathetic stasis. Chapter Four considers the grotesque aesthetic excess of Denise Giardina’s Appalachian, political novel *Storming Heaven* as representative of the excessive aesthetics of the American 1980s to analyze how this affective decadence can confuse *eudaimonia* with exhaustion. This dissertation concludes by theorizing love as a commitment of the will and not a feeling

by reading Peter Taylor's *A Summons to Memphis* to emphasize that, while some affect theorists argue that negative affects and political problems can be countered through large emotions such as disgust, it is actually not feasible to fight feeling with feeling. Unethical structures of feeling can only be productively challenged through strong commitments.

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Introduction: Southern Structures of Feeling

“Instances of the facts, as I shall boldly call them, which interest me and which seem to have been forgotten or ‘theorized away’ are the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals.

Contemporary philosophers frequently connect consciousness with virtue, and although they constantly talk of freedom they rarely talk of love. But there must be some relation between these latter concepts, and it must be possible to do justice to both Socrates and the virtuous peasant.”

— Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (2)

“But you were asking about what affect theory can do. At the moment of this interview, all over Europe and the United States, people are revolting against more loss in the face of the unequal distribution of vulnerability and exposure throughout capitalist class society. But they hit the wall, over and over, on imagining and being willing to risk making alternatives to the forms of flourishing that are normative within capitalism. Work and pleasure need reinvention. Crisis induces a need for a kind of radical life experimentality, therefore, that also threatens the loss of even more material and fantasmatic ground. So we’ll see if the counter-authoritarian affective motor can remain juiced while the bottom struggles to converge on what kinds of fairness and reciprocity ought to govern ordinary life, whether managed by the state or not.”

— Lauren Berlant, “Affect in the End Times” (87-88)

“We who were born in the South called this mesh of feeling and memory ‘loyalty.’ We thought of it sometimes as ‘love.’ We identified with the South’s trouble as if we, individually, were responsible for all of it. We defended the sins and sorrows of three hundred years as if each sin had been committed by us alone and each sorrow had cut across our heart. We were as hurt at criticism of our region as if our own name had been called aloud by the critic. We knew guilt without understanding it, and there is no tie that binds men closer to the past and each other than that.”

— Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (26)

In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai calls for greater attention to “unattractive feelings like opportunism” because, “For all its pettiness, the feeling calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth” (5). Social experiences and evaluations of historical truths are contested topics among southern studies scholars as we work to articulate our relationship to American studies and debate the usefulness of examining

national, regional, and local particularities. The current state of southern studies is poised on a generational gap. Current leading scholars have ushered in new southern studies, which pushes back against former ideas of southern exceptionalism to make arguments that focus on the South as a handy fantasy for southern nostalgia and American displacement. Indeed, in Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, Duck claims that notions of southern exceptionalism, vis-à-vis American identity, have a steep sociopolitical price. Duck argues that both the South and the nation use "projective fantasies" for cultural and institutional work so that the region can be the nation's repository for white angst (3). This is similar to how Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson claim regional projections occur. In their "Preface: Violence, Body, and 'The South,'" Baker and Nelson describe how dialectical relationships can help build illusions of wholeness: "for there to exist a good union, there must be a recalcitrant, secessionist 'splitter'" (235). Explaining how we constructed an illusion of northern/American progressivism, they write, "To have a nation of 'good,' liberal, and innocent white Americans, there must be an outland where 'we' know they live: all the guilty, white yahoos who just don't like people of color" (235). Scholars such as these, and many others, clearly and rightly argue how political fantasies construct regional distinctions. But, to riff off Ngai, for all the pettiness of imagined distinctions, feelings *can* call "attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth." While the South is built on fantasy, the real lived experiences and feelings produced in the space are cultivated by particular desires influenced by both national and regional imaginaries.

The Spring 2015 (published Fall of 2017) issue of *Mississippi Quarterly* exacerbated the fissure. In this issue, a group of young, up-and-coming scholars were solicited to write a series of manifestos for the journal, no revision required or requested. And yet, when copies of the journal arrived, the contributors were surprised to find that the journal had also solicited a response to these manifestos from the most combative figure in the field, Jon Smith, and had published his reader review-like responses aside their manifestos. Suffice to say, we're all worked-up.

The issue begins with a lyrical manifesto from the Emerging Scholars Organization that takes on a binary blast/bless form: "Blast food deserts, and bless butter beans./ Bless gardens, and blast guns ... Blast targeted mass incarceration, which transforms marginalized people into constant fugitives. Bless VISTA and writers like Joseph Bathanti for bring poetry to prisons" (6-9). The manifesto ends with the following:

We whisper in your ear a powerful secret: The South is (and, of course, is not) a provincial region.

We dont. We dont! We dont hate it! We dont hate it!

Bless New Southern Sincerity. Bless our hearts. (10)

This ending reveals many questions that stir anxiety among southern studies: (what) is the South?, can provincialism be cosmopolitan enough for academic prestige?, how do we feel about the South? Obviously playing on Quentin Compson's anxiety about his relationship to the South and the identity it conveys, the final lines of the manifesto offer the reader an insight into the vulnerability of one's relationship to scholarship and lived

experience. The ending of this manifesto importantly and somewhat defiantly claims and acknowledges provincialism. In its last line, the manifesto shows an effort to work within the dichotomy of irony and sincerity, to push past the desire to remain sarcastically guarded and to accept vulnerability instead.

In her manifesto, “What’s Old about the New Southern Studies?,” Jennie Lightweis-Goff summarizes the disagreement: “At conferences and in journals, in conversation and in print, we seem split between those who believe the *New* modifies *Southern*, and those who believe that *New* modifies *Studies*” (11). Yet, in his retort, Smith says scholars aren’t concerned with this distinction as much as they question “‘the South’ as a scalar unit” (52). Smith portrays the manifesto writers’ perspectives, particularly their recouping of “the South” and their seeking a liberal scholarly discourse on the lived realities of regionalism, as not much more than “loving barbeque and hating racism” (44).

I’m sure that to the established generation we seem, like petulant children, to want to have it both ways—to acknowledge that, yes, of course, the South is constructed on fantasy, but also to acknowledge it is a real entity that deserves articulation and focused critique. But to answer Duck’s call for “Southern studies without ‘The South’” would prove disastrous if we value politically pertinent cultural studies (“Southern Nonidentity” 329).¹ Instead of being petulant, many of us are following Slavoj Žižek’s path out of

¹ I value a cultural studies that appeals to, and influences, people beyond the academy. While some may value the ontological truth of our objects of study more than their cultural, political, and emotional effects, I find it difficult to privilege that knowledge over frameworks that would actually facilitate understanding of other human agents. My stance on this type of southern study is consistent with my stance on ethical study, as I value virtue and care ethics over Kantianism or utilitarianism. Situation and situatedness

Heideggerian deep ontology and back into discussions of lived experience. In his book, *The Southern Hospitality Myth: Ethics, Politics, Race, and American Memory*, Anthony Szczesniul provides an excellent review of the conversation on southern exceptionalism over the past decade. Yet, I do not agree that investigating notions of southern exceptionalism should be “abandoned” (3-4). It is important for me, however, to note that my goals are not so different from those of Szczesniul, Smith, Duck, Jennifer Greeson, and others. All of us argue against southern exceptionalism, but in different ways. Yet, while many argue that notions of southern exceptionalism are purely imaginary, I am interested in how these imaginations manifest in particular lived experiences. To be clear, I do not argue that southern exceptionalism is real or good. But, I argue we must acknowledge how these imaginations assemble experiences that would be cruel to label as “not real.” My point of view claims it is better to critique the commitments and drives underlying southern exceptionalism than it is to dismiss them. Indeed, it seems as if any study of affect structures in the South must investigate notions of these imagined and preformed particularities. Concerning the abstract question of the South’s reality, I won’t challenge the establishment because I do not care whether the South is actually really real. Such questions are beyond the scope of research I set out to do when I chose this career. Instead, my research investigates what happens when devotion to myths of southern particularities actually dictate structures of feeling. I am concerned by the tendency to

matter. However, if one desires for me to make ontological moves in this dissertation, one will remain disappointed.

“theorize away” the South because it still operates as a powerful force that has affected many generations and will almost definitely affect generations to come.

Žižek, upon whom Smith relies heavily, takes a moderate turn in his more recent scholarship. Indeed, in a 2012 lecture on melancholy to the European Graduate School, Žižek mocks the ontological tendency to extrapolate too far past lived experience for one’s criticism to have any tangible implications. As is his style, he tells jokes to make his point. In one joke, he describes a man who has come to a psychologist because he thinks he is a piece of corn because his chicken pecks him. The psychologist explains to him that he is not, but he comes back next week with the same problem. Finally, the patient tells the psychologist “okay, I know I am not corn, but would you tell the chicken I am not.” In a similar vein, Žižek tells a joke about a religious man living in a Soviet territory. The Soviets send in psychologists to deconvert the public from Orthodoxy to atheism. After many sessions, the local man finally says, “Okay, I can say ‘God’s not real,’ but, does God know he’s not real?” So, the same might be said for southern studies. I, under pressure, might say to Smith, “Okay, the South isn’t real,” but the South definitely does not know that it’s not real. It exerts real and felt power over me, no matter how much I might know what I know or try to convince others. People and entities such as school board members, city councilmen, legislators, police officers, community organizers, primary school teachers, baby sitters, the Rotary Club, clergy, the local weatherman, coaches, Belk, pharmacists, gynecologists, McDonalds (see their sweet tea

line), university deans,² newspaper staff, tourism agencies, The Food Network, governors, funeral home directors, and many others.

I need to stop myself, for, as much as I critique the movement towards some type of “No South” scholarship, Smith is correct on many fronts and highly influential on my thinking about southern feeling. Indeed, in *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*, Smith follows the pleasure to ferret out melancholic tendencies in southern studies that use nostalgic ideals and regional fantasies to keep scholars *feeling* productive without actually struggling toward any forward destination.³ He writes,

Nobody really wants closure; the crisis fantasy has become central to our symbolic order: to how we work and, more fundamentally, how we work to feel about our work. In old southern studies, meanwhile, the crisis fantasy is about “forgetting”; we are supposed to be endlessly agitated about the loss of “memory” and hence “identity.” (4)

Smith is right to examine this impulse. In my work, I examine how this same phenomenon occurs in how the public sphere thinks about, and gets worked up about,

² At a fellows reception at my university, I was explaining Smith’s application of branding theory to the South and the Dean of the Graduate School told me how great she thought G.R.I.T.S. (girls raised in the South) was. G.R.I.T.S. is an acronym often found on koozies, t-shirts, ball caps, and other merchandise in the South, and was among the blasted in the ESO manifesto.

³ In Smith’s view, those of use who claim melancholy to a past we did not experience are like the family in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”: we did not actually experience the event, but we behave in a way as if we had. But it’s more than that: we behave in a way that performs it to the right amount, so that others can see that we really and truly feel just as much as they ought to.

identity and southernness. This “southernness” is a powerful assemblage that affects the way people adhere to tradition and myth, feel intimacies, and belong (but always under the constant threat of being ousted). Yet, in their implications, there is a big difference between Smith’s critique of how this works in academia and my critique of how this works in public life. Smith says that he is “certainly suspicious of academic enjoyment” (5). Indeed, in a personal interaction, Smith challenged me to think about how the pleasure I receive from doing my scholarship differs from the public pleasures I critique: if I’m not just getting worked up over other people getting worked up. Even further, he challenged me to consider how the very tradition my scholarship participates in has a heritage of anticathartic feelings such as Fred Hobson’s rage to explain.⁴

But, I think Smith overestimates the number of scholars who take pleasure from endlessly circling. If Smith conceives of academic writing as a type of therapy, he takes us to be bad patients, because he believes that most of us are not really interested in getting beyond our fantasies. However, by focusing on anticathartic feelings throughout my chapters, I sincerely—with all of the blessed New Southern Sincerity—hope to purge and purify emotions, and offer southern studies a scholarly equilibrium from which to

⁴ In *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain*, Hobson argues that this need to explain is a tendency among southerners who feel compelled to explain and have their backgrounds and situations understood and appreciated by outside others. While Hobson claims that this “Southern impulse for self-exploration and self-explanation is but a variation of the greater American rage to explore and explain,” he also asserts that the desire to do this in the South is exceptional given historical circumstances and embedded traditions and culture (9). He writes, “[t]he Southerner...felt he had something to explain, to justify, to defend, or to affirm” (3).

move forward.⁵ Academic research, particularly in the humanities, has been dominated for the past two decades by what Martha Nussbaum calls, “pessimistic flirtatiousness” (“Professor” 44). Theoretical scholarship flirts with concepts that bypass lived experience to dally with more exciting ontological abstractions that encourage pessimistic and ungenerous suppositions: resistance and change are nothing more than playful subversion and are bound to end in failure. In southern studies Smith, among other vocal scholars, deride scholarship that presents an affirmative view of southern networks (e.g. foodways studies).⁶ Adopting a posture of academic pessimism affects a pseudo-cosmopolitan knowingness, perhaps in an anxiety to escape the provincialism of being associated with the South. However, this orientation requires a commitment neither to people nor to place. My project rejects trendy pessimism while taking very seriously previous research on negative emotion as well as a suspicion of and resistance to notions of southern exceptionalism. But, more than that, in a similar vein to that Iris Murdoch expresses in the epigraph above, I hope to use affect and ethics to think about the relation between philosophical and theoretical thought and the so-called “virtuous peasant.” Here, I’ll

⁵ This must be an equilibrium that acknowledges the fragility of studying a provincial subject in an academic environment that values cosmopolitanism. This optimistic point-of-view risks coming across as naïve, but such a risk is worth the price of doing good research. Therefore, while my work will most definitely be compared to those cool pessimists in my fields, my work will operate by the more humanistic impulse of an ethics of good faith. Indeed, as a scholar and a writer, the best compliment I might receive would be to have someone talk about my writing the way Nussbaum writes about David Hume’s: “what a gracious spirit: how kindly he respects his reader’s intelligence, even at the cost of exposing his own uncertainty” (40).

⁶ At the 2018 Society for the Study of Southern Literature Conference, during one panel on foodways studies, panelists repeatedly read from foodways scholarship for the purpose of literally laughing at it from the presentation table.

claim it is better to be committed to others—to people—than to be committed to theory; being virtuous requires being situated and the obligations included in one’s particular situation.⁷

In this dissertation, I use affect theory and virtue and care ethics to study how southern myth and tradition encourage the impish drive toward stuck states of being and anticathartic emotions, such as melancholia and indignation, empathy, apathy, and exhaustion. Indeed, my work studies the relationship between our assumed freedom as independent agents and the particular commitments and values of the space we inhabit. Affect theory helps describe the value of the insights that can be cultivated by attending to quotidian structures of feeling that affect the resonances of lived experience.⁸ Using affect theory to intervene in southern studies scholarship allows me to critique how southern culture’s veneration of and obsession with myth and tradition exact costs with respect to one’s affective orientation, vulnerability, and sincerity; I then examine the moral, psychological, and affective costs which these allegiances exact.⁹ Southern studies

⁷ Which is to say: these obligations might include an obligation to (some version of) the South as it relates to the people who make up that region. This is something I comment more on in chapter two, wherein I discuss the ambivalent situation in which Quentin Compson finds himself.

⁸ Like Ngai, I will use the terms “affect” and “emotion” “more or less interchangeably,” but will prefer to use the term “feeling” to refer to felt experiences that are not states of being (*Ugly* 27). Also like Ngai, the texts I have chosen to include and the organization of my project has “been determined by the kinds of ... feeling I have chosen to emphasize,” and I have chosen to emphasize these particular feelings because I believe that they are most appropriate for discussing the politics and ethics of lived experience in the American South (*Ugly* 9).

⁹ Nussbaum situates her understanding of the intelligence of emotions in a Stoic tradition; she claims, “Arguing that emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to things and persons outside the agent’s own control great significance for the agent’s own flourishing, the Stoics go on to argue that all of these judgments are false, and that we

needs affect theory to provide new methodologies of critique that have the ability to de-privilege interest in the monumental and reorient critique to the tangible, to the affecting and the affected, and to the lived experience of the ordinary. Affect theory studies the unseen, unacknowledged, and unspoken forces in a particular scene; its descriptive project is demystifying. Using affect theory to discuss southern texts forces a discussion of what Patricia Yaeger, building on Christopher Bollas' ideas, criticizes as the "unthought known" in southern culture.¹⁰

It may seem odd that a scholar who believes affect theory is an excellent framework through which to study culture would devote chapters of a book to highly nameable emotions, as I have. But my argument is that these more traditional emotions are not as clear as we assume. Ngai argues, "in the transnational state of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger or fear" (*Ugly* 5). In the chapters that follow, I do not critique people for feeling emotions such as indignation or melancholy as much as I critique the taking of pleasure from them as perverse, and map how these states flourish under southern structures of

ought to wean ourselves from them to the extent that we can. I ultimately reject that normative vision in its simple form, although I do think that it has a lot to offer us in the area of unwise attachments to money, honor, and status" (*Fragility* xvi).

¹⁰ Yaeger explains how Bollas' conception differs from objects relations theory, and argues, "instead of describing the importance of transitional objects ... Bollas explores the importance for the child of connecting to mothers and nannies as human prostheses who create a holding environment that bolsters the infants felt but unexamined sense of her own powers of transformation" (142).

feeling. I map the ambiguation of empathy and apathy to further discuss how traditional emotions become fragmented and anticathartic in the twentieth-century South, and I discuss the anticathartic nature of exhaustion, as well as its separation from eudaimonia, within the late twentieth century's neoliberalism. Mapping the pleasure in and of white southern literature for ethical diagnostic claims is my central project.

Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" is a key concept informing my work. This term refers to structures that control how one is affected: how one is made to feel, what possibilities for attunement exist in a particular situation. Williams explains, "structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences *in solution*" (133). In studying affect and assemblages,

We are talking about characteristic elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. (Williams 132)

But, what do we mean when we talk about public feeling? How communal is intimacy, and, for the purposes of my ethical inquiry, how communal should it be? A premise informing my argument is that myth, an assemblage of commitments and convictions, creates structures of feeling. I focus on texts by white authors as a way of studying specifically white notions of southernness.¹¹ I argue that these texts show a resistance to

¹¹ Nussbaum explains how emotions develop in ways similar to Williams' structure of feeling: "Real people are sometimes moved by the love of just principles presented just as such, abstractly; but the human mind is quirky and particularistic, more easily able to

fluid feeling, or, for that matter, any sort of vulnerability. After reverse engineering these structures of feeling by focusing on how a particular feeling is produced in a text, I use virtue and care ethics to critique the morality and soundness of the commitments caught in and by these forces by exploring balances and lacks of balance between individual autonomy and community influence.

Virtue ethics is a great companion for affect theory precisely because of its skepticism toward emotivism.¹² Care ethics also pairs well with affect theory because it requires us to acknowledge our relationality and that we are quintessentially relationally responsive. I use these two ethics because of their affirmation of community—which I understand to be less codified than society and more interested in the position of being in relationship—but also because they both acknowledge how ethical choices need to understand context and relationship consequences.¹³ In this respect, Carol Gilligan and Alasdair MacIntyre share common ground. Gilligan states, “‘Instead of whose rights [take] precedence,’ the question [is] ‘What is the responsible thing to do when you find yourself in a situation of relationship?’” MacIntyre discusses animality and our vulnerability in order to force recognition that we are incredibly fragile animals, a fact he says, that most of us fail or refuse to acknowledge. In his view,

conceive a strong attachment if these high principles are connected to a particular set of perceptions, memories, and symbols that have deep roots in the personality and in people’s sense of their own history” (*Political Emotions* 10).

¹² MacIntyre makes a case against emotivism in *After Virtue*. He claims that an emotivist culture has degraded cultural morality in a way that mirrors Ngai’s claim that traditional feelings do not link as securely to correct judgment as they once did (21).

¹³ Of course, Benedict Anderson shows how communities are “imagined.” However, I use the term “community” as MacIntyre does to examine networks of interdependence and relationship.

the virtues that we need, if we are to develop from our initial animal condition into that of independent rational agents, and the virtues that we need, if we are to confront and respond to vulnerability and disability in both ourselves and others, belong to one and the same set of virtues, the distinctive virtues of dependent rational animals, whose dependence, rationality and animality have to be understood in relationship to each other. (*Dependent* 5)

I choose to subscribe to these ethical traditions because they value relationality and fragility.

By taking the South, as well as southern literature and experience, as my subject, my project rests on the claim that southern culture has corrupted a necessary balance of individual autonomy and rationality to privilege cultural shaping. Often political and ethical choices do not enter into an agent's consideration because structures of feeling work so well that they close affect receptiveness before a moment of agency arrives. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains this phenomenon:

Another problem with reifying the status quo is what it does to the middle ranges of agency. One's relation to what is risks becoming reactive and bifurcated, that of a consumer: one's choices narrow to accepting or refusing (buying, not buying) this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntariness. Yet it is only the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change. (13)

My study of literary texts examines how this happens aesthetically and culturally. The South has an infatuation with its past, a commitment to memory, myth, and traditions

over the individual and the present—one is so tied to past expectations and past myths (which one may or may not agree with) that experience becomes more limited and stuck.¹⁴ The South’s over-indulgence in myth and practicing of memory is why, I argue, the South has a tendency to promote states of being such as indignation and melancholia over being vulnerable to experiencing a multitude of affects.

My understanding of ethics is greatly influenced by Nussbaum, and therefore grounded in Aristotelian virtue ethics and greatly informed by Stoicism. While Aristotle is an important thinker for my project, I refer more to Nussbaum and MacIntyre as recent figures in virtue ethics.¹⁵ My ideas are also greatly influenced by Ngai, particularly her belief that aesthetics and aesthetic judgments often call for new mappings of the way feeling moves us towards notions of the good, whether that be acknowledging race-related power dynamics or capitalism’s power over lived experience. Affect theory is in an odd situation when it comes to current discussions on American literary study and

¹⁴ I’ve been told that my arguments on southern structures of feeling, memory, and stuckness are similar to Bishop Robert Barron’s teachings on the paralysis of the past and sin. In his homily, “I Am Doing Something New!,” he claims “God has made us for movement . . . for a journey outside of the self and into the world in its fullness,” and asks us to “Think of sin, therefore, as a lack of movement. A stubborn turning in so as to protect the prerogatives of the ego.”

¹⁵ I share with MacIntyre some criticisms of Aristotle’s tendency to think of the self as sufficient (*Dependent* 127). I also disagree with Aristotle’s claims about righteous indignation. This I will elaborate on more in my discussion of *Lancelot* in chapter one, but for now, I’ll claim that I agree with MacIntyre’s criticism of Aristotle’s *megalopsychos* because it is “an illusion that plays its part in excluding [the powerful] from certain types of communal relationship” (127). Upon this, I advance that this flaw in Aristotle’s thinking leads him to incorrectly assert that the temperate position between envy and emulation is righteous indignation.

accusations of symptomatic readings.¹⁶ Yet, humanities scholarship should do its best to represent and describe truths about the conditions of lived experience, and, in so doing, it will sometimes be necessary to offer diagnostic claims. While it may be paranoid to go looking for the perverse, attentive readers will find it in American culture, and it is not academically old-fashioned to identify and critique aspects of cultural phenomena that diverge from the project of liberal humanism. In discussing the good, the beautiful, and the true, one can expect critiques of the amoral, the disgusting or gross, and the incorrect.¹⁷

My project shows how space, region, and localized affiliations affect agential bodies. Taking his cue from Yaeger, Jay Watson claims that the South is the nation's embodied region, as opposed to national "forms of abstract personhood and disembodied or 'anesthetized' subjectivity" (10). Watson calls on more scholars "to focus on the body as a source of insight into the region's deep structures of cultural meaning" (21). In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, Yaeger investigates the motif of "the throwaway." She claims that we can see the grotesqueness of the South through the way in which bodies are disposable. No doubt this is a true and common motif in southern literature; however, Yaeger raises questions that I want to pursue in

¹⁶ Of course, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading" positions affect theory as a method of weak theory that accounts for the close and near-in-descriptive, localized claims. However, works such as Ngai's and Lauren Berlant's obviously make larger claims that connect to Marxist and psychoanalytic arguments and grander conceptions of national subjectivity.

¹⁷ This is all to say, that while my project is an affect study, I will not be afraid of criticisms of symptomatic reading or poststructuralist criticisms about truth claims (including Foucauldian criticisms of my claims about pleasure).

other ways, for example, the dialectical relationship between neglect and worth. Yaeger writes that she

want[s] to examine the importance of irregular models of the body within an extremely regulated society and to focus on figures of damaged, incomplete, or extravagant characters described under rubrics peculiarly suited to southern histories in which the body is simultaneously frustrated and overwhelmed. (xiii)

Yaeger focuses on the body as it comes under physical treatment. But, this same mode of thought can be used to analyze the body as it operates under structures of feeling.

Examining feeling can better describe the way in which southern culture and practices are assembled into lived experience. Studying southern literature with an affect theory methodology shows how the pull of regional fantasies can be as affecting as national fantasies, as well as how these fantasies can be anchored to social and political space and geographic reach.¹⁸

Although some may view affect theory as nouveau chic, my commitments remain grounded in the traditional project of liberal humanism. Thus, my claims follow:

1. Some pleasures are perverse. For example, *schadenfreude*, or the perverse pleasure that accompanies white nationalism, or the enjoyment of one's own crises.¹⁹ While I claim that being open to experience is necessary, I do not argue that experience itself is an unmitigated good.

¹⁸ It is important to note that, while I argue that region is very influential for developing certain fantasies that contribute to affective atmospheres, this is not to say that these fantasies cannot be adapted and transferred across regional boundaries.

¹⁹ In the *New York Times*' recent article "The Perverse Thrill of Chaotic Times," Teddy Wayne claims, "the atmosphere of Trumpian turmoil makes a lot of people across the

2. Vulnerability is necessary to be a good person and to appreciate aesthetic representations and experiences.²⁰ I agree with Nussbaum that, in order to be a good person, one must be open and vulnerable to tragedy that may be caused through no fault of one's own.²¹
3. Borders and boundaries are real concepts and they affect real lived experience. While the South is not exceptional, it does produce particular experiences just as Wisconsin or Ireland produce particular experiences.
4. Non-negotiable obligation to community exists; however, the community has the responsibility to respect certain levels of individual autonomy.²² There should be

political spectrum feel as though they are part of something bigger than themselves.” This is actually true, but there's nothing about the era of Trump that makes it any *more* true—because we are always in relationships, and therefore always a part of something bigger than ourselves.

²⁰ This lack of vulnerability, I would argue has led to equally bad art and criticism. Indeed, I believe that most of today's bad scholarship comes from a place of insincerity and lack of genuine inquiry. If Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best are right about anything in “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” it is that bad scholarship can happen when scholars approach texts and methodologies to prove what they already know/believe.

²¹ In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum describes human excellence “in the traditional image of *aretē* as plant: a kind of human worth that is inseparable from vulnerability, an excellence that is in its nature other-related and social, a rationality whose nature it is *not* to attempt to seize, hold, trap and control, in whose values openness, receptivity, and wonder play an important part” (20).

²² Considering obligations to the individual and the community, MacIntyre writes, “Note that on this account the good of the individual is not subordinated to the good of the community nor vice versa. The individual in order not just to pursue, but even to define her or his good in concrete terms has first to recognize the goods of the community as goods that she or he must make her own. The common good cannot therefore be understood as a summing of individual goods, as constructed out of them. At the same time although the pursuit of the common good of the community is, for all those capable of contributing to it, an essential ingredient of their individual good, the good of each particular individual is more than the common good” (*Dependent* 109). The fact that we have and can uphold ourselves to certain commitments is one of the aspects that make humanity good. However, obligations can also be used to corrupt goodness and

limits on how much a person or the community should be allowed to control a subject's openness to being affected.

5. I believe in the project of liberal humanism, and that humanistic studies are more productive than studies in post-humanism. Additionally, I am drawn to affect theory because I think it is particularly suited to study human experience.²³

Concerning my conceptions of ethics, I am highly committed to the Aristotelian virtue of temperance and agree, with Nussbaum, that in order to be a good person one must be vulnerable to tragedy; that we should *care* so much that we risk being destroyed; and that there is an intelligence of emotions. With MacIntyre, I believe in the virtues of dependent rationality; and with Gilligan, I believe that notions of care are central to ethical orientations. It is important to note that while I claim that no one *deserves* security, and that fragility is good, people do have rights meant to protect their persons from persecution. This, as Nussbaum points out in *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, has more to do with justice than ethics. As she argues, justice is important because it allows the injured to move on while letting the state take up the work of retribution: "Moreover, justice focuses not on a past that can never be altered but

humanity. Therefore, temperance should be a guiding mantra in navigating communitarian networks of obligation and individual flourishing.

²³ Like Nussbaum, I believe that "a decent society is a form of 'political liberalism,' one in which political principles should not be built upon any comprehensive doctrine of the meaning and purpose of life, religious or secular, and in which the idea of equal respect for persons gives rise to a careful abstemiousness about government endorsement of any particular religious or comprehensive ethical view" (*Political Emotions* 6). While many of my beliefs also map on to certain brands of Christian ethics, I find this model of liberal humanism to be more generous in its practical application and use by human agents.

on the creation of future welfare and prosperity” (3).²⁴ In describing the ethics of my project I often say, “ethics becomes a necessary player in affect readings when the negative feelings one experiences become the thing one likes about one’s self.” This is similar to Smith’s claim that southern reverence for memory is not so much the lost object, but the feeling of mourning or anger over the lost object. Smith argues that we are living in a historical moment wherein there is an “irrelevance of the particular object of desire, the particular excuse for getting worked up,” and that “what we really like is that it makes us feel desiring, agitated, stimulated” (4). A study of affect in twentieth century southern literature reveals vulnerability to be largely circumscribed by highly effective structures of feeling meant to keep southerners, particularly white southerners, in affective states that court stasis and block engagement with others by offering the fantasy of self-fortification.

Most affect theory either expresses pessimism about the possibility of change and betterment, or attempts to use one feeling to change another feeling. But, that type of approach is futile because feeling is the manifestation of the structure of feeling, not the origin. Structures of feeling are complex assemblages comprised of remnants and resonances of history, tradition, and, most importantly to my particular study, myth. All

²⁴ In my formulation, rights have nothing to do with “desert,” and we make an intellectual or ethical error when we conflate the two things, implying that to have a right to something is to deserve it. Rights, as Nussbaum asserts, are in the dominion of the law and of justice. Rights are systematized and enforced by the system so that we humans can be more than desiring and calculating accountants. Instead, we get, if we allow ourselves, to enter into relationship with good faith and participate in relationships that are not restricted by exact reciprocity. This freedom is the reward of accepting one’s inherent fragility.

of these entities press for different types of commitment, which cannot be overcome or changed via feeling. In the chapters to follow, I use psychoanalysis and affect theory to describe and judge how states of being and feelings are cultivated and deterred under particular structures of feeling. In my conclusion, I suggest that commitment can only be challenged by commitment.²⁵

Imagined Desert, Perverse Pleasures, and “Stoicism in the South”

In 1956, disgusted by the religious South’s resistance to, and indignation at the audacity of, the equal rights movement, Walker Percy wrote “Stoicism in the South” for the liberal Catholic magazine, *Commonweal*. In this essay, Percy identifies Greek Stoicism, rather than an ostensibly proclaimed Christianity, as the operating ethics and code of white southerners, specifically wealthy white southerners (343). Percy argues, “the Stoic way was ... remarkably suited to the agrarian South of the last century” because the idea of southern nobility was

the natural perfection of the Stoic, the stern inner summons to a man’s full estate, to duty, to honor, to generosity toward his fellowmen and above all to his inferiors—not because they were made in the image of God and were therefore lovable in themselves, but because to do them an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself. (343)

²⁵ Acknowledging critiques of the theory’s reductiveness, Duck writes, “psychoanalysis nonetheless offers resources for understanding the profound interactions between psychology and social life. In particular, it provides rubrics for considering how beliefs concerning group identity may reverberate with individual desires and fears, how anxieties concerning individual selfhood may seek satisfaction in fantasies concerning collective affiliation, and how political groups may mobilize psychological dynamics to shape public belief about the forms of social cohesion necessary in social life” (10).

Percy claims that this ethical paradigm is not workable in the modern South. He explains that this line of ethical thinking produces a type of stubbornness so that the southerner's "finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him" (343). That a person's "finest hour," that a person's greatest source of pleasure would be being able to say "I told you so," upon a cultural or social destruction—or, in fact, that such people get their pleasure by spending time fantasizing the about the *schadenfreude* that they might one day feel is perverse and adverse to flourishing.

Instead of being a proper pleasure brought about by intense feeling and the purge or release of such intense feeling, the pleasures produced by the feelings I study come from stasis. For example, indignation is a sort of pleasure from the unending feeling of being worked-up, anxious, nostalgic, and angry: it is a sharable pleasure of restlessness and invites others to see the pleasure of an ability to endlessly feel something. While proper pleasures encourage human flourishing and growth, perverse pleasure inhibits them. An aspect of this perverse pleasure comes from its familiarity and expected nature. Southern structures of feeling provide a familiar affect and aesthetic that provide a pleasurable comfort in having one's preconceived notions validated.²⁶ From this stasis comes a pleasure of repetition, in short, a fetish. Freud notes that a fetish is "seldom felt by [fetishists] as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life" (152). A fetish, according to Freud, is related to a type of repression in that it is an effort to fixate

²⁶ People don't like feeling new feelings. People like scripts for feeling, such as pride in the national anthem, for example. Challenging the rightness of these feelings is often taken as a challenge to the entire culture that surrounds the scene.

so as to not acknowledge something else; it is a fixation wherein “a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal” (154). The process of fetishization requires a sleight of hand. To direct perception away from the “unwelcome perception,” something else takes on heightened, special, and extraordinary qualities; what was to cause displeasure is ignored, and a source of inexhaustible pleasure discovered (154). Southern structures of feeling compel us to fixate on myth and to repress the fragility of our social circumstance.

Against such fixations, the Aristotelian notion of catharsis proves useful. In his *Poetics*, he appears to value certain formal arrangements and elements because such arrangements and elements will heighten effects of catharsis. Aristotle describes pleasure as a release of emotion. Of tragedy, he writes that it “is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions” (92). Catharsis is helpful because it helps us exit stasis caused by over-indulgence in particular emotions and experience movement more generally. Building on this, I argue that taking of pleasure from one’s anger or one’s sadness, the building an identity based on the pleasure of one’s anger or one’s sadness, and the desire to sustain one’s anger or sadness are all perversions of the role pleasure is meant to take in human flourishing. One cannot work toward the good life while he desires his anger.

An important aspect of this kind of pleasure is its obsession with a fantasized and romanticized past that has been lost. Describing how southern “Stoicism” slowly dies off, Percy writes:

Nor did it wish to survive. Its most characteristic mood was a *poetic* pessimism which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its values—because social decay confirmed one in his original choice of the wintry kingdom of the self. He is never more himself than when in a twilight victory of evil, of Modred [sic] over Arthur. (343)

This type of thinking fortunately allows the indignant to be compared with King Arthur without having to do anything. Even better, it’s a fantasy that allows the indignant to be the underappreciated righteous victim. He allows himself to get worked-up in pleasurable defiance, and, most importantly, to maintain it. A foundational element in the pleasure of righteous indignation is often a false notion of desert—*I don’t deserve this; I deserve something better*—which can also manifest as schadenfreude or comeuppance. Through this aesthetic form, the unexceptional sate their desires for a more fantastic life by living vicariously through great men of action. They see wondrous occurrences and feel the action through to its completion, experience and purge the intense emotion, and then continue on in an average life and (ideally) logical decision-making.

Therefore, one key aspect in which the southern “Stoas” are wrong is the idea that one has a desert. Much of southern, and American, anxiety has to do with fragility and desires to mitigate fragility. Nussbaum explains, “A primary source of political difficulty is the ubiquitous human wish to surmount the helplessness that is so large a part of

human life—to rise, we might say, about the messiness of the ‘merely human.’ Many forms of public emotion feed fantasies of invulnerability, and those emotions are pernicious” (*Political* 16). People believe in the fantasy that they deserve a certain level of security and social standing,²⁷ which has been promised to them through some social contract based on their whiteness, maleness, straightness, or other identifications with significations of power, so long as they uphold traditional power structures. Here, one might think of the conversation between Mr. Rich White and Mr. Poor White that Lillian Smith dramatizes in *Killers of the Dream* (175-190). But, this is not at all what actual Stoics think.²⁸ Stoicism rebukes any notions of desert, and would be especially resistant to ideas that one deserves to have one’s social standing secure. Again, we should value the significance in distinction between deserts and rights: whereas one might have certain rights to secure one’s treatment in society, there is no desert. Instead, to be a Stoa one must accept vulnerability to misfortune, and it is only through acceptance and acknowledgment of vulnerability that one can become an ethical agent. Even more, it is only through acknowledged mutual vulnerability that we can really connect with others. It is this truth that leads MacIntyre to write corrections to *After Virtue* in *Dependent Rational Animals*. He claims that human life and reasoning capacity depends on others;

²⁷ Much theoretical research examines how one’s “face” is treated. This term is used across disciplines from linguistics to ethics.

²⁸ Indeed, M. Andrews Holowchak opens his introductory guide to Stoicism by explaining that the Stoics would have found American shock at the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 folly. He argues that the Stoic perspective shows, “Americans suffered mightily because they entertained three foolish notions. First, they suffered in thinking that they were invulnerable. Next, when reality set in, they suffered in thinking that such attacks were undeserved. Finally, they suffered in thinking that they were alone in their grief” (2-3).

from the moment we are born we are dependent and in need of help. Therefore, to be an ethical person one must acknowledge mutual dependency, mutual animality (fragility), and mutual humanity (care). However, southern structures of feeling work against this acknowledgement. Actual Stoicism refutes claims of desert, whereas romanticized southern stoicism relies upon claims of desert and perpetuates itself through these false promises and indulgent perverse pleasure when these promises ultimately prove empty.²⁹

In the book, *F*ck Feelings: One Shrink's Practical Advice for Managing All Life's Impossible Problems*, medically trained practicing psychologist Dr. Michael I. Bennett and his comedian daughter Sarah Bennett critique the idea of closure as a ridiculous and unattainable goal that most people pursue so that they can continually circle around sources of pain, rather than acknowledging a lack of control and addressing issues one actually can control, *something a real Stoa would appreciate*. When discussing desire and strong feeling, the Bennetts echo Percy's suggestion of departing from one system of values (southern "Stoicism") to another (Christian ethics): "What you want is for something to restore your faith, but what you need is a different kind of faith" (103). They explain:

It's not just the lingering malaise that's a problem; having faith in the commitment of others to your values is also dangerous because it blinds you to reality and makes you too reactive when something goes wrong. Feeling

²⁹ Not only do the Stoics claim that believing in a desert inhibits flourishing, so does Berlant. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant claims that the thing we "desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). For example, people overeat because they believe they deserve excess since they work hard, yet this bingeing ultimately hurts us.

oppressed by whatever went wrong makes you seek out similar situations, looking for a do-over and a chance to make things right. (103)

This is a process that promotes stuck and ambiguous feeling; people continue to insist that their beliefs must be right, that others will eventually see that, and that eventually, if they just stay the same and never deviate from the purity of their convictions, they will be vindicated. As with melancholy, indignation becomes a circling around the past as a way to be continually worked up. Smith argues that southerners enjoy a perverse, narcissistic pleasure in their melancholy (or anger) because “we don’t really derive pleasure from obtaining the object of our desire, we derive pleasure from getting all worked up about our desire ... The real goal is to feel something, even something as seemingly unpleasant as anger or melancholy, rather than nothing” (3). For example, indignation is a state of being wherein seething becomes normative and pleasurable, and this throbbing becomes one’s familiar and preferred tempo. In this state, one uses one’s anger about being slighted of power as a way to avoid acknowledging that one never really possessed any. The preciousness of angry and embattled feeling is something Paula Ioanide notes in *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*. Discussing how dominant majorities feel and felt about the post-civil rights era, she claims, “At stake in these ideological fantasies were real and imagined losses in dominance and power. The projected losses were psychological and affective as much as they were economic” (28). In these fantasies, people hold on to indignation and insist that they have been slighted as a way to avoid acknowledging that their “real and imagined losses in dominance and power” are securities they never deserved in the first place.

In Percy's description, *noblesse oblige* runs on pleasure: a pleasure that one imagines as his desert, given his privileged social station and romanticized generosity. This imagined desert is recognition and gratitude, which reinforces a sense of security in social standing. Discussing how white southerners feel about black southerners' obligation to perform their blackness, Lillian Smith dramatizes this performativity: "Yassir boss, yassir boss, howdy miss, howdy, words spoken loud and bendingly. Now ain' dat right, yes mam! Followed by sleazy laughter that turned human dignity into a limp thing. But you liked it. And you felt big, important, superior even, as you heard it" (97). Yet, real generosity cannot expect anything in return. *Noblesse oblige* requires a type of reciprocity: one must receive gratitude from lower social and economic ranks and be perceived as noble in order to prove one's own nobility. If he does not receive this recognition, then *noblesse oblige* is just charity, which is much less romantic or fantastic—much more of a boring chore than a poignant performance.

The act of *noblesse oblige* never actually risks anything, yet expects a filial piety in return; indeed, a type of piety that asks the receiver of the "generosity" to give up the self.³⁰ Percy writes that the Stoic's perspective sees the other's selfhood as "insolence," that, "this is what he can't tolerate, the Negro's demanding his rights instead of being thankful for the squire's generosity" (344). Percy identifies this lack of deference, the imagined desert of the upper class, as that which has "rendered the moderate position *untenable*" (emphasis mine) and leads to him joining white supremacists groups such as

³⁰ See *Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China* for a detailed definition of filial piety.

the Citizens' Council (342). Percy writes that "the white man has lost his *oblige*" (343). But he hasn't actually lost his oblige; he is just being petulant because he isn't receiving the desert he thinks he has been promised. The obligation to do good and to continue to help those less fortunate hasn't actually gone anywhere. Dependent rationality and Stoicism need juxtaposition, and MacIntyre is incredibly helpful on this front. Vulnerability is a key similarity and necessary for both forms of thought. Giving, as MacIntyre claims, then cannot be thought of in a purely reciprocal fashion, because one's fragility makes it impossible to know how much you might need at some future date:

[T]o participate in this network of relationships of giving and receiving as the virtues require, I have to understand that what I am called upon to give may be quite disproportionate to what I have received and that those to whom I am called upon to give may well be those from whom I shall receive nothing. And I also have to understand that the care that I give to others has to be in an important way unconditional, since the measure of what is required of me is determined in key part, even if not only, by their needs. (*Dependent* 108)

Southern structures of feeling need a better orientation toward obligation, and there need to be more direct conversations about what our commitments actually are.

But, the "Stoa" Percy describes has a romantic fantasy of nobility which needs recognition in order to actually be nobility. The performative aspect of this process is crucial. Percy writes, "The white Southerner ... has been invited to either go inside the edifice he has built or to consider what he is doing on the porch at all." But, he is sitting out on the porch because he needs to be seen. He is sitting out there so that all can see his

ironic and grim satisfaction. He sits on the porch not to help or to hope, but to make sure that his displeasure, his righteousness in his resentment is seen: being seen as defiant to Civil Rights only intensifies his pleasure. The indignant is not only happy to have his indignation vindicated, but others must also know it as well. Again, his indignation is the thing he is proud of—he believes he deserves it, since he cannot have the lost object (his fantasized desert). This aesthetic mapping of the affective mechanics of this pleasure also fits with how Ioanide claims racist emotions become perpetuated and stuck. Ioanide claims that racist structures of feeling construct an unattainable ideal in order to create emotions and emotional longings that will never come into being—so that the feeling that accompanies that longing (anger, for example) can always be sustained. Ioanide uses the figure of the border patrol Minuteman as an example; she asserts that, “As an ideological fantasy creates the setting for a desired ideal, it constructs this ideal as something attainable ... however, the ideal is unattainable because, if it were attainable, we would lose the meaning and purpose on which we have constructed our desire and yearning” (18).

It’s important to understand what the southern “Stoa’s” imagined desert is, why he thinks he deserves it, and how he begins to take pleasure in the denial of this desert. In their chapter, “Fuck Fairness,” the Bennetts write:

Getting your due, in spite of most people’s inflated expectations of what they deserve, is a reasonable goal only if you’re under the age of seven. Children often use fairness as the main argument for both getting what they want and avoiding what they don’t want, and it’s also why their arguments often end in tears. (89)

Notions of due and desert, then, are at the heart of states such as indignation (and melancholy). It is the source of the loss and the slight. But, something else happens when anger or sadness become indignation or melancholy: it becomes much less about the slight or the loss, and about the loss of the loss. As the tangibility of the desert wanes, the fetish becomes one's new moral desert; one deserves to be indignant about the loss of these privileges. Therefore, it is not the lost object itself that sustains the indignant. Rather, it is the ego's practiced memory of the feeling of the slight or loss that builds a different type of libido pleasure. Freud explains, "the fetishist feels that he enjoys yet another advantage ... it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it" (154). Studying how southern structures of feeling pervert feelings show us how, for particular identities, one's pleasure—even one's type of pleasure—becomes the basis for identity. Because that pleasure, that access to being worked-up, is necessary for communal and self-identification it becomes imperative to have an endless supply of it. Ioanide claims that since the ideal is never actually attainable, one must conceal its unattainability to oneself. She describes this process as that which happens when people construct a

sense of self and purpose through this ideological fantasy and through the constant desire it reproduces because the ideal is always out of reach; acknowledging that the fantasy is unattainable would be tantamount to losing the structure through which [one] constructs his sense of meaning and would result in the death of the desire that defines his self-identity. (18)

Therefore, believing that one deserves something unattainable sets one up to feel perverse pleasure of loss or slight. Southern myths and traditions embed these beliefs as ways of belonging and operating in the region.

While it may seem antithetical for a study in affect to work with a text that clearly tells us to “Fuck Feelings,” what the Bennetts outline aligns with my goal to suggest that, often our feelings don’t point us in the “right” direction, and yet we still are morally accountable for our decisions, actions, and pursuits of pleasure. Nussbaum, while seeking a way to advance Stoicism’s stance on emotion, writes, “the guidance given by emotions is sometimes ethically good and sometimes bad. Emotions are only as reliable as the cultural material from which they are made” (*Fragility* xvii). In a section that could be read as a precursor to affect theory,³¹ Murdoch considers the ethics of structured feeling and action:

The point can also be made ... that the identity of inward thought is established via the public meaning of the symbolism used in thinking ... This should refute claims to ‘ineffable experience’, etc. Philosophers have more recently chosen to emphasize the ‘shadow’ view, that is to consider the particular sense of thought via context rather than the general sense of the thought via symbols. But I think the points are worth separating. They represent two complementary pictures of the ‘self’ or ‘will’ as outside the network of logical rules, free to decide where to risk its tyranny, but thereafter caught in an impersonal complex. I can decide what to

³¹ Actually, much in Murdoch’s work expresses thoughts we now consider paradigms for thinking about affect. Yet, writing before Williams and *Marxism and Literature*, Murdoch does not get much, or any, consideration among affect theory genealogies.

say but not what the words mean which I have said. I can decide what to do but I am not master of the significance of my act. (20)

The Bennetts make clear that “no amount of sweating, seeking, and therapizing is going to change the fact that life reserves the right to throw more shit at you than you can possibly handle.” And yet, “If your goal is to be a good, decent person who carries out his responsibilities, you’re never off the hook” (10, 9). They see the value of setting realistic goals; for example, they clarify, “your primary goal is not to get rid of negative feelings and feel better, but to block them from controlling your behavior while you continue to act like a decent person” (21). I agree with the Bennetts: you do not have a lot of control over whether or not you get angry, so you should not really dislike yourself for being angry.³² Yet, you also should not let your anger become the thing you like most about yourself.

Where much work in affect theory goes wrong is in an effort to correct negative feeling with other feeling, which ignores the origins of these feelings—structures of feeling constructed to protect commitments to myth. Indeed, my work undermines the option Ngai identifies in her conclusion, the feeling of disgust, because my identification of perversity in the desire for melancholia and indignation (as well as the perversion of traditional emotions) denotes that the barrier against disgust has already been overstepped. In fact, the indignant often takes pleasure in being the object of derision. It’s

³² My main critique is not of melancholy and indignation themselves, but the taking of pleasure from them. Also, I should note that while I critique “stuck” feelings and the stasis that southern structures of feeling promote, not all stasis is inherently bad; indeed, we must have some level of sameness to have intelligibility. However, to flourish denotes healthy growth and development.

an exciting “Fuck You” to polite society. The power of this ability is addictive; it tells you that you are right because you feel right, or mad, or aggrieved, and that any arguments or evidence to the contrary is misguided or malevolent. This perverse pleasure keeps us estranged from other feelings, affective and logical development. Southern structures of feeling barter proper intimacy for this promise of a perpetual grind of agitation, or, at least, ambiguity.

Nussbaum, however, argues “that all the major emotions are ‘eudaimonistic,’ meaning that they appraise the world from the person’s own viewpoint and the viewpoint, therefore, of that person’s evolving conception of a worthwhile life” (*Political* 11). Further clarifying her meaning, she explains that “Eudaimonism is not egoism: we may hold that other people have intrinsic value. But the ones who will stir deep emotions in us are the ones to whom we are somehow connected through our imagining of a valuable life” (*Political* 11). There’s a lot to be unpacked here for its relationship to how feelings are assembled in both particular and general ways. Nussbaum seems hopeful here to think about how care and value in terms of closeness, but, my project examines how “the ones to whom we are somehow connected through our imagining of a valuable life” are not always those tangible loved ones closest to us. Instead, this process of imagining can often exclude the body next to you for the fantasy of a particular myth or obsession with tradition.

Yaeger’s Confederacy of Water Moccasins: A Perverse Reprise

Yaeger opens *Dirt and Desire* by describing how many regions throughout the South have their own version of the “water-skier” tale—Yaeger quotes from Ellen

Douglas' *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988). In this tale a water-skier—sometimes a swimmer and often, but not always, an attractive young woman—falls into a nest of water moccasins, and cries out that she must be tangled in submerged barbed wire just before she dies. Yaeger quotes this passage from Douglas' text:

the rope breaks or she loses her balance and falls. No big deal. It's happened hundreds of times before. But this time is different: screams of agony—a thrashing and churning in the water. The lover spins the wheel, brings the boat about in less time than it takes to write this sentence. The young girl's lovely face is contorted with pain. Barbed wire, she gasps. I'm caught in barbed wire.

But there isn't any barbed wire. No. It's a writhing, tangled mass of water moccasins. She holds out a hand and he seizes it.

Wait! Wait! she says.

She's dead before he can drag her into the boat, snakes dropping away as she slips over the side. (1988, 130-31, qtd in Yaeger 3)

Yaeger claims that this story is of note because it is “a story about beauty ravaged into bestiality, about eruption of monstrosity in a climate and setting where one least expects it” (2). She reads this parable from a feminist standpoint, claiming “The story is, first and foremost, about leisure and who has the freedom and space to enjoy it,” and that it, “suggests new strategies for thinking about the relation between southern culture and the female body” (2). Yaeger suggests that this story speaks to anxieties about femininity and whiteness during the late sixties South. And, for Douglas' narrative, this may be true. Indeed, Yaeger's reading is an empowering one wherein the girl begins “communing

with the water moccasins, imbibing their knowledge and their power” (3). It’s the type of feminist reading that embraces monstrosity and harnesses its power to carve out a piece of the world wherein women can own their bodies and control their spaces. It’s a beautiful reading of Douglas’ telling of the story, but an incomplete reading of the folktale writ large.

As I mentioned above, the victim of the story is not always female. I certainly remember hearing this tale growing up in Southeastern Oklahoma, and was surprised to learn that it, indeed, was an extra-regional tale while reading Yaeger’s book in graduate school. However, in oral tellings of this story I heard as a child, the skier was generally gender-neutral (or, sometimes it would change based on the gender of the person being told the story).³³ Similar tales also appear in texts by southern authors such as Willie Morris’ *North Toward Home* (1967), Lisa Alther’s *Kinflicks* (1976), and Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* (1985). In *Lonesome Dove*, it is a male rider (his attractiveness goes unnoted) who is wading across a river and attacked. In Jan Harold Brunvand’s *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2012), the “hapless water-skier” is described as a “he” (290). Yaeger uses this tale to put forward the argument that it embodies an identity that we can recognize as the South: she calls it grotesque. While Yaeger claims that the grotesque and its astonishing nature can be used as a way to map where and what the South is, more can be unpacked from meditating on the image itself,

³³ In writing this portion, I felt compelled to contact my family member to see if they could remember a particular gender assigned to the water-skier; they could not. However, the tale’s ability to affect a verisimilitude persists, as my Father felt compelled to venture, “I think it is a myth.”

its popularity in the southern imaginary, and why this grotesque style registers as southern.

Consider this image: a mass of venomous black snakes wrapping their bodies around and around one another, forming a malignant, ball-like amalgamation made of uncountable moving little knots making themselves tighter; those knots, undulating under what appears to become one expanse of tight black skin, are grotesquely rolling in, and in to itself, chafing from all sides as each layer agitates and is being agitated by those above it and below it, perpetually writhing in either pleasure or pain. This assemblage is an image of indignation, and a good description of the byproduct as it is produced by structures of feeling dominant in the South. That is, a description of a nest of water moccasins mirrors a description of indignation's seething, and its state of constant self-agitation.

Another way that this image is like the South is that it is a complete fabrication: this breed of snake does not nest in groups (the only time when one would see many in one place would be when a litter hatches, which, of course, would occur on land). This tale is like the South because it is that which many have taken to be true, and have subsequently made decisions or imaginations based on that belief. While "we" (you and I) may know that such a tale is preposterous, our knowledge does not redact any of the cultural realities or lived conditions of the society that thinks the folktale true and desires to retell it. Additionally, another striking aspect of the tale is that it has no moral conclusion, nor does it provide an intelligible cautionary tale. Typical folktales have moral (or at least culturally situated moral) lessons. Yet, this is absent from the South's

tale: there's nothing that the person could have done to avoid the misfortune.³⁴ Yaeger claims that one conclusion of this story is that, "from a sense that whatever you're riding through the lake of southern culture, some confederacy of water moccasins awaits you—intimations of occluded drama that disoccludes itself, that wells-up—attacking the body and misshaping it" (8). Again, Yaeger quotes from Douglas, "But you—you're the one, I hear you say. You're the driver of this boat. You're pulling the skier. Is the story true? It's always true. Always true that a tangle of water moccasins lies in wait for the skier. Always, always true" (1988, 131 qtd. in Yaeger 7). If this is indeed "always, always true," how do we make sure of pleasure taken from the telling and retelling of this story? Does its disgusting nature lure us in? Are we proud of this twisted little peculiarity; does it make us unique, special, even if it is gross? Perhaps the pleasure is in the threat itself, and in our defiance to live with the threat, to not challenge it or change it. This, again, is a good model for thinking about the way in which southern structures of feeling create lived experience. In this dissertation, I examine how anticathartic feeling stems from the culture that loves the water-skier myth. To be clear, my argument about this type of regional fantasizing myth relies on a process I take to be true most of the time and for most people:

1. Myth and tradition become valued more than other types of narrative or virtues because they exact a controlled stability.
2. These myths become the basis for the southern imaginary.

³⁴ Except, of course, to remain indoors and closed off from connection to the dangers outside; yet, to do so would be to greatly inhibit and even limit her own flourishing.

3. Such a southern imaginary sets up spaces that structure feeling.
4. These structures of feeling become systematic: the people no longer structure the imaginary; instead, the imaginary structures the people.
5. People become stuck in certain affective structures, and “goodness” becomes one’s ability to correctly align with the structure.³⁵

The water-skier’s misfortune befalls her because she inadvertently encounters a seething assemblage—which is able to flourish because conditions and climate are just so.

Questions remain; why does this tale reappear throughout the southern region of the United States? And, what is appealing about a tale that ends in an undeserved gruesome death? Is it that this is how indignant and melancholic southerners think of the defeat of the South? What’s the pleasure in retelling this tale? Nussbaum claims that, in order to be a good person, one must be susceptible to tragedy through no fault of one’s own; one is thus susceptible not because of pure random chaos, but because, to be good, one should care so deeply and greatly that one could be utterly destroyed as easily as a plant might be. We think of modernity as an era of fractured reality. The subsequent chapters continue to think through these questions, and mediate on susceptibility to destruction in fractured reality with restricted emotions.

Yet, it is important to note that many of Nussbaum’s ideas about goodness come from her study of tragedy. Nussbaum writes,

³⁵ See Sarah Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*, particularly her discussion of ethics and gender and analysis of Rousseau’s *Emile*.

Tragic poems, in virtue of their subject matter and their social function, are likely to confront and explore problems about human beings and luck that a philosophical text might be able to omit or avoid. Dealing, as they do, with the stories through which an entire culture has reflected about the situation of human beings and dealing, too, with the experience of complex characters in these stories, they are unlikely to conceal from view the vulnerability of human lives to fortune, the mutability of our circumstances and our passions, the existence of conflicts among our commitments. (*Fragility* 13)

But, the water-skier tale is not a tragedy for many reasons: the skier is not a person of great consequence, there is not a development of character, and there is no process of reasoning. Most importantly, tragedy must come about because of action, because a character is put in a situation in which she must make a choice and act. But, there is a reversal: there is recognition and reversal without reasoning. The water-skier realizes that the threat under the water was not what she thought it was and recognizes the bad luck of her situation. Therefore, the water-skier tale is not tragedy, but naturalism. While it is not the main drive of my argument, through the process of my application of virtue ethics to twentieth-century literature, I am in a position where I must consider how Nussbaum's understanding of virtue ethics and Stoicism, as it is informed by application to tragedy, might need revision when we consider more contemporary writings. All of the texts I consider in this dissertation deal with luck and misfortune. They also, as Nussbaum claims, require readers to confront the issues Nussbaum claims tragedy requires us to confront. Yet, while Nussbaum's characters are susceptible to the gods and fate, the

characters I study are susceptible, not to some forces of mysticism, but to the system in which they reside and to the lack of care they find in those closest to them.

Many of the feelings Nussbaum examines throughout her work are just as applicable to contemporary studies as they are to the ancient Greek; indeed, at times she even uses more contemporary writings in her philosophical illustrations. Yet, there is a certain feel of modernity and late modernity that produces, or at least intensifies, particular anxieties and evaluations.³⁶ In an interview, Berlant claims,

One really big difference between political institutions and people is that people are able to manage ordinary affective incoherence and disorganization with much grace as long as their anchors in the ongoing world or the ordinary feel sufficiently stable ... We can bear a lot of wobble, but when the media and state-interested institutions orchestrate all kinds of situations as crises and as threats to the infrastructures that organize nextness and vague senses of the projected out future, anxiety levels rise that are not just about the singular situation but about ongoingness itself. (76)

In the twentieth-century and our contemporary moment power structures are more apparent, and risk is exacerbated under neoliberalism. In the South and across the United States, many who once occupied a very secure place in the social fabric of their space are more likely to see and feel the vulnerability that was always there for reasons that are good—such as Civil Rights progress and other movements towards equality—and for

³⁶ Ngai makes this argument in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*.

reasons that are less humanistic—the outsourcing of jobs, economic depression, and the erasure of the local.

Because of these developments, people become unable to bear this much wobble, and indulge in a fantasy that tells them this wobble is undue and that they deserve the invulnerability they once knew. People grow reactive in ambiguity. Jasbir K. Puar explains,

Paranoid temporality is thus embedded in a risk economy that attempts to ensure against future catastrophe. This is a temporality of negative exuberance—for we are never safe enough, never healthy enough, never prepared enough—driven by imitation (repetition of the same or in the service of maintaining the same) rather than innovation (openness to disruption of the same, calling out to the new). (xx)

This is not to say that there is an easy ethical dichotomy, that old=white=bad and new=diverse=good. But, we need to consider how efforts to stave off fragility create excuses for unethical decisions and immoral interpersonal orientations, and how those excuses become tenants of tradition and valorizes as myth. We need to consider the good from the position of the fragile, not from the position of the fearful or the invulnerable.

Chapter Previews: A Collection of Anticathartic Feeling

Chapter One: On Indignation (and Melancholy)

In my first chapter I analyze representations of melancholia and indignation. Melancholy is what happens when one's sadness becomes the thing one likes about one's self, and indignation is what happens when one's anger becomes the thing one likes about one's self. Melancholy is obsessed with loss and indignation is obsessed with slight.

Melancholy and indignation, however, produce evaluations wherein the “thing” is inconsequential; this is “the most fundamental pathology of the melancholic: the complete inability to enter into new affective alliances because he or she is still circling endlessly around the Lost Loved Object” (Smith 40). In this way, melancholy and indignation are not proper affects, feelings, or emotions, but are states of being that fetishize negative feeling. Unlike anger, which we might actually be fearful of and cower under, indignation is more like Ngai’s “irritation”; it is constant and insufferable. I claim that indignation, and, even more specifically the taking of pleasure from one’s own indignation, is entitled, and based on fantasy. People are susceptible to indignation and melancholia because of a feeling of powerlessness. I read Robert Earl Keen’s song “Swervin’ in My Lane” (1984), William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (1939) and Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* (1977) to discuss the similarities between indignation and melancholia as well as to critique how cultural notions of desert lead one towards these stuck states.

Chapter Two: On the Ambivalence of Empathy

Like Ngai, I want to recuperate many of the feelings I intend to study for their “critical productivity” (*Ugly* 3). However, while some feelings will be recuperated, others I intend to complicate. While much has been written praising literature’s ability to produce empathy, I will read William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) to map empathy’s ambiguities and fluidity. Empathy is generally thought of as an emotion with a clear relation to an object. Faulkner’s modernist style and interrelation of characters’ narrative arcs help me argue that the conditions of modern society in the South have made ambivalent and ambiguous emotions that were once clear. In this chapter I examine

the way that empathy gets fragmented. My chapter takes up this project and maps how a reverence for myth and mythmaking make empathetic emotion intangible. Analyzing both Faulkner's modernist aesthetic and his character's self-centered desires, I study the relationship between coercive structures of feeling and an unflinching commitment to southern myth and tradition. I focus on Quentin Compson and the culturally "dangerous" practice of genuine listening to discuss the role of narrative in southern structures of feeling. I do this to examine what types of narratives are privileged and how certain narratives are not fully articulated. I chart the assemblages that block Quentin from his own feelings and his own judgment. Quentin is the quintessential figure for examining how southern structures of feeling block interpersonal connection with the other.

Chapter Three: On Compelled Apathy

In my third chapter I analyze the circulation of apathy in Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* (1946). While a tension between desire and ethicality remains central, this chapter engages in economic critique as well. By positioning the Fairchilds' maintenance of their own family myth as a function of preserving a sense of collective memory and its social stronghold, I argue that apathy is a part of a system constructed to defend against affect's relationality, including the uncomfortable recognitions of class and race-based issues. Within this system, apathy acts as a method of affective, economical, and ideological conservation. *Delta Wedding* dramatizes apathy as a mode and mood of southern (as well as American or global) economics. The narrative and aesthetics of the novel create an experience of apathy that ignores the outside social forces by keeping labor unfelt and by restricting care for anyone who might be seen as threatening to the

Fairchild myth. By privileging their myth above genuine interpersonal connection, the Fairchilds choose to give up agency in exchange for security. While the purpose of this essay is to show how myth creates structures of feeling that dictate receptivity and shape the fluidity of affect, this chapter also argues that care is a critical term that merits more attention in southern and American studies.

Chapter Four: Exhaustion, A Case Study

This chapter utilizes historical analysis to study the desire for and the rhetorical effectiveness of exhaustion. I analyze how Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven: A Novel* (1987) produces aesthetic and somatic feelings of exhaustion. Through a study of this text and the politically rhetorical and historical moment in which it is caught, I offer an ethical meditation on the pleasure of exhaustion, as well as its ability to manipulate orientation and pull focus. *Storming Heaven* dramatizes the mining wars of the 1920s during the height of Reaganomics in the 1980s. I argue that, to use Ngai's phrase, "in the transnational state of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment," exhaustion easily masquerades as eudaimonia. Virtue ethics argues that character is built through habitation and that achieving eudaimonia requires a life of striving, working hard to achieve something very difficult. Like Christian ethics, an ethics of flourishing is an ethics of futurity. It is active and developing. With a goal such as this, one is always at risk of failure and is therefore vulnerable. Yet, while feeling uncomfortable and being open to uncomfortable feelings may be necessary to one's political and ethical agency, it is incorrect to assume that one's discomfort can be a measure of one's goodness or rightness. In this chapter, I analyze how exhaustion builds for the reader in aesthetic and

physical ways, and then discuss the political effectiveness of this aesthetic-induced exhaustion, and the moral implications of such an exhausted state.

Love: An Afterword

The South has an obsession with the past. While this is not entirely particular to the specific region, it is well documented and analyzed as a southern phenomenon. If, indeed, indignation and melancholy keep us stuck in the past, what feelings, if any, might be more progressive and less perverse? My afterword is on love; not the troubadour style, but love as cognitive commitment. Because I resist pessimism, I want my final chapter to be an optimistic, yet realistic, identification of a real force for advancing human flourishing. My definition of love merges traditional notions of affective care and cognitive commitment as I build on the philosophy of Gilligan's notion of paternal love, Aquinas' conception of love as a commitment of the will, and Nussbaum's latest work on generosity. Care ethics is helpful in considering what the better thing to do is when there is no good thing to do, no way to avoid harm. In *Anger and Forgiveness*, Nussbaum writes, "Revenge made it impossible for anyone to love anymore" (4). I would expand on this claim to add that ideologies that rest upon notions of inherent desert make it impossible for anyone to love anymore. Purely affective love often fails; this can be seen in many works, but I focus on Peter Taylor's *A Summons to Memphis* (1986). Where much work in affect theory goes wrong is in an effort to correct negative feeling with other feeling, which ignores the origins of these feelings—structures of feeling constructed to protect commitments to myth. Therefore, my conclusion is to fight commitment (to a mythic desire and fantasy) with commitment (to other people). Often,

we think abstractions make us smarter and better, but this is not always the case. If anything, abstracted care and love make us crueler as we go blind to the humanity and need in front of us.

I find affect theory and the study of affect absolutely exciting: there is something incredibly humanistic about a paradigm that mediates on a particular scene, and maps the seen and unseen interpersonal binds and connections. Another aspect I love about it, but that I think too often goes underappreciated, is its skepticism about the authenticity of feelings. Lauren Berlant's *Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* argues that Americans make the pilgrimages to monuments in Washington D.C. to feel connected to their nation state not in any authentic or genuine way, but to feel a certain, desirable, and prescribed way. That is, one travels to the monuments not only to feel deeply, but to feel "correctly." In a way, this dissertation is inextricably caught between what *ought* and what *is*. The South *ought* not to be seen as a real formation, but that definitely *is* what is as it still functions in such a way. In a way, this dissertation is an experiment; it's less a collection of essays like many affect projects, but not quite as thesis-driven as many literary ones. In the pages that follow, I meditate on and analyze an assortment of feelings that vary from states of being to emotions which I argue have lost their secure defining qualities. While keeping a tether to the ought—from a tradition of virtue and care ethics—I analyze what is through a methodology that must have both close readings and an analysis of narrative progression. We live in a

world that requires a mediation of ought and is, even if we're smart enough to know that the "is," at least in some cases, isn't real.

Chapter 1: On Indignation (and Melancholy): Desert, Desire, and Perverse Pleasure

Polonius: My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet: God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? (Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 490-495)

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Indignation and melancholy are recurring patterns in the South, the U.S., and abroad. Where one is found, there generally also exist critics who praise these feelings for their beneficial byproducts—community building, motivation for political action, elegiac beauty, or other reasons. These states of feeling can be alluring, hypnotic, and utterly consuming. Yet, they can also be quite laughable, as those who are consumed by them often appear cartoonish or juvenile, like caricatures or incensed children who have yet to discover the futility of conversing or negotiating from such an entrenched state. In this chapter I will present texts that portray figures who exude petulance because, in order to deny their own fragility, they enter into indignant states of being. To be clear, my analysis of indignation and melancholy argues that they are similar in the way they participate in the structuring feeling, and that they derive from desire and anxiety; therefore, the dominant analytic framework for this chapter will be a psychoanalytic one. Like Jon Smith, I claim that melancholy is a projection, an identification, and a desire. However, I want to take this even further: melancholy and indignation are not only rarely justified, but also not good; they are, indeed, adverse to the project of humanistic flourishing. One cannot flourish while stuck in a state of melancholy or indignation.

Indignation and melancholia stem from a fantasy of desert. Indignation and melancholia, must, at their base, feel that something is deserved out of life, and, in my

work, I investigate how these states develop from the desire to mitigate one's fragility. And, perhaps, at times, this notion of desert may be ethically desirable: it is not incompatible with an Enlightenment philosophy that all persons, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation, deserve to be treated equally. Conversely, indignation or melancholia can derive from less ethical notions of desert; for example, one might believe that he deserves better treatment than others because of his gender, race, or sexual orientation. Ultimately, these notions of desert, whether ethical or unethical, derive from a fantastic notion that life makes or keeps promises.

In this chapter, I analyze texts that portray indignation and melancholia in order to argue that these feelings are not primarily affects or emotions because they are not transient or fluid; rather, they are static states of being ultimately destructive to the task of human flourishing. In so doing, I claim that indignation and melancholy are mirror inverses of each other: indignation is a state of being that occurs when one's anger becomes the thing that one likes most about oneself, and melancholy is a state of being that occurs when one's sadness becomes the thing one likes most about oneself. I would be remiss not to make something very clear: my formulations are not critical of feeling sadness or anger;³⁷ instead, my critique is of the tendency to pervert sadness and anger them for pleasure-seeking and identity-building purposes. This perversion occurs when anger or sadness is projected and romanticized: when the feelings are exacerbated for the sake of getting worked up, because sustaining a certain level of these feelings is critical

³⁷ Feelings of sadness and anger are transient and a regular aspect of the ebb and flow of emotional life.

for one's identity. The center of my argument is a critique of the taking of pleasure from indignation or melancholia.

When Critique Becomes Anthem

On October 1, 1984, Americana singer and songwriter Robert Earl Keen released his first album, *No Kinda Dancer*. This album launched his career and gave his listeners a “working man’s” anthem, “Swervin’ in my Lane.” Later, with the rise of Internet radio and the development of curated stations catering to highly specific audience bases, “Swervin’ in My Lane” was repopularized in the late 2000s and 2010s by radio stations such as Outlaw Country and Red, White, and Booze. These stations grew their following and their popularity by playing “Renegades, rebels, rabble rousers and rogues,” and promoting DJs who provide “an uncensored thrill-ride that celebrates the unheard demented psychotic underbelly of the American dream served with a heaping order of BBQ,”³⁸ a description saturated in southern performativity, but one that deeply resonates with the station’s listeners. These are the stations that I spent my adolescence listening to and that I still listen to when I visit or travel with my parents.

Performed in the first person “I,” and therefore adopting the singer’s white, working class troubadour persona, the song depicts a mistreated, white male driver complaining about the lack of courtesy he receives from other drivers on the highway. The song laments/rages about problems with life he deems to be undeserved, which connotes a fantasy that there is a truer, easier life of which he is being deprived. Let’s

³⁸ All quotes from Outlaw Country’s website: <http://www.siriusxm.com/outlawcountry>.

look at the song in its entirety (I'd also recommend the reader listens to its performance³⁹):

Sometimes I don't know what I'm doin'
'Cause sometimes all my days are filled with rain
As I travel down life's highway
Things ain't going my way
'Cause there's always someone swervin' in my lane

They keep a swervin' in my lane
And it's causin' lots of danger
I'm a honkin' on my horn
I'm a shootin' you the finger
I keep a switchin' on my bright lights
But you're just too dim to know
When you're swervin' on life's highway
You're runnin' someone off the road

The day you drove away I thought I'd never
Could love another—how else could I feel?
But now when you run into me
I cain't believe I could not see
You're all tanked up, but no one's at the wheel

You keep a swervin' in my lane
And it's causin' lots of danger
I'm a cussin' out your name
I'm a shootin' you the finger
I keep a switchin' on my bright lights
But you're just too dim to know
When you're swervin' on life's highway
You're runnin' someone off the road

When and if I ever finally pass you
Oh, when I do, and if I'm still alive
I won't never see you
'Cause I'm rippin' out my rear-view
And I'm shiftin' it on in to over-drive

But you're still swervin' in my lane

³⁹ A version can be heard for free online at this address:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuKHqK8EPJo>.

And it's causin' lots of danger
I'm a stompin' on the foot-feed
I'm a shootin' you the finger
I keep a switchin' on my bright lights
But you're just too dim to know
When you're swervin' on life's highway
You're runnin' someone off the road

Invoking mottos and phrases such as “don’t tread on me,” and “know your place,” “Swervin’ in My Lane” depicts a proud and entitled nature of white American sentiment that has strong myths about desert. It is important to note that my analysis here is focused more on the way Keen’s song works in particular structures of white working-class feeling. My reading of the song is not so much a critique of Keen as it is an analysis of how particular feelings and sentiments get adapted and utilized for securing melancholia and indignation. The cultural resonance song intuits the swerver as a marker for other. Indeed, though the “you” in the second stanza refers to the lover, the speaker also laments that “there is always someone swervin’,” and that an unidentified “they” trespasses. I like thinking about this song and its pertinence to my project because of its indignant and/or melancholic nature and because of the way it builds pleasure. “Swervin’ in My Lane” is a theoretically fun text for my study because it illustrates just how closely related, indeed, even indistinguishable, indignation and melancholy can be. Take the song as a social experience: I agree with Heather Love when she writes, “It is possible to detect impulses that are not yet organized as movements; we can understand and respond to a historical movement that is not yet fully articulated in institutions as the dominant mode of existence” (12). This song uncovers the lavishness and glamour with which these states surround themselves; indignation and melancholy are decadent, after all.

Studying the way Keen is attuned to particular structures of feeling helps demystify and de-romanticize these states (which are often taken to be very serious) because it shows an aspect of their laughable and obnoxious nature. “Swervin’ in My Lane” shows how indignation and melancholy function with a precise similarity, with just different styles of inflection: anger or sadness. Indeed, the song is a unique cultural artifact because, even with a close reading of the song’s lyrics and an analysis of the tempo, or even with an understanding of the song’s reception and historical situatedness both within American cultural politics and within a tradition of alternative bluegrass country music, it is incredibly difficult to tell if the song is more indignant or melancholic. However, what is more interesting is that the feelings foddered by the song can feed either of those two states. Indeed, feeling strongly seems much more important than feeling angry or sad.

As the song depicts an internal emotional struggle of white American angst with modernity and the evolution of social exchanges, “Swervin’ in My Lane” works-up the indignant and melancholic by indulging in nostalgia. The opening line of the song, “Sometimes I don’t know what I’m doin’,” sets a scene wherein resentment, a key component in both indignation and melancholia, can fester. The speaker in this song resents the loss of a time when life made sense (as opposed to only having reassurance in specific and insulated enclaves). This line of the song presupposes that there once was a time with clear courses to take that were objectively right or wrong. In this way, it points to a loss or a slight. This speaker, like his white American listeners, is taunted by the clarity of the past, and the unfair fact that he cannot live and work within the same, uncomplicated structure. These feelings tag into the white American sentiment that their

culture is being “erased,” or that they are being “replaced.” Indeed, the song laments the speaker’s fragility. This opening line sets the nostalgic narrative on track so that a sense of being lost and having lost *something* that was due can develop; it begins a narrative of yearning backwardly for self-interested aims, not of recovering what is “deserved,” but of practicing the articulation of that slight or loss. This process of mythologizing the feeling of slight or loss builds a narrative repertoire for a particular aesthetic pleasure.

Later in the verse, Keen sings, “As I travel down life’s highway/ Things ain’t going my way/ ‘Cause there’s always someone swervin’ in my lane.” Through the popular, and definitely overused, metaphor of life as highway, the speaker of the song sets up listeners to identify with the sympathetic, weary life-traveler who keeps getting cut off by people who are either too inconsiderate or too stupid to stay in their designated lane, and who are therefore ruining the experience for all of the good travelers who are just trying to follow the rules. In this way, the lyrics of the song agitate the listeners’ contempt with changes to the traditional structure of American culture, wherein “change” registers as “loss” or even “slight,” because it registers as a failure to conserve social capital. Now, this is not to say that people never get cut off in traffic; indeed, it happens, and it is generally accompanied by a short annoyance. For example, perhaps a driver may remain annoyed until a song he likes comes on, and then he swaps the feeling of annoyance for a feeling of auditory pleasure. However, what we find in and through Keen’s song presents a different orientation, indeed, a different pathway for agitation. The speaker of the song perceives himself as a victim of regulatory slight. The song claims that there is “*always* someone swervin’ in [his] lane [emphasis mine].” While the

speaker of the song (and, perhaps, the listener as well) feels that he is always under attack from those who do not belong or who are not in their rightful place, another possibility is that, if someone is *always* swervin' in his lane, perhaps he is the bad driver. Or, perhaps the "always" is present in the lyrics because he derives from the pleasure of complaining about this mistreatment—it is the refrain of the song, after all. And, as we shall see below, the speaker purposefully chooses to exacerbate or continue the cause of the indignant feeling by disabling safety mechanisms. Furthermore, the fact that King produces this song so that people can regularly feel this way and work themselves up without actually experiencing the real irritant (getting cut off) speaks to the pleasure and desire associated with feeling indignant, as well as its projective nature.

Keen's metaphor and message feeds the listeners' feeling that *something* has been done to or taken away from them, making their indignation or melancholy a righteous one. Building on Freud's conception of melancholia as the process that takes place in the unconscious, I contend that melancholia is disoriented grief for a loss that is incompletely articulated or located. Feelings of loss rely on the notion that there was once something entitled, promised, or owed; that one deserves a certain level of security that protects one from fragility. Therefore, this loss is also a slight. These feelings are reciprocal. The feeling of loss and slight bolsters the sense one is entitled; the sense of entitlement bolsters the sense of loss. The song can be interpreted in two ways. The first is the false notion of a broken promise that suggests if you stay in your lane, you can enjoy American prosperity. The second is that American prosperity is jeopardized by those who seek to enter into a different (white America's) lane.

This is a comforting promise for white Americans because it encourages stasis and sees dissent from the status quo as selfish, reckless, or even as theft. The lyrics of the song give voice to white traditionalists' arguments, particularly their reaction to modern social changes and their destabilizing nature. Take the chorus:

They keep a swervin' in my lane
And it's causin' lots of danger
I'm a honkin' on my horn
I'm a shootin' you the finger
I keep a switchin' on my bright lights
But you're just too dim to know
When you're swervin' on life's highway
You're runnin' someone off the road

The thoughts here rely on the idea that one has a designated space; that somehow the highway all taxpayers support, a system built for all citizens, has designated lanes for certain people. Others encroaching on one's rightful space is "dangerous" because it threatens order and instigates aggressive and reactive behavior. Listeners appreciate the humor of the futility of signaling to these people that their actions are out of line. Keen sings "you're just too dim to know," which provides listeners who identify with the speaker with feelings of reassurance in their rightness. The chorus ends by reifying righteous indignation/melancholy by putting forward the claim that something wrong has been done to them: that the bad and reckless swerving of those around them endangers them, the good rule-followers. It is the movement of the other that jeopardizes the due of

the speaker, and, therefore, describing the movement of the other produces indignant or melancholic pleasure.

The final verse of the song provides more insight into how melancholy and indignation work. Keen sings,

When and if I ever finally pass you

Oh, when I do, and if I'm still alive

I won't never see you

'Cause I'm rippin' out my rear-view

And I'm shiftin' it on in to over-drive

This scene depicts a key component of indignation and melancholy: that is, these states' wholly inward-looking nature. These states of being perpetuate themselves by keeping the person who feels wronged by something focused on him- or herself. The move of ripping off one's rear-view mirror signals how the indignant or melancholic become less open to the other and less considerate of circumstance. This move forecloses options, and requires one to commit even more to the current path: one must, then, remain indignant because other options become intangible. The process of being overtaken with the pleasure of anger is one Martha Nussbaum explains well in *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*: "anger does nothing to solve such a person's real problems, and it positively impedes progress;" it "eats up the personality" and "impedes introspection"; perhaps most significantly, "It becomes its own project, displacing or forestalling other useful projects ... it almost always makes the relationship with the other person worse" (*Anger* 125). As with melancholy, indignation can completely

consume the individual to the extent that personality and identity change. Instead of being open to negotiations with others, the indignant or melancholic exacerbate the conditions of the unpleasant situation: the speaker in the song makes a dangerous driving situation more dangerous by disabling safety features and aggressive driving. All of this is done in the service of producing and securing perverse pleasure.

Yet, the indignant/melancholic, even with disabled safety features, cannot conceive of himself as the “swerver,” as it were. Given the structure set up thus far, cis, white, and male correlate with goodness or rule-followingness.⁴⁰ Given the style and grammar of the song, the speaker also projects a working class identity—one that connects to American notions that hard work is an ethical good and deserves to be rewarded with recognition. Indeed, even as the indignant take pleasure from bucking polite society, this pleasure is still linked to a sense of righteousness—of the slight of his desert. Because the other, because he is “other,” cannot help but swerve or encroach; conversely, the speaker cannot help but be encroached or swerved upon. It’s the perfect frame of understanding for the indignant/melancholic: they are, then, always experiencing this sense of indignation or melancholy because it is intrinsically tied to whiteness. The lyrics of the song certainly have an indignant spirit as they show a repetition of violent reactions to the outsiders’ imposition on the “driver’s” rightful occupation of a certain place in time. Because indignation is a wholly inward and self-

⁴⁰ The indignant takes great pleasure from existing from appropriate behavior. However, his indignation stems from a belief that he was in the right in the first place, and therefore, because he did not get what he deserved, any aberrant behavior from that moment of slight is “justified.”

focused state, the speaker of the song does not consider that he is not the sole heir to the highway, that the highway is shared as it is communally funded, or that, perhaps, it's best to share the lane with those who need to merge. Instead of considering any of these ideas as a way to mitigate his negative feeling, the speaker exacerbates it by stewing on how dangerous and stupid the other driver must be. The speaker uses this contact with the other as another opportunity to turn inward and think about his mistreatment and perpetuate his righteous indignation.

Yet, the lyrics also have melancholic moments, many of which tag into genre conventions of country and bluegrass music such as being caught in the rain, losing one's "woman," and general underserved mistreatment.⁴¹ The opening verses of the song play on typical country and bluegrass melancholia: "Sometimes I don't know what I'm doin' / 'Cause sometimes all my days are filled with rain." While the first line is the same line I earlier read for indignation, it is equally melancholic, especially when paired with the stereotype rain, a sad affect in image form. The second verse of the song signals its membership in the genre by lamenting the loss of a lover. The sound of the song is influential in cultivating an aura of "authentic" melancholy. The tempo of the song and Keen's Americana style resonate as melancholic and demonstrates strong ties to country music's tradition, particularly Keen's acknowledged influence, Jimmie Rodgers. In *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music*, Jocelyn R. Neal explains how

⁴¹ A good test for typical levels of the genre's melancholy is David Allan Coe's "You Never Even Called Me By My Name" (1975). While the song definitely has a tongue-in-cheek status as the "perfect country and western song," it nevertheless does a good job of categorizing symbols and tropes.

“There are two fundamentally different types of yodeling in country music: one occurs when a signer jumps into a falsetto register in the middle of a word or inserts a warble in an otherwise normal line of lyrics ... In contemporary country music, yodeling is viewed as a marker of authenticity” (19-20, 24). In “Swervin’ in My Lane,” Keen practices the second type of yodel that Neal describes. Keen warbles throughout the song, which, to listeners, resonances within the tradition of melancholic southern troubadours. While Jimmie Rodgers’ style and yodel was highly influenced by “European, Alpine tradition” and “black vaudeville sources,” the fact that he is an icon related to country music’s conception story erases the fact of this lineage (Neal 21).⁴² To contemporary listeners, the “authentic” style of the song registers as a specific kind of white experience: that which has been disenfranchised by globalization, left behind economically, and disdained culturally.

This is the melancholic style of the poor, mistreated white man who did not get what he “deserved” out of life, be it a faithful woman or a successful harvest.⁴³ This genre of music operates by particular structures of feeling that orient the listener to perceive melancholy as pleasurable. Indeed, Jon Smith’s reading of “Bubba Shot the Jukebox” by Mark Chesnutt produces insights into the mechanisms of how these structures of feeling are produced. Smith explains that the country music jukebox is “a way to escape from the Real into circling a much more manageable substitute trauma”

⁴² Jocelyn R. Neal explains that “Within popular music, much like religion, there is a need to establish conception stories—those explanations of origination that contain the most valued seeds of ideology and that take on mythical proportions among followers” (8).

⁴³ Both are common tropes in the genre.

(42). The jukebox represents a repository of indignant or melancholic pleasure, which, as Smith explains, Bubba ruins by “disrupt[ing] the melancholy circling of the bar’s entire clientele, a community that, in Judith Butler’s terms, ‘cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community’” (42, Butler qtd. in Smith 42). Smith might have also cited Alan Jackson’s “Don’t Rock the Jukebox,” wherein Jackson explains that the jukebox should be used to perpetuate melancholy. The speaker of the song states that he is “a heart-broke hillbilly” whose “baby’s gone.” Having lost his love object, the speaker explains that he needs a country song, as opposed to a rock ‘n roll song.⁴⁴

Keen’s song is pleasurable to his listeners because it invites them to participate in truth building wherein the listeners are in a position both to envision themselves as the unfairly treated and to affirm the judgment that those like them are unfairly treated.⁴⁵ This is a production of a special kind of knowledge and truth intrinsic to “authentically” living this type of white, working-class American subjecthood. The truth of this authentic lifestyle is told through the bluegrass, Americana, and country music genres, wherein

⁴⁴ Another applicable example is Loretta Lynn’s first song, “I’m a Honky Tonk Girl,” wherein she sings, “Ever since you left me I’ve done nothing but wrong./ Many nights I’ve layed awake and cried. We was so happy, my heart was in a whirl,/ But now I’m a honky tonk girl./ So turn that jukebox way up high,/ And fill my glass up while I cry.”

⁴⁵ The fact that “Swervin’ in My Lane” supports both indignant readings and melancholic readings shows that the larger point is not so much truth or sincerity (in terms of feeling); the point is that you get to feel worked-up; you get to be riled and revel in righteousness. This song helps remind me about white American indignation and melancholy, and, in particular, its relation to southern signifiers and identifications. It reminds me that these states of being are traceable, and that their origin stories follow sentiments of loss and slight. These people feel cheated (whether or not these feelings are warranted); they find themselves in a world that is not respecting the promises history made to them and theirs. There is a sense of divestment in that they are being stripped of their way of life. The unending frustration with indignation and melancholy is that they are incredibly strong feelings, and people are conditioned to believe that strong feelings signal truth.

listeners are captivated by the narrative, find pleasure in their perspective of the really true (confiding the secret), and enjoy the indignant flaunting of their knowledge (luring it out into the open). The indignant (probably more than the melancholic) can take pleasure in being derided by polite society.⁴⁶ Through the process of confessing their loss and indignation and affirming that loss to each other, they build a truth about “the way things really are.” There is a pleasure in this conspiracy of knowing more.⁴⁷ In this way, an indignant might take much pleasure in flying a full-sized Confederate flag from his vehicle because he believes that he actually knows the truth, and that polite society is wrong and needs to be upset.⁴⁸ Yet, this subject-making is built on fantasy, as these two feelings rarely have anything to do with actual reality; rather, they have more to do with perceived wrongs and perceived requirements.⁴⁹ A substitution takes place: as the lost object (one’s fantasied desert) becomes ever more lost, it is the access to feeling

⁴⁶ It is important to note that there is a difference in taking pleasure from being the object of derision and taking pleasure from typical rebellion. With the former, there is a type of outing that occurs: the indignant exposes himself as a proud opponent of polite society.

⁴⁷ This pleasure is not only a pleasure of melancholy or indignation, but can be found in many situations. Indeed, one could assert that this is the pleasure of critique itself. Yet, the formation of this pleasure matters. With indignation and melancholy, the pleasure forms as a way to promote stasis; with academic pleasure, one would hope that this manifests as a *telos of eudaimonia*.

⁴⁸ More examples country music songs that highlight this sentiment include Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman,” Colt Ford’s “No Trash in My Trailer,” and Johnny Cash’s “Cocaine Blues.” Celebrating dysfunction is a common thread in country music. For more on this, see Barbara Ching’s *Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture*.

⁴⁹ Indeed, the use of the Confederate battle flag by non-southern groups shows how symbols can become free-floating signifiers of indignant defiance and pleasure in public derision.

produced by the loss—indignation or melancholy—that becomes one’s new *objet petit a*, one’s new fantasied desert and source of pleasure.

I like listening to “Swervin’ in My Lane” because it reminds me that the indignation and melancholy which the people I grew up with surrounded by feel makes affective sense to them: they genuinely feel loss and slight, and strive to live an authentic representation of the righteous who have been cheated, and whose pain of the cheat is their compensatory treasure. However, I also like listening to this song because it makes me laugh, because it is comical in its camp (which is also entirely in the tradition of country music). Keen’s music appropriates feelings of authenticity by using elements of Jimmie Rodgers’ style, including a subtle yodel and narrative-driven songs with a slightly off-time lyrical accentuation.⁵⁰ His marriage of a Jimmie Rodgerseque yodel with his own quirky rant makes for a ridiculous and disorienting postmodern joke, which, combined with the genre’s intense demand for authenticity, conflates Rodgers’ real struggle to live with tuberculosis long enough to provide for his family with the image of poor merging on the highway.

However, while I see Keen as a trickster figure, most do not. Keen is far from working-class; his father was a geologist and his mother was an attorney. Having graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Texas A&M University in English, I can expect that Keen is familiar with tropes of both the trickster and the fool. But, the majority of Keen’s audience does not think of the song as exaggerated or ironic, because

⁵⁰ Neal writes that Rodgers’ ability to cultivate cultural ownership “stemmed from the way he let the song’s narrative unfold,” and that, “Many critics have commented on what they described derisively as Rodgers’ inability to ‘keep time’” (25).

exaggeration and irony will not work on an audience devoted to pillars such as authenticity, memory, nostalgia, and the ever-growing task of never forgetting. Therefore, instead of enjoying some healthy pleasure by laughing at the song's hyperbolic kitsch and partaking in a moment to feel deeply about one's particular social fragility as a way to release excess angst, listeners identify anger or sadness in the song as something they like.⁵¹ There is no Freudian discovery or Lacanian laughter. Keen's audience will not critique of the song or the sentiments it portrays as long as the object up for critique is their prized possession and central to their sense of identity. This fact and its consequences on cultural artifacts and their reception is one of the biggest misses in American and southern critical studies; in this way, perhaps we dropped the ball on identifying one of the biggest shifts in aesthetic and cultural typography: the loss of ironic distance. Just as in melancholic loss wherein the actual lost objects matters less and less, the ironic distance matters less and less as pleasure gets channeled to a single feeling. While Keen may have been playing with a benign and devious critique of the genre he enjoys, the song produced is less a critique of (poor) white culture to its listeners and more so their anthem. Indeed, given their "truth," these listeners cannot interpret the song as ironic; in order to see it in that way, they would have to accept their fragility and forfeit the right to ownership over their "lane" and space in general.

"Swervin' in My Lane" shows how indignation and melancholy are not feelings, but curated states of being sustained by an identification with a desire to feel a certain

⁵¹ The pleasure of the experience of the song is channeled into what one believes one deserves to derive pleasure from. The indignant will like the song because it portrays indignation. The melancholic will experience an identical phenomenon with melancholy.

way. These are projected feelings that are, in this case, based on a false notion of deserving priority. Yet, there is a particular consciousness that desires melancholy and indignation because they are signifiers of loss and slight, and this consciousness is embedded into southern assemblages and structures of feeling. In the rest of the chapter, I explore how indignation is developed and portrayed in two literary texts: William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (1939) and Walker Percy's *Lancelot* (1977). However, while my attention will shift away from reception and contemporary American sentiment, I think it is worth remembering that, were Abner to read his story, he'd still see himself as the victim betrayed by the world around him. Lance, at the end of the novel, is still obsessed and unable to function in society. In Keen's song, we can see how narrative is used to help people feel the way they think they ought to; in "Barn Burning," we will see how this practice can become all-consuming; and in *Lancelot*, we will see the effects of an effort to intellectualize a defense of indignation. All of these are efforts to mitigate vulnerability and secure an indignant pleasure from an unstable and uncontrollable world.

A Theory of Indignation

As there already exists a plethora of research on melancholy in both American and southern studies, the majority of my readings will focus on its twin, indignation.⁵²

⁵² Examples of studies on melancholy include but are not limited to: Drew Daniel's *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance*; Sanja Bahun's *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning*; Elizabeth A. Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*; Jennifer Radden's *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*; Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family*; Michael Kreyling's *The South that Wasn't There: Postsouthern Memory and History*; Benjamin Schreier's *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the History of Modern American Literature*.

Yet, it is my hope that my analysis of indignation is directly applicable to theories on melancholy. Indeed, I build my theory on indignation from the work already done on melancholy, with particular debts to Freud, Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*, Love's *Feeling Backward*, Smith's *Finding Purple America*, and others. Risking repetitiveness, I reassert that indignation and melancholy operate by the same mechanisms, with the differences being either an inflection of anger or sadness. Therefore, juxtaposing theories of anger and sadness together offers a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at work.

In her text, Love argues that "feeling backward" is a "disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection" (30). She advocates for such a position because it offers insights into lived queer experience. One of Love's most interesting interventions is in reading Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of *The Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Correcting their reading of the Sirens episode, Love explains,

By being bound to the mast, Odysseus survives his encounter with the Sirens
...What saves him is that even as he looks backward he keeps moving forward.

One might argue that Odysseus offers an ideal model of the relation to this

historical past: listen to it, but do not allow yourself to be destroyed by it. (9)

However, Love doubles back again, and desires to loosen the ropes that bind Odysseus to his ship. She states, "Clearly annihilation is not a goal for the movement, but an absolute refusal to linger in the past may entail other kinds of losses. Are we sure we are right to resist the siren song?" (10). However, I think Love's initial tempered response is correct.

There is a difference between refusing past losses and taking pleasure in them; indeed, describing those losses as an irresistible siren song speaks to some sweet pleasure in the pain. But, because he is tied up, Odysseus does get to fall completely under the Sirens' spell; he feels deeply and begs his crew to untie him. Most important is what comes next: his crew doesn't untie him. Odysseus gets to be completely enveloped in feeling, but he can survive it because he has relationships with the living world. In this scene, Odysseus gets the pleasure of purging deep feeling and rejoining connection among his men.

Love is correct in identifying "impossible love," "failed or interrupted connection," and "broken intimacies" as consequences of melancholia (24). However, by recommending that we untie Odysseus, Love seems to suggest that these consequences are worth their price. Near the end of her book, Love explains that her aim is not "to suspend absolutely the question of the future; that is Lee Edelman's project in *No Future*, and although [she] see its values, [she is] interested in trying to imagine a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption" towards a better life (147). In that way, Love makes the argument that a "backward future" actually is a moderate position. However, there are other, more beneficial, moderate positions that are not predicated upon "broken intimacies." Indeed, if Love wants a future without "optimism" and the "promise of redemption," perhaps Stoicism offers a good starting point. From the Stoic perspective, one can (and must) admit one's vulnerabilities and accept that some things probably won't get better while still participating in a flourishing

life.⁵³ Nussbaum's Stoic-informed Aristotelian communitarianism is preferable because it honors fragility while still requiring us to still value "activities and relationships that are, in their nature, especially vulnerable to reversal" (*Fragility* 6). In other words, such a perspective honors fragility without letting us develop a fetish for brokenness.

Returning to Nussbaum's phrase that anger "eats up the personality" provides an excellent opening to this dialog. She explains that anger

diverts one's thoughts from the real problem to something in the past that cannot be changed. It makes one think that progress will have been made if the betrayer suffers, when, in reality, this does nothing to solve the real problem. It eats up the personality ... It impedes useful introspection. It becomes its own project displacing or forestalling other useful projects. (125)

Nussbaum analyzes how anger sustains itself and its consequences in a way that identifies certain types of anger with what I am calling indignation. The type of sustained anger, or indignation, she describes here shows how it inhibits flourishing by suppressing humanity: the feeling effectively takes over the personality and agency of the human. Additionally, her idea that anger is consumable and consumes mirrors Anne Anlin Cheng's discussion of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia."

Cheng makes an excellent observation and describes an often-overlooked key point about Freud's conception of melancholia. Cheng explains that, though melancholy

⁵³ Given Love's desire for an unoptimistic future without the nihilistic consequences of Edelman's argument, one might want to ask Love if she could accept any notion of human teleology in queer theory. Indeed, while I am inclined to like Love's more moderate approach, if her approach won't accept any teleological design, then her desires to construct a particular future seem at odds with her avowed beliefs.

signals a loss or lack that cannot be attained, “this impoverishment is also nurturing. In fact, Freud describes melancholia as a kind of consumption” (8). She quotes at length a section from Freud’s essay:

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different ... [The] free libido ... was withdrawn into the ego ... to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. *Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego* ...

The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it.⁵⁴

Unlike mourning, which grieves the loss and eventually moves forward, melancholia incorporates the loss into the self. Cheng follows this quotation with the concise claim that the melancholic “feeds on the lost object” (8). Yet, what the melancholic really feeds on is the loss of the lost object—at least, this must happen eventually. The lost object itself cannot withstand regular feedings as it and its memory dissipate with every feeding and the passage of time.⁵⁵ This is interesting to think about in terms of whiteness because one cannot actually lose whiteness i.e., the tone of one’s skin, but one can lose the social

⁵⁴ “Mourning and Melancholia,” 248-250; emphasis is Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race* page 8.

⁵⁵ The lost object, being by definition absent, is intangible; and, as a lost object, one’s memory of it weakens over time to become a type of simulacrum, a memory of a memory of what the lost object was like.

privileges one fantasizes should accompany whiteness, such as a lack of vulnerability or fragility, which includes a comforting distance from others and their permeable affects. As the feelings of (cultural) security wane, the fetish becomes one's right (or moral desert) to be indignant about the loss of these privileges. Therefore, it is not the lost object itself that sustains the melancholic. Rather, it is the loss of the lost object that feeds the melancholic; it is the ego's practiced memory of the feeling of the loss that builds a different type of libido pleasure. Nussbaum, Cheng, and Freud all articulate a process of being consumed by anger/sadness—unpleasant feelings—only later to come to actively consume them, willingly taking the feelings into their bodies and allowing them to enter into their structural makeup. Analyzing situations wherein pathological mourning occurs and drawing a comparison to anger, Nussbaum claims that this kind of obsession is bad because “New values replace the old” (126).⁵⁶ Revenge fantasies sideline the values and commitments one once worked toward; the proper pleasures are replaced with pleasures of retribution and dreams of *schadenfreude*. In an interview with Lauren Berlant, Jordan Greenwald asserts that, “an ambivalence of feeling manifests itself between the cynical *Schadenfreude* that brings about ‘glee’ and the euphoric sense of revolutionary opportunity inherent in a world that comes ‘crashing down’; they create a unique blend that I think might best be described as a perverse apocalyptic optimism” (83). Narratives surrounding southern myth and tradition create ways of being southern, and

⁵⁶ Nussbaum writes, “As with grief, as life moves on, the importance of the damage actually shifts. When we see a person for whom the dead person is still at the center of life five years later, we feel that a case of pathological mourning. New values replace the old” (126).

consequently, ways of being reactive to certain threats.⁵⁷ Southern structures of feeling encourage anger and sadness to become indignation and melancholy and to build identity when the negative feeling becomes the thing the person likes most about oneself.

While making an argument for law as a necessary institution that can protect humans from destructive tendencies, Nussbaum discusses anger in ways that are similar to Smith's analysis of melancholy. Commenting on the function of anger and revenge plot in *Agamemnon*, Nussbaum writes:

People don't get to exist as themselves: they are in thrall to a past that burdens them. Anger about wrongs done to oneself is transformed by law too ... but perhaps the largest change law effects is to give people a way of caring about others that does not involve exhausting vicarious retributive projects. (*Anger* 5)

The project of anger, when sustained, overtakes the identity of the person. When one commits or is committed to a project of anger, his resources are constantly exhausted by the demands of retribution. Nussbaum claims that, in many cases, anger and compulsions of retaliatory acts usually have "little to do with the actual living people" (*Anger* 4). This formulation of anger is like Smith's argument that those who are melancholic over Emmitt Till's death have little to do with actual feelings about Till, and about how John Shelton Reed's white southern melancholia has little to do with any actual connection to

⁵⁷ Of communities, Robert Wuthnow writes that it is important to understand the function of "rural communities as collectives, as places that people call home," in order "to grasp why they react as emotionally as they often do when they perceive their communities to be threatened. The places they live in are 'moral communities' that carry meanings about the quality of life that they feel is right. The moral community influences their attitudes and how they think about the self-interests of their families" (16).

stolen silver spoons (35). While Nussbaum later argues that, unlike anger, sadness can be productive, she limits this sadness to either grief or mourning, which, as Freud explains, are fundamentally different from melancholy. Mourning requires deep feeling that is eventually purged; melancholy requires sustained feeling that eventually infects one's identity. The pleasure of these states is perverse because it is stuck and based on irrational desires.

Like Smith, Nussbaum primarily critiques anger that rarely addresses the "real" issue, "the loss," which can never be unlost or unhurt (*Anger* 127). Building on Žižek's understanding of the Lacanian "real," Smith notes:

Everybody feels desire because of some kind of narcissistic lack; the problem with the melancholic is that she or he tries to fill that void (and winds up circling around it) by treating it not as a constitutive lack, but as a prior wholeness that has been lost ... The first ethical problem here is that the subject is rendered unable to live in the present; the second is the lie that the subject was ever whole. (37)

Smith is right to explain that it is common to feel some sort of desire because of a felt lack of completeness. Indeed, much art in and since the modernist era explores this fragmentation and lack of a knowable totality. But, for Lacan, this lack is more than felt, it's constitutive; he claims that everyone suffers a lack. Freud and Lacan disagree about what can be done about this lack. In a flirtatiously pessimistic mode, Lacan claims that because language constitutes the lack, we cannot get better and our best option is to laugh at it. Freud, however, argues that we can get better when we uncover the real issue.

My critique positions itself between Freud and Lacan: indeed, there is a lack difficult to address, and we often find ways to take pleasure from this lack. From the ethical perspective I've provided, if everyone has a lack, it must be a lack of certainty and security. Because we are fragile and vulnerable to chance, certainty and security are elusive desires—and we trick ourselves into thinking we deserve them because we want them so badly. When we feel this lack, we develop fantasies and nostalgias that feed melancholia and indignation. When one is unable to accept that there is no promised desert of security—indeed, that nostalgia for a past which promised security (i.e. the American dream) is fantasy—restoring this lack can become an obsession and result in a fetish for the loss of the loss. The desire to feel secure might be human, but fetishizing anger or indignation is perverse. Indignation and melancholy feed on ugly feelings rather than having their own unique feelings, emotions, or affects; they are, in perhaps the truest sense of the phrase, more style than substance. They can recuperate envy, paranoia, or irritation and channel those resonances to energize indignant seething or melancholic wallowing. The fact that these states have exactly the same composition, only styled differently, shows their false and projective nature.

While proper pleasures encourage human flourishing and growth, preserve pleasures inhibit them.⁵⁸ In a way, this is like the Freudian death drive as characterized by queer theorists such as Edelman, or the constant state of *jouissance*. For Lacan,

⁵⁸ Smith argues that southerners enjoy a perverse, narcissistic pleasure in their melancholy or anger because they do not desire some object, but instead desire for desire's sake; we get worked-up about X (not because we really care about X or think we can cause change) just for the pleasure of getting worked-up (3).

jouissance amounts to the pain of being denied pleasure, in order to ensure the continuation of desire. Lacan argues that desire does not ever belong to us, but is a product of fantasies. These fantasies, he maintains, are created in the image of cultural ideologies rather than based on anything tangible or corporeal. Human desire, then, is always reliant on a lack because fantasy, by definition, is not a real entity. The object of our desire is merely a way of providing substance to the desire. If this is the case, Lacan says, human desire is nothing more than a narcissistic projection misrepresented by an object, and as such, we will always continue to desire. The paradox here is that to obtain the desire—to actually acquire desire itself—is to reveal the lack, which we need in order to even feel desire in the first place. Thus, desire only works if it is frustrated and impossible to attain. Indignant and melancholic feelings provide fantasy and security from an ever-changing reality.⁵⁹

Nussbaum's response to Lacan would be that our lack is what makes us good because it makes us fragile, and that any attempts to rid ourselves of our lack—any actions to attempt to make ourselves invulnerable—are not only useless but actively make us worse people. People desire stability. They desire to mitigate their fragility, to have secure social standing, and to know exactly who they are and what who they are

⁵⁹ While desire is continually unsatisfied, drive finds its satisfaction. According to Lacan, drive subsists off the incessant and repeated thwarting of desire. In fact, desire must be thwarted for drive to exist, so desire's dissatisfaction is ultimately drive's satisfaction: drive feeds off desire's continual dissatisfaction. Drive finds pleasure but also maintains existence in the denial of pleasure and satisfaction of desire. Thus, argues Lacan, *jouissance* "appears not purely and simply as the satisfaction of need, but as the satisfaction of a drive" (209). For Lacan, *jouissance* exists in the pain of being denied pleasure in order to ensure the continuation of desire.

means to society. This type of stability requires stasis and for everyone else to stand still as well.⁶⁰ Indignation, then, becomes a safeguard against other experiences. In her chapter on intimate relationships, Nussbaum explains that anger stems from “profound helplessness,” and “is a vain attempt at seizing control” (105). She claims that people engage in cycles of anger (which I would call indignation) to avoid the risk of what might occur if the problem governing their life experiences thus far were to actually be resolved. Nussbaum writes that giving up on anger

would take work, and it would be risky, because things would then have to change. Cycling round and round in the predictable ‘dance’ is a lot easier, because it means not having to address fundamental issues. So anger becomes a deflection from the constructive job of working out a reciprocal adult relationship. It is not just non-Transitional, it is anti-Transitional” (*Anger* 108).

Part of the perversion of indignation’s pleasure comes from its tendency to fixate and fetishize. Rather than being vulnerable to new experiences, people can develop a perverse pleasure in indulging in known experience, even if, as Smith says, those experiences are unpleasant. Freud notes that a fetish is “seldom felt by [fetishists] as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise

⁶⁰ Yaeger asserts, “southern manners are designed to hide ... heterogeneity and injustice” (139). If a white man is to know exactly who he is in society, it requires everyone else to remain in the exact social circumstance their parents inhabited; it requires them to “stay in their lane,” if you will. This desire is something Sharon Patricia Holland comments on when she recounts a personal encounter in her introduction to *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012). She describes an encounter when after waiting in her car to allow a white woman to unload her groceries in a parking lot (instead of moving as the woman demanded), the woman “said with mustered indignation, ‘And to think I marched for you!’” (2).

the way in which it eases their erotic life” (147-57).⁶¹ When anger or sadness take over the personality and becomes indignation and melancholia, this causes the person’s values and pleasures to change. When a person cannot accept that she is not entitled to her fantasy, she expends energy by fixating on the loss or the slight. Like projection, fetishization requires a sleight of hand.⁶² To direct perception away from the “unwelcome perception” of one’s inability to assert control over life, something else takes on heightened, special, and extraordinary qualities; what was to cause displeasure is ignored (grief over life’s difficulty), and a source of exponential pleasure discovered (indignation over the loss one’s desert).

Abner’s Stride

The indignant can often equate habit with desert. The fantasy of the indignant is that he participates in a world with stagnant codes, and that, once mastered, these codes are the key to material and social advancement. One can easily become indignant, then, when rules shift and change, or, at least, when reality does not align with fantasy. Then, the indignant can feel cheated and slighted. William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” conveys how indignation seethes and illustrates how it can become stagnant and permeate an entire family, the Snopeses. “Barn Burning” is the story of a drifting tenant farmer family not long after the Civil War. The family and their livelihood are at the mercy of Abner’s

⁶¹ A fetish, according to Freud, is related to a type of repression in that it is an effort to fixate so as to not acknowledge something else; it is a fixation wherein “a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal” (154).

⁶² Freud writes, “In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached, as is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought” (154).

indignation, which arises out of a false notion that he deserves privilege because of his whiteness. We see Abner's feelings about desert and race come through in his interactions with the black servant at the de Spains' house and in his disgust that the house was built with white sweat. Abner, the father and head of the family, is notable for many reasons, his pyromania among them. Yet, Faulkner conveys Abner's indignant state best by describing Abner's style: through Abner's unwavering stride, his cold and steady voice, and his conviction in his actions. Abner emits indignation in every steady, calculated move he makes.

Focalized through Sarty (Abner's youngest son) and his perspectives (which shift between the time of the story's setting and years later), the story opens with a makeshift court scene wherein Abner is being tried for burning a barn. This scene speaks to two levels of indignation. First is the boy's effort to interpellate himself into his father's indignant fantasy narrative. Faulkner writes, "He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father's enemy (*our enemy* he thought in that despair; *ourn! mine and hisn both! He's my father!*)" (3). In this short first paragraph of the text, we see the boy make an effort to shift his way of engaging with the world, to alter his general attunement. He corrects himself twice: first, he makes himself see the Justice not as a Justice or a man of order, but as his and his father's enemy; second, he instantiates his perspective even more through his use of language—he changes and corrects his use of "*our*" to "*ourn*." The fact that "*ourn*" is not his automatic or natural usage points to this language as a something that he identifies with a *something* he should be desiring and feeling. Whereas "*our*" might be too inclusive or facilitating—whereas it

gives him a broader orientation to attunement— “ourn” suggests nativism and that circle of inclusion for this version of “our” has a highly limited reach. While “ourn” is correct usage in an Appalachian dialect, it is important to note the correction to it and how such a correction adheres to the general form of the opening paragraph, in which the perspective becomes increasingly limited. Additionally, when Sarty uses the phrase “*our enemy*,” he locates his grievance as a target that can be addressed and moved beyond. Changing this identified noun to his dialect’s pronoun “ourn” frees the target of his ire (the enemy Justice) and makes the anger more about himself, which makes his indignation more difficult to localize, direct, and purge. If structures of feeling are created by commitment, belief, and desire, then the language we use to think about or communicate these bonds is an instrumental piece of machinery.

The second level of indignation illustrated in this opening court scene is in the testimony that Mr. Harris, the plaintiff, provides concerning how the barn burning comes about. He explains that Abner’s hog had gotten into his cornfield. Upon returning the hog to Abner at his residence, Mr. Harris provides Abner with the wire needed to build a pen for the hog, which would thus eliminate future interactions and exchanges between the two men. After the hog is found in Mr. Harris’ corn again, Mr. Harris testifies, “The next time I put the hog up and kept it. I rode down to his house and saw the wire I gave him still rolled on to the spool in his yard. I told him that he could have the hog when he paid me a dollar pound fee” (3-4). It is this interaction that leads Abner to burn Mr. Harris’ barn. For the purposes of producing a theory of indignation, what is interesting to note here is the phenomenon of stasis, which is integral to indignation as a state of being.

Abner has the means to stop an encounter that will make him feel slighted and give him cause to reassert his indignation, but does not act on his opportunity. His stasis leads to an encounter in which he can feel slighted by Mr. Harris, who wants to exact money from him. Abner burns the barn.⁶³ While one could validly argue that Mr. Harris' actions are paternalistic, Abner does not address Mr. Harris' paternalism with an angered retort. Abner does not burst into a fit when Mr. Harris makes his demand, nor does he voice a critique of Mr. Harris' thinking. Instead, Abner uses this event to feed his indignation, and he responds with a steady-handed and calculated blaze.

Indignation is a state of being that functions via stasis, and Abner's act of barn burning is not a departure from this stasis. The burning is not an eruption of passion. He is a barnburner, and he exacts a perverse pleasure from destruction and non-productivity. Abner likely took some ironic pleasure in sending only the phrase "wood and hay kin burn" to his first victim (4). Abner burns barns not in an eruption of fervor, but with a calculated perversity. What better way to drive indignation than to commit an act that is ultimately unproductive and fruitless?

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* offers useful insights on American perversion, melancholy, and indignation. Berlant opens her study on the cruelty of optimism with the now often-quoted definition of the phenomenon:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a

⁶³ We know this to be true given the boy's pleas to send warning again before Abner burns De Spain's barn.

fantasy of the good life, or a political project. ... These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

(1)

Applied to “Barn Burning,” Abner desires feeling indignant, and this desire keeps him from flourishing because it keeps him from forming better relations and more productive desires. Cheng argues that the melancholic’s love for the lost object can turn to a type of resentment in a way that supports Berlant’s assertion that the thing we desire can often hurt us: “The melancholic is not melancholic because he or she has lost something but because he or she has introjected that which he or she now reviles. That the melancholic is stuck in more ways than just temporally; he or she is stuck—almost choking on—the hateful loved thing he or she just devoured” (9). Given Berlant’s definition, objects of desire in a cruelly optimistic relationship are perverse because they turn out to be illogical and regressive. Berlant puts forward the bold, tautological claim, “All attachment is optimistic,” and explains, “if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene [emphasis original]” (2). Berlant’s claim here relies upon the idea that people wish to be generative. Melancholy and indignation, however, are not procreative and are secured by avoiding generative possibilities. As in, they are a type of drive perpetually being thwarted: they feed on desire and can never be nor wants to be satisfied. After being banished from the town in which the story beings, Sarty hopes,

“Maybe he’s done satisfied now,” but this is not the case (6). Unfortunately, Sarty does not understand that his father must actively work to avoid the finality of satisfaction. Abner’s satisfaction and pleasure relies upon the repetition of an assertion of his righteous indignation, and others’ recognition of it.⁶⁴

While Berlant may overestimate people’s desires to be generative, her analysis of the way pleasure can become confused or redirected is excellent. In language that echoes the sentiments of Nussbaum and Smith discussed earlier, Berlant writes:

Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of “the change that’s gonna come.” Or, the change that is *not* going to come: one of optimism’s ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate. But optimism doesn’t just manifest as aim to become stupid or simple—often the risk of attachment taken in its throes manifests an intelligence beyond rational thinking. (2)

Berlant shows how pleasure can be shaped in a way that dislocates the feeling from its original point. Abner’s attachment to the project of indignation shows how his pleasure has become perverted: its “intelligence beyond rational thinking” is addiction. It’s

⁶⁴ There is something especially symbolic about the use of fire, too, because fire can be both generative and destructive. For example, in contained forest fires, we burn off underbrush or burn off a field to remove all the dead or harmful elements to ready it for a new season. But, this is when it is contain and kept under control. Like deep feelings, fire can be used to purge excess growth, but it cannot be allowed to become excess itself.

important to note where Berlant's theory is applicable to "Barn Burning," and where it falls short. Abner's attachment is optimistic because it is to his indignation. He does not attach to anything that might threaten this, including his son, whom he abandons at the end of the story. His other children do not pose a threat; indeed, Faulkner likens them to cattle, as if they have minimal cognitive functioning: "The two sisters got down, big, bovine, in a flutter of cheap ribbons"; "the older brother leaning now in the stable door, chewing, blinking slowly and steadily at nothing apparently" (9, 16). Abner receives his pleasure from conventionality, even through it is a gross one. What might have begun as a type of tempered Aristotelian righteousness has become exacerbated into an American indignation, wherein Abner's "appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts," not of a traditional "good-life" but, nevertheless, a pleasurable life.

Indignation becomes Abner's style. Abner's consistency in tone and action are reflected by the constancy of his movements: a stride that will not be broken and strikes "without heat." Minrose Gwin claims that "memory can be transmitted from generation to generation by aesthetic work" (157). Though Gwin is discussing the transmission of memory and melancholy of racial injustice (and, specifically, Medgar Evers), the statement is equally true for white indignation. After the court scene, the family is banished from the area. In a reflective moment in the text, Faulkner describes the Snopeses' style of action:

His father mounted to the seat where the older brother already sat and struck the gaunt mules two savage blows with the peeled willow, but without heat. It was not even sadistic; it was exactly that same quality which in later years would

cause his descendants to over-run the engine before putting a motor car into motion, striking and reining back in the same movement. (6)

In this trans-temporal passage, Faulkner shows how indignation festers into a state of being that can be passed genealogically. The Snopeses do not over-run their engines because they are angry; they over-run their engines because they are Snopeses, because that is their mode of operating in the world, of occupying space and time. They lay claim to the rightfulness of this occupation by remaining defiant to any change, even that which would be beneficial to themselves. No doubt, Abner has cause to be angry: he is a poor-white in the aftermath of the Civil War; he is being forced to live in a world that does not respect him or the rules his father taught him to live by; as a tenant farmer, he is no doubt taken advantage of by his landlords. But, Abner isn't angry. Throughout the course of the narrative, he exhibits no signs of productive anger, such as raving, ranting, or emotional outbursts. Though he would benefit from moments of catharsis, he denies himself of them in order to protect his indignation. Rather, he has developed a way of being that protects his anger from burning out. In "'Barn Burning': A Definition of Evil," Edmond L. Voepel claims, "All centripetal will, Snopes can have no feeling for any other being" (79). Abner exists in the world by seething. He strikes his horse too hard not out of anger, not with heat, but savagely. "Stiff" and the image of being "planted stiffly" recur in the short narrative as well.⁶⁵ Indeed, the family is largely described as lethargic, the sisters as

⁶⁵ And, no doubt, provide phallic imagery, as Abner indignantly attempts to assert his presence as a white man in this world.

beings who “emanated an incorrigible idle inertia” (12). Like melancholy, indignation privileges a stylized way of being over any option for virtuous ways of being.

Detailing Abner’s affective presence, Faulkner writes:

There was something about his wolflike independence and even courage when the advantage was at least neutral which impressed strangers, as if they got from his latent ravening ferocity not so much a sense of dependability as a feeling that his ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions would be of advantage to all whose interest lay with his. (7)

Indignation is affectively alluring because of it connotes a sense of power and security. Abner is an impressive and an imposing figure with a “latent ravening ferocity.” But this ferocity is suppressed and dormant, underlying the structure of the man and his indignation. The rest of Faulkner’s description is also telling: Abner secretes a feeling, a “ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions.” Much the permeable subject, Abner makes those around him feel the potency of his seething, which translates cognitively (both to other and to Abner) as conviction.

As someone working in virtue ethics, “commitment” is a key term and idea for the way I formulate ethical theory. But as someone working in affect theory, I also have an equal interest in “conviction.” Commitments refer to obligations one has chosen to accept for reasons that are important to her, or for reasons she holds to be true. Convictions are less logical, less cognitive, and largely affective: one feels right. While traveling to the de Spains’ farm, the family stops for the night and makes camp. Faulkner writes, “The nights were still cool and they had a fire against it, of a rail lifted from a

nearby fence and cut into lengths—a small fire, neat, niggard almost, a shrewd fire; such fires were his father’s habit and custom always, even in freezing weather” (7). Abner prioritizes habit over need. His routine pleases him so much so that he does not change, even when such a change would be comforting or beneficial to his family and himself. This example highlights a particular phenomenon of Abner’s indignation: he has learned one way to do things, and refuses to adapt or acknowledge circumstance. Indignation is a defiant pleasure, but this defiance signals not revolutionary desires, but rather a perversion of righteous feeling. People desire to align their interest with his because the conviction of indignation connotes a feeling of steady propulsion towards the desired outcome. Yet, the desired outcome of indignation is to stay indignant, and so “Barn Burning” shows a different outcome. Instead, all those who lay their interests with Abner lose their barn. Securing and perpetuating indignation is more precious than partnership; the indignant can secure and protect his indignation—making sure he is always able to feel something (righteousness) in ways that open and fluid interpersonal partnerships can never be. In this way, Abner is very much like Keen’s speaker, who, instead of acknowledging the swerving as a reality of driving on a road—or, even the greater assumption that he is owed his space on the road by virtue of being a white, male driver—the driver propels himself into a constant state of seething.

Because indignation is a reinforced style of anger, its depiction can seem exaggerated. References to Abner’s “stiffness,” particularly his stiff foot, and his actions done “without heat” recur throughout the text.⁶⁶ Indeed, they almost seem too repetitive

⁶⁶ This is particularly ironic since fires are fluid in form and, well, hot.

and unpracticed for a writer of Faulkner's caliber. In "Don't Do It on My Carpet: The Humor of William Faulkner's 'Barn Burning,'" Ulf Kirchdorfer suggests that Faulkner overemphasizes Abner's characteristics to create humor: "[I]f we imagine the story in visual terms, the repeated references to the stiff-footed hobbling by Abner, barn burner extraordinaire (certainly a legend in his own mind) makes us laugh" (5). Comparing Abner to "Chester, the limping deputy in *Guns smoke*," Kirchdorfer argues that "Were one to turn 'Barn Burning' into a play, the comedic potential of a man walking stiffly across the stage would be tremendous" (5).⁶⁷ While I agree that "Faulkner draws attention to the limp to what is an obsessive, relentless degree," I do not agree that this is done for comedic effect (Kirchdorfer 5). Faulkner's obsessive, relentless description of Abner is a means of portraying Abner's compulsive, relentless nature, as well as his tendency to call attention to his presence. While Keen invites us to see the ridiculous nature of a driver melancholic over merging traffic, Faulkner treats his character seriously. Abner is not funny; he is a creature to be pitied and feared—pitied because his indignation is his greatest attribute, and feared because this is a fact about himself that he likes.

Because indignation only serves one end—to secure indignation—Abner can be confident because he knows how all his encounters will end before they occur. There are two catalysts for the ultimate climax of the narrative. The first arises out of Abner's desire to make himself seen. After landing at the new tenant house, Abner states, "I reckon I'll have a word with the man that aims to begin to-morrow owning me body and

⁶⁷ Perhaps, Kirchdorfer has never seen the film production of *Barn Burning* directed by Peter Werner, as Tommy Lee Jones' portrayal of Abner is not at all humorous.

soul for the next eight months” (9). While he rarely seems to have anything to say, it is important to Abner that his presence is noted and that his seething indignation affects those around him. To recall Percy’s commentary on southern stoics, the Stoa sits on the porch. While Percy asks the Stoa to question “what he is doing on the porch at all,” a theory of indignation shows that he sits on the porch not to help or to hope, but to make sure that his displeasure, his righteousness in his resentment, is seen by others (86). And to feel it too, of course; it is infectious. Just as the speaker in Keen’s song must honk and flip off other drivers, Faulkner’s characterization of Abner shows that a key component of the pleasure of indignation is its performance and spectacle.

This kind of desire to be seen indignant and defiant seems highly similar to the indignation of Bone, Dorothy Allison’s child narrator in *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), who desires for people to watch as her stepfather abuses her, and to see her defiant and indignant reaction to the abuse. Bone’s pain and humiliation cannot be undone; therefore, Bone takes pleasure in fantasizing about others seeing and confirming how wrongly she was mistreated and how right (and even heroic) her actions were. While the melancholic takes pleasure from being in a spectacle of lugubrious wallowing, the indignant takes pleasure from being in a spectacle of livid seething.⁶⁸ Abner attempts to indoctrinate Sarty into his fantasy. He asks, ““Don’t you know all they wanted was a chance to get me because they knew I had them beat. Eh?”” (8). Abner’s delusion of winning is inextricably tied to his destructive tendencies and his decision to value his righteous

⁶⁸ The indignant, claiming indignation as his replacement desert, wants others to recognize that he has been the victim of the theft of this original desert and validation that his replacement desert is indeed his rightful claim.

indignation above all else. The added ““Eh?”” is noteworthy; Ford suggests that Abner requires Sarty to “confirm his interpretation of the hearing” (531). Abner uses this confrontation to attempt to tell the truth about his mistreatment and righteous indignation; to him, this confrontation validates the preciousness of his truth.⁶⁹

Ford claims, “After Abner strikes his son and demands that he affirm this father’s perverse ideals, the narrator immediately evokes the mature Sarty; at the very moment when Abner compels Sarty to endorse his father’s version of events, to *actively* commit himself to his father’s ideals, the narrator opens a compact space of resistance in which Sarty can redefine his father’s eccentric vision” (532). Here, Ford attributes Sarty’s power to his vocal hesitation. While this is certainly true, I believe that there are also other important claims to be made about this “resistance.” Claims about how to read “Barn Burning” are varied: indeed, in “Character and Symbol in ‘Barn Burning,’” Karl F. Zender suggests that Abner is a Marxist hero and, though Kirchdorfer does not outright call Abner the protagonist, he suggests that Abner takes rightful revenge on the wealthy de Spains by shitting on their prized possession (7). However, reflecting on the future Sarty the narrator claims, “Later, twenty years later, he was to tell himself, ‘If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again’” (8). Ford argues that through this moment the narrator offers readers a “glimmering of hope” for the mature

⁶⁹ It might be useful to talk about pity here. There is a certain part of being indignant that asks others to pity you, or, at the very, least empathize with you. Keen does it in the song. Indeed, why else sing about it, theoretically, unless you want people to agree with you or pity you for how wronged you have been? Further, this is an inherent part of white nationalism, too.

Sarty, that “somehow, despite horrendous odds, Sarty will survive” and “will surpass his beleaguered childhood and mature into a worthy human being; somehow, Sarty will preserve his integrity, will escape the curse that his father inflicts on his family” (531). Building on that, I argue that Sarty’s resistance of his family’s indignation and his resistance of the circulatory affects and effects of Yoknapatawpha County’s structure of feeling are central to understanding him as a hopeful and ethical character.⁷⁰

Because indignation is a stylized performance, it is expressed as a particular affective register. While walking to the big house to make Major de Spain confront him (and his indignation), Abner’s stride becomes the focus and resonates as the driving force of Faulkner’s narrative. Abner’s stride is, perhaps, one of the best metaphors for a theory of indignation: it calls attention to itself through its sheer affective dominance and its refusal to adjust, no matter what may be in its path. Faulkner writes, “Watching him, the boy remarked the absolutely undeviating course which his father held and saw the stiff foot come squarely down in a pile of fresh droppings where a horse had stood in the drive and which his father could have avoided by a simple change of stride” (10). Like the speaker in Keen’s song, Abner interprets the world through his indignation; instead of seeing relations with others as a way to mitigate negative feeling, Abner uses others to

⁷⁰ This reading is more in line with Vope’s: “‘Barn Burning’ however is not really concerned with class conflict. The story is centered upon Sarty’s emotional dilemma. His conflict would not have been altered in any way if the person whose barn Ab burns had been a simple poor farmer, rather than an aristocratic plantation owner. The child’s tension, in fact, begins to surface during the hearing in which a simple farmer accuses Ab of burning his barn. The moral antagonists mirrored in Sarty’s conflict are not sharecropper and aristocrat. They are the father, Ab Snopes, versus the rest of mankind.” (76).

reinforce his right to feel indignant. Also like the speaker in Keen's song, Abner is intent on asserting his right to a particular space in time, and he sees a part of this right as not having to break his stride or adjust his step. Abner sees it as his literal right to step in horseshit, and, since he believes his other deserts have been slighted, he is intent on claiming and using all of his other ones.

Continuing his performance, Abner expresses the deliberate mode of his style by marking his presence in the de Spain home. Faulkner explains how the boy saw his father's horseshit footprints "appear on the pale rug behind the machinelike *deliberation* of the foot which seemed to bear (or transmit) twice the weight which the body compassed [emphasis mine]" (11). After being asked by the lady of the house to leave, Faulkner emphasizes Abner's relentless assertion of his body in the space of his employer's house. Faulkner writes:

He just stood stiff in the center of the rug, in his hat, the shaggy iron-gray brows twitching slightly above pebble-colored eyes as he appeared to examine the house with brief deliberation. Then with the same deliberation he turned; the boy watched him pivot on the good leg and saw the stiff foot drag round the arc of the turning, leaving a final long and fading smear. (12)

Faulkner follows this with the information that Abner never looks down to see his work; he looks down and scrapes his shoe clean only after leaving the house. The indignant will always interpret the scene to feel that the challenges are in his way, and not that, perhaps, he has not chosen the best path. Kirchdorfer claims, "In an era and climate of social injustice, the sharecropper Abner is able to exact some retaliation against the rich and

high-handed de Spain and his wife. Abner does the next best thing to what people threaten and find to be humorous revenge: to shit on someone's prize possession" (7). There are a few points on which I struggle to reconcile this claim. First, Abner has never met the de Spains, and does not yet know how they will treat him. Instead, Abner's indignant compulsion leads him to do something that will secure poor treatment, and thus secure his feeling of being slighted. Abner's indignation drives him to assert himself in the space, to make sure that he is seen and not forgotten. But, this is ultimately counterproductive to change. Nussbaum writes, "Far from being required in order to shore up one's self-respect, anger actually impedes the assertion of self-respect in worthwhile actions and a meaningful life" (*Anger* 125). Abner's indignation hinders his flourishing and the flourishing of his family.

Later in the story, Abner purposefully chooses the least opportune time to reassert his presence. In the middle of the night, Abner returns the rug to the big house, "the stiff foot striking the hollow portico with that wooden and clocklike deliberation, that outrageous overstatement of the weight it carried" (15). Abner's stride is outrageous because of its overstated presence. Abner desires to leak his affect (indeed, marking his territory) in such a way that dominates whatever space he is in: others must rub up against his indignation, and he never risks feeling anything else. Part of his pleasure comes from the unproductive (or, even counterproductive) actions and from making the non-indignant confront and deal with these perverse feelings. Major de Spain explains that the rug costs one hundred dollars. Knowing that Abner will never be able to pay that much, de Spain intends to take the penalty out of Abner's crop. De Spain exclaims, "That

won't keep Mrs. de Spain quiet but maybe it will teach you to wipe your feet off before you enter her house again" (16). This highlights the idea of exchange in space and the price of space, whether that price is paid for in status, race, or money. Faulkner builds an aura of intention around Abner throughout his interactions with others. Abner never looks at the de Spains, even when Major de Spain is demanding 20 bushels of corn.⁷¹ Neither does Abner react to Sarty's retorts about the unfairness of de Spain's demand. Nussbaum argues that the law creates chances for individuals to loose themselves from feelings of anger. Sarty wants to take this opportunity; Abner sees this opportunity as another slight meant to take away one of his precious possessions. Smith would call this tendency a narcissistic obsession with lack that has rendered Abner with "the complete inability to enter into new affective alliances because he...is still circling around the Lost Loved Object" (40). Abner returns to business as usual, festering in his indignation. Sarty wants his father "*to stop forever and always from being what he used to be*" (17). But, Abner cannot. Indignation is Abner's pleasure and identity. It is the thing he likes most about himself, and he is willing to make sacrifices in order to sustain it. Abner views Sarty as an impediment to his continued indignation, in that Sarty compels him to act on his paternal instincts, try to behave. Sarty should be the check on his unending anger because children are the thing we love, nurture, prompt to grow and "flourish." But Abner does the exact opposite; instead of letting Sarty end the indignation, he holds him hostage to it. Sarty becomes the legacy of his indignation. The sad irony, however, is that the only

⁷¹ While this falls outside of the scope of my argument, it is interesting to wonder what justice would actually look like here.

thing left when he is finished is a shit-stain—a literal waste is all that is left, and is the cost of losing his son.

It is not hard to imagine that Edelman would take issue with my reading. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, he criticizes the symbol of the child as a tool used to keep the status quo, writing “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom the order is held in perpetual trust” (11). Doubling down, Edelman calls us to “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net” (29). Reading Edelman provides an interesting opportunity to consider what the Stoics would think about the death drive and how such an approach might mediate both sides of the discourse in which Edelman interjects: the overly protective parents seeking to shield children from the realities of the world, and the melancholic negativity Edelman values. Children don’t need to be “fucked,” as Edelman suggests, but they also do not need to be brought up to assume the world is just or that systems always work. Edelman’s argument seeks to undercut the symbolic nature of the child; however, the child is ultimately a symbol of fragility and vulnerability, an embodiment of dependence, and a capacity to be utterly broken, which Faulkner shows us at the end of “Barn Burning.” There is a way in which Edelman is also celebrating a capacity to be utterly broken, but this is not through vulnerability. Instead Edelman, like Abner, actively courts destruction as a way to avoid any destruction by the hands of

another. Instead of allowing for the chance of one's vulnerability to lead to destruction, Edelman's defeatism seeks destruction before this could happen.⁷²

There are many critics who take melancholy to be a positive attribute. Indeed, in a lecture at my department, Christina Sharpe proclaimed that she subscribed to an "ethics of melancholy." But, while some scholars contend that Abner could be correct in his actions (as the Marxist hero), most analyses that focus on Sarty condemn Abner's moral character. For example, Ford writes, "Rather than objectifying and degrading Sarty, this dispassionate narrative imitates nightmare's disembodiment and disorientation. The reader perceives the terror-stricken child's suffering much more intensely through his manifold narrative perspective" (530). Ford argues that narrator is able to create an atmosphere in which there is a "distilling of the conflict between devotion and fear" for Sarty (531). In "Barn Burning," Sarty must decide whether to choose indignation. And, if indignation is indeed just an inverse of melancholy, some scholars might argue he has an ethical obligation to carry on with this burden. Abner tries very hard to get Sarty to accept indignation by taking other things away from him (prosperity among them) so that indignation becomes his desire. This is how indignation works, and this is why Faulkner can write of future Snopes exhibiting the same indignant behavior as Abner.

Abner sees indignation as the only birthright he can offer his children. Building on Billingslea's reading of "Barn Burning" and Sarty's "spiritual potential," Ford

⁷² Overall, I must agree with Antonis Balasopoulous' review of the book: "To declare *No Future* a timely work is hence not an unambiguous compliment; for its timeliness comes at the cost of intellectual surrender to the increasingly polarized and disconcertingly fundamentalist climate of American politics in the present" (426).

explains how “Faulkner projects the mature Sarty as a moral force, a relentless opponent of his vile heritage, but this synopsis does not promise the fulfilling on the American Dream. Rather, Faulkner insists that no frontiers protect a man from his past” (535). In Faulkner’s world, as in ours, no one gets promised a desert. Perhaps transitioning away from the affectively decadent South helps future Sarty escape the dense affective atmosphere that nourishes nostalgic yearnings and feelings of loss and slight, but indignation (like melancholy) is a phenomenon that must always be resisted (Ford 535). Indeed, feeling slighted is a common aspect of human nature, a grosser one, but continually present nonetheless. Sarty also sees in himself a future (personified in resistance) that Abner never could, because, for Abner, the future was always already bound up in his indignant drive. As Vope claims, “Ab’s rage is not fired by social injustice. It is fired by a pride, like Lucifer’s, so absolute it can accept no order beyond its own” (79). Through Sarty, Faulkner offers a path out of a past littered with the ghosts of indignant men.

The purpose of my reading is not to degrade and ridicule Abner as a working-class white (though, Ford’s reading approaches doing so), but instead to point out how indignation separates the self from others and inhibits the development of goodness. Abner has a family that appears to be extremely committed to him. We can see his son try very hard to love and support Abner, despite his own conscience and moral compass. Yet, instead of leaning into the support, Abner stokes his feelings of indignation rather than his feelings of love. Abner will give up Sarty before he is willing to give up his indignation. But, of course, Abner’s indignation gives him things that Sarty never can:

absolute certainty that it will never change, or disappoint him, or fail to live up to its objective; it gives him a false sense of security and invulnerability.

Lance's Philosophy

Indignation is not limited to the working class (nor is it bound solely to whiteness, masculinity, or heterosexuality). Percy's novel *Lancelot* displays an example of upper-class indignation, wherein Lance is indignant about his incapacity to philosophize past the body and human desires. The narrative of the novel shifts between two frames. The first frame takes place after the events at Belle Isle have unfolded. The setting of this frame is Lance's cell in a "Center for Aberrant Behavior" and consists of him talking (or perhaps lecturing might be more accurate) about the events at Belle Isle and his new theory to his old friend Percival (who has taken the priestly name *John*, but Lance refuses to use it) (3). The second frame takes place around one year before the first. Told retrospectively from Lance's cell, we are guided through the process of Lance's discovery of his wife's infidelity, his excitement and indignation over this fact, the murder of one of Margot's lovers, and the ultimate destruction of the house and subsequent deaths of those in the house: Margot and other members of Margot's film cast. Because he is cheated on by his wife, Lance has a new awareness of how vulnerable he is to other people. Catching his figure in the mirror Lance identifies himself as having a "vulnerability guarded against ... a conquered frailty" (64). Lance begins a quest to discover evil⁷³ and he begins work on constructing new theories and a new vision of the

⁷³ Explaining his behavior to Percival, Lance claims, "In times like these when everyone is wonderful, what is needed is a quest for evil" (138).

world that would protect him from vulnerability. This new world would be structured so as to take surprise out of any situation. After investing in his task, Lance claims that in his new world order, “it will be possible to enjoy simple things once again,” suggesting that such a task is impossible for him now (63). Yet, as Percy’s narrative shows, Lance does not “enjoy simple things” when he has them; instead he is bored by them and mocks those who enjoy them. He enjoys indignation. Lance desires a large, totalizing philosophy instead of a situationally specific mediation of virtue because it is something he can contain and master. Virtue ethics finds value in the—perhaps boring—process of developing a virtuous life.

Lance is a useful study for my project because his state of being combines interest, disgust, and pleasure. Before his discovery, Lance is bored with his life and claims to be stuck in a rut of living day-by-day watching “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” reading Raymond Chandler novels, and getting drunk every night. Then, when he discovers that everything is not as good as he thought, he gets “interested” and feels thrilled for the first time in a long time. Lance never grieves his cuckoldry; in fact, he never even directly confronts his wife about what he discovers until he walks in on her and her lover together. Nussbaum explains the value of grief: “If vulnerability is a necessary consequence of giving love its proper value, then grief is often right and valuable,” adding that call any wish to reconstitute or make up for the loss “magical thinking that makes no sense” (*Anger* 127). Yet, Lancelot devalues love and attempts to make it smaller by theorizing it as one of two kinds of love: either sexual or romantic. However, as his philosophy progresses, love devolves into sexual acts. He tries to make

up his loss by having complete knowledge of Margot's infidelity; he tries to rationalize love and sex and produce a grand theory about human nature. In his effort to always reduce and categorize, love ends up being nothing more than sexual pleasure, which he further reduces to an interaction between a "raper and rapee" (254-255). Lance becomes indignant because of his limitations and vulnerability, yet he also feels good and excited. *Lancelot* supports my argument that melancholia and indignation are the extreme inverses of each other. Lance, who is obsessed with having a system for categorizing life, uses differences between his family and his friend's family as a model for ways of being. After describing his own physical prowess, Lancelot explains to Percival, "You were melancholy" and that "There was a difference in our families. The men in my family (until my father) were gregarious, politically active (anti-Long), and violent. The men in your family tended toward depression and early suicide" (15). These opposite extremes stand, for Lance, in contrast to a simple, ordinary life he cannot stand. Elaborating on this, Lance tells Percival,

There is a sense [in New Orleans] of people seriously occupied with small tasks. We, you and I, our families, were different from the Creoles. We lived from one great event to another, tragic events, triumphant events, with years of melancholy in between. We lost Vicksburg, got slaughtered at Shiloh, fought duels, defied Huey Long, and were bored to death between times. (24)

Specifically, Lance contrasts their grand narratives and experiences to women scrubbing tombs on All Souls' Day year after year. While Lance is correct to contrast these different ways of living, he is incorrect to devalue the ordinary life.

His desire to live in constant extremes keeps him self-centered and unable to develop meaningful relationships with others. Peter Lecouras contends, “Lance’s story will turn out to be about a man who has lost his center, and one of the major themes of the novel is that in this age, it is supremely difficult to develop an identity” (69). Lecouras, however, adds a questionable statement, “All the extraneous and mindless possibilities of experience in the world undermine the development of a singular identity, often relegating the sense of selfhood to the margins” (69). Yet, the possibility for the development of a variety of identities does not foreclose a single one. Instead, what we see in Lance is indignation that he cannot live within a system that produces particular identities of his liking. In *Enraged: Why Violent Times Need Ancient Greek Myths*, Emily Katz Anhalt writes, “When we are enraged, we easily mistake anger for moral correctness; we think, ‘I’m really angry, so I must be right.’ But an enraged response, regardless of the provocation, is at best counterproductive and at worst catastrophic” (2). While anger can most definitely help us understand circumstance, deep feelings alone cannot be trusted with the position of motivational drive for social commitments. Yes, Lance is a man who has lost his center, but he does not desire a center. He desires the fortitude of extremity. Percy would probably claim that the fading of Christian consciousness has made the development of a self more fraught. Whereas a Christian knows him or herself to be a creature of God—fallen, sinful, and utterly dependent, but also loved and redeemed (what could be more beautiful or exciting?), without such a consciousness, people struggle and boredom spreads. While I don’t disagree with most of those ideas, it is still entirely possible to develop a self; it is only more difficult to

preserve the illusion of a solid, invulnerable identity; it is more difficult to write a narrative that minimizes a questing knight's fragility and luck. Instead of embracing an unveiled vulnerability—perhaps as a benefit of the struggle to develop a self is a more truthful way of being—Lance deceives himself into believing he can restore or build a new world to mitigate this openness. Lancelot considers ambiguity untenable and intolerable.

In this way, Percy plays with the tension between tragedy and naturalism. Lancelot's name suggests the epic and the tragic; however, his role of a bored, rich, cuckold with a much younger wife is rather mundane. Lance's fall does not come about through fated circumstances. Rather, he designs it, and scoffs at opportunities to change his path. *Lancelot* is naturalistic in that, once Lance decides he must have a totalizing philosophy, he is set on an unavailable path to destruction. Instead of avoiding disaster, Lance charges into it with an indignation that such vulnerability would exist for him in the first place. In short, Lance sees himself as a tragic hero trapped in a naturalistic world, but neither really seems to be applicable. Percy intimates from the outset that Lance's perspective is not to be desired. In addition to Lance's derision of the simple life, reflecting on the perspective from his cell, Lance makes the following claim: "Have you noticed the narrower the view the more you can see? For the first time I understand how old ladies can sit on their porches for years" (3). We are to read this as a mistake and a marker of Lance's flawed logic. The view from his cell is cut off from others and he is confined to himself and his own ideas. What his view gives him is exceptional fluency in a very specific interpretation. But, his limited view is indeed limited because it devalues

anything outside his specific orientation. As MacIntyre writes, “the quality of my imagination also depends in part on the contributions of others” (*Dependent* 95). In this way, I agree with Robert Brinkmeyer Jr.’s assessment of the novel; in “*Lancelot and the Dynamics of Intersubjective Communities*,” he writes, “Lance, until the end of the novel, embodies what Percy sees as perhaps humanity’s most destructive resistance to intersubjectivity—the myth of the autonomous self” (161). While Lance’s independence is key, it is important to qualify his “autonomy” by noting his reliance upon and devolution to mythic ideals and heroic models. In his indignation, Lancelot is an expert in finding ways to sustain his one particular feeling and the desires that feed that feeling, but he is incredibly limited in other areas. This opening scene and conversation points to the final conclusion of the text, which is that Lance’s problem is that he likes being cut off from others; indeed, that being cut off from interactions with others and from the exchange of ideas with others makes him feel smarter, more righteous.

This desire for control and preference of limited perspective is continued in the form of the novel. As the teller of his tale, Lance works diligently to make sure he has total control in the way he tells his story and the way he develops himself as a character. In the act of telling about the events at Belle Isle retroactively, Lance can construct his narrative in a way that highlights the epic nature of his quest and the meticulous and scientific way he goes about it.⁷⁴ In the novel’s first frame, Lance controls the narrative by refusing to speak to anyone except for Percival, who does not speak until the last two

⁷⁴ Lancelot compares his sniffing out Margot’s adultery to the precise calculations of a scientific astronomer (19).

pages of the novel and, even then, only in “yes” and “no.” This allows Lance to develop an image of himself virtually unimpeded. Describing how Lancelot constructs an image of himself as a founder of a needed new age, in “Walker Percy’s Lancelot Lamar: Defending the Hollow Core,” Julius Raper claims, “rather than offering sufficient justifications, his explanations extend the southern tradition of evasive idealism and high-minded violence that our writers since Mark Twain and Ellen Glasgow have identified as central to southern ways of thinking” (164).⁷⁵ Throughout the novel, Lance remains struck in fantasy, always desiring some great design that would perfectly order the world. While speaking of his philosophy of love, Lance tells us that he “became coarser or perhaps more realistic,” his “realism” romanticizes dreams of a totalitarian social order.⁷⁶ Lecouras discuss the “political and social liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s” to suggest that Lance loses his identity in the midst of this cultural change (71). Yet, while Percy does give us moments to critique liberal extremes, we are to critique Lance the most. Lance’s reactions are not so much commentary on the age and social change as it is a Stoic-inflected commentary on Lance’s false notions of invulnerability and desert. Given what Percy writes in “Stoicism in the South,” the correct response to the changes of this time is not to burn it all down. Even if Lance wanted to become a hero figure, he undercuts this by distancing himself from others. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre writes, “The self becomes what it is in heroic societies only in and through its role; it is a social

⁷⁵ To be clear, this example shows a southern particularity. Examples also exist that show this type of thinking as an American tendency, e.g. *American Psycho* (1991).

⁷⁶ Lancelot explains to Percival, “Children will be merry because they will know what they are to do ... we will not tolerate this age. It is not enough to destroy it. We shall build a new order” (159).

creation, not an individual one” (122). Lance, however, wants to be able to create his heroic narrative without input from anyone beyond his tragic, static models, and his frustrated attempts only feed his indignation.

While, like many early critics of the novel, Edward J. Cashin incorrectly asserts that Lance is completely a mouthpiece for Percy’s views, some of his comments on the relationship between history and myth are useful for thinking about Lance’s obsession with making his ordinary concerns seem monumental.⁷⁷ For example, though Cashin probably does not see that Percy intends this, he correctly identifies that “Although Percy is knowledgeable about the facts of Southern history, it is not factual history he conveys. Rather it is that peculiar understanding of their own history which Southerners have that he reveals” (875). Lance does not have a mediated understanding of southern exceptionalism; instead, he is quite invested in the notion that he participates in a long narrative of epic deeds, even if some of those deeds are abhorrent. Writing on history’s connection with people, Cashin claims, “even if the historical facts directly contradicted the popular notion of what happened, people would soon forget that facts and return to the notion” (875). Indeed, throughout the novel, Lance argues that there is no need to remember history. Because Percy allows Lance control over his narrative, “*Lancelot* is ultimately a mediation on the seductions and ambiguities of storytelling” (Kobre 76). *Lancelot* is about the traps of fantasy and myth, and the consequences of desiring the myth above other commitments and relationships.

⁷⁷ No doubt, Lance definitely brings up questions Percy wants his readers to consider; however, most of the time he reaches the wrong conclusion.

Lancelot's obsession with a totalizing philosophy stems from his obsession with myth. In "The Teller and the Tale: Walker Percy's *Lancelot* as Metafiction," Michael Kobre writes, "We are witness not only to the murderous events at Belle Isle—Lancelot's ancestral home—in the secondary frame but also to his efforts in the primary frame to make that sequence of events coherent and acceptable to his own wounded sensibility" (72). Kobre convincingly argues how *Lancelot* is a metafictional narrative wherein Lance tries to cohere the events of his life around popular narrative; "Lancelot attempts to make sense of the events in the novel's secondary frame by imposing on them a series of narrative patterns, of potential scripts for his life, which are derived from many disparate sources," including Arthurian legends, Raymond Chandler novels, and family myths (72). Lance has set scripts for the way things are, and when life moves beyond these scripts, he becomes indignant. At first, he is curious—indeed, "interested"—but, the effort and struggle toward a hermeneutic of understanding drive him crazy.

In his indignation, Lance sets out to form his theory by finding the "Unholy Grail." Instead of pursuing a symbol of grace, forgiveness, and love, Lance believes that he can better access ultimate truth by seeing sin. Lancelot asks Percival,

Can good come from evil? Have you ever considered the possibility that one might undertake a search not for God but for evil? ... But what if you could show me a sin? a purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation? Now there's a mystery. People would sit up and take notice. I would be impressed. You could almost make a believer out of me. (51-52)

Lance's self-proclaimed desire to see something "for which there is not explanation" is seems at odds with his aspiration to be "scientific," and to always have a structure for explanation and understanding. On the other hand, it reveals the insatiable, "stuck" nature of his indignation—if an explanation can never be found, then the indignation that drives the attempt to explain it can always sustain itself. Remembering that we should be questioning Lance's perspective, Percy's point is that there *is*, in fact, an explanation for sin—we are fallen—but Lance rejects the banality (and finality) of this explanation, precisely because it would put an end to his indignation. C.E. Smith writes, "Lancelot believes that to witness the sin first hand, actually to see it, will somehow grant him an understanding of the absolute good" or to somehow surpass limits of knowledge (387). Lance needs to know the truth so that he can feel secure and autonomous.

Part of his fascination with sin is that he finds it more interesting and in need of investigation. He claims, "Dishonor is sweeter and more mysterious than honor. It holds a secret. There is no secret in honor. If one could but discover the secret at the heart of dishonor..." (213). Lance likes feeling bad and dishonor's unknowability entices and frustrates him; he finds pleasure in the dread of what he might discover and desires to know it entirely.⁷⁸ Thinking of himself as a scientist he struggles to build a paradigm into which his experience can neatly fit, so that he can make sense of, and take intellectual

⁷⁸ Lance asks Percival, "What did I want to see? the money in my father's sock drawer? Why was it so important for me to see them, Margot and Jacoby? What new sweet-horrid revelation did I expect to gain from witnessing what I already knew? Was it a kind of voyeurism? Or was it a desire to feel the lance strike home to the heart of the abscess and let the pus out? I still don't know. I knew only that it was necessary to know, to know only as the eyes know" (236).

command over, his experience. Yet, this paradigm must also work with the exceptional models of greatness he admires. Even though Lance claims he must start all over and make a new world, his ideal references are old. Describing what the men of the new world will be like, he claims, “What we are is the best of you, Percival, and the best of me, Lancelot, and of Lee and Richard and Saladin and Leonidas and Hector and Agamemnon and Richthofen and Charlemagne and Clovis and Martel” (178). Lance idealizes men who undertook great action, not caring to discern whether those actions were good. Lance likes them because he can envision his indignation as similar to their narratives.

Throughout the novel, Percy’s uses Lance’s ridiculousness to critique desire for southern exceptionalism. Indeed, the fact that Lance feels compelled to flaunt that his ancestor knew Jim Bowie makes him appear as a sad fanboy of southern exceptionalism (18). It’s sad, because the locus of his identity is external, peering into the lives of romanticized “great” men he’ll never meet to find a sense of gratification and to validate his own meaning, instead of developing meaning and identity in a reciprocal and mutual way with those he can actually be in relationship with. Cashin writes, “There is an indeterminate but very real point when a people’s history becomes internalized. Myth becomes mores” (875). This is the danger illustrated by Lancelot’s obsession with grand narratives: the content of myth is not affect my Lance’s obsession with it; it does not give back in any real way, but only offers a mold for Lance to violently, unproductively, and

vainly press his experiences into.⁷⁹ Commenting of the cultural power of narrative, Anhalt explains how the natural feeling of rage is as opposed to the ethical ought nicely:

Rage may be a natural reaction to injury, insult, or injustice, but indulging in rage and admiring it in others is a choice. Whether we embrace or condemn rage in ourselves or in others depends largely on the stories that we inherit and transmit. Our culture's stories consciously and unconsciously shape the choices we make, the goals that we pursue, and the ways that we treat one another. History shows that the transition from tribalism to civil society and the maintenance of civil society both require individuals to restrain their own rage and to stop admiring it in others. (2-3)

But Lancelot does admire rage, and often reflects on the notable rage of others (e.g. his ancestor's Bowie knife fight) as he tells about his own. Percy is well aware of the way southern exceptionalism uses rage to perpetuate its allure, but *Lancelot* is a commentary on this tradition, and, specifically, the desire for this tradition. Indeed, Susan V.

Donaldson aptly claims that the novel "suggest just how untenable [the southern] storytelling tradition is by Percy's lights, for the first-person narration of Lancelot ...

⁷⁹ Michael Kobre writes, "Although Lancelot tries, both at the time of his actions and in telling them later, to see himself as re-enacting his ancestor's legendary deeds, the self-consciousness that permeates his actions undermines them. Lancelot killed Jacoby with the same weapon and in the same manner that Manson Maury Lamar killed his opponent-grappling hand to hand until he managed to turn Jacoby around and slit his throat with the bowie knife-but after what he calls "the cutting" is done, he is forced to "[cast] about for an appropriate feeling to match the deed." He knows, because of all of the stories he has heard, "that great deeds were performed with great feelings" (Percy qtd. in Kobre 242). But the banal reality of what Lancelot calls "the deed" —a term that insists that the murder of Jacoby is the stuff of legend too-cannot match the heroic quality of his ancestor's famous duel" (74).

offers precious little opportunity to celebrate the bonds between storytelling and community” (67).

Lance likes retelling stories over and over, referencing them continuously so as to stress their significance as markers in a monumental life. One of Lance’s favorite stories is of a touchdown he scored against the University of Alabama football team: “I achieved my single small immortality at the age of twenty-one when I caught an Alabama punt standing on the back line of the end zone and ran it out 110 yards for a touchdown. It is still on the record books as the longest punt return in history” (15). Later in the novel Lance states again, “I was famous in Louisiana, as famous as the Governor, and for one reason alone: running 110 yards against mighty Alabama” (82). Yet again, the yards are mentioned twice more when Lance recounts a moment with his uncle and other men (213-214). Lancelot includes these references back to his great moment like an uncontrollable tic. To make a cheating spouse narrative seem epic, he must remind us that he lives an epic life.

Reflecting on how cultural stories build structures of being in spaces in *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that southern structures are incredibly influenced by vast amounts of Stoic literature. He identifies “the Aristotelian ideal of *megalopsychia*” as the model for southern drives (95). And while Aristotle does put forth this position in *Nicomachean Ethics*, modern Aristotelian thinkers identify this as a flawed ideal. For example, MacIntyre rejects this because it results in “a bad character...[with] a failure to recognize its badness” (*Dependent* 127). The issue is with Aristotle’s claim that such a man would not recognize his dependence upon others

or community.⁸⁰ MacIntyre claims that such a character has “an illusion of self-sufficiency ... an illusion that plays its part in excluding [this character] from certain types of communal relation” (127). Lance says that he likes his 110 yard story because it is a record that “can never be surpassed. It’s like running the mile in zero minutes” (15). However, it seems likely that Lance also likes this story because he can think of it as an athletic achievement he did alone: he didn’t have to catch a great pass and share the credit of the score. Yet this just shows how quickly Lance is to forget the help of those around him, such as the blockers who kept him from getting tackled. In a similar way, Lance minimizes the help he receives from Elgin, a 22 year-old African American man with a “scholarship to M.I.T” by telling himself that Elgin enjoys the job he has been assigned (44). John D. Sykes, Jr. explains that in desiring complete autonomy, Lance “is stepping into a madman’s delusion, which only has room for one. The knights of the Round Table had a common quest; Lance, although he uses the labor of others, is on a solitary mission of false autonomy” (140). As he works toward developing his theory and becoming autonomous, Lance uses Elgin’s highly overqualified help, but fails to recognize him as a person whom he is dependent upon and with whom he could form relationship. Instead, keeping with past models of being and interaction, Lance’s relationship with Elgin is paternalistic and not an authentically vulnerable one.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Aristotle claims, “It belongs to the great-souled also to need nothing, or scarcely anything” and that “he is necessarily incapable of living with a view to another—except a friend—since doing so is slavish” (1124b 18-19, 31-1125a 1).

⁸¹ One could argue that Elgin in fact benefits from this and is shrewdly manipulating Lance in some ways.

There is another story that continually resurfaces throughout the course of the novel: Lancelot compares the pleasure of discovering Margot's infidelity to a childhood trauma when he discovered that his father engaged in dirty politics.⁸² Lance recounts,

I can still remember the sight of the money and the fact that my eye could not get enough of it. There was a secret savoring of it as if the eye were exploring it with its tongue. When there is something to see, some thing, a new thing, there is no end to the seeing. Have you ever watched onlookers at the scene of violence ... Their eyes shift to and fro ever so slightly, scanning, trying to take it all in. There is no end to the feast.

At the sight of the money, a new world opened up for me. The old world fell to pieces—not necessarily a bad thing. *Ah, then, things are not so nice*, I said to myself. But you see, that was a very important discovery. For if there is one thing harder to bear than dishonor, it is honor, being brought up in a family where everything is so nice, perfect in fact, except of course oneself. (42)

Lancelot describes this experience as a pleasurable one; he “savoring” it with bodily sensations. He describes it as a type of addicting trill and compares it to violence as a type of excess. For Lance, this affectively decadent experience is pleasurable. His reaction to finding out that his father is a crook is not devastation or unhappiness. He experiences this as an unidentified euphoric pleasure that is almost, if not indeed, too much. He indulges in it thinking that he “could not get enough of it” while at the same

⁸² Yaeger argues that trauma is constitutive of southern identity. Her work on southern women finds value in this model of trauma; however, this same model can be an impetus of indignation and melancholia.

time knowing “there is no end to the feast.” Lance interprets this discovery as a kind of freedom from participating in the world as he knew it. Instead of confronting this discovery as a negative moment in his life, he alters his orientation so that this moment and moments such as this are pleasurable experiences in which he can indulge. Mark Johnson rightly contends, “Unable to reconcile the ideal with the real, Lancelot finds refuge in evil itself” (28). Like the football story, Lance returns to this story throughout his explanation of what’s happened. Yet, with each reappearance, this story starts to feel like a Freudian trauma wherein Lance must retell the events as to reassure himself of his initial interpretation. Discussing the “fort/da game,” Freud argues “the unpleasurable nature of an experience does not always unsuit it for play” (*Beyond* 57). This is the thrill of Lance’s death drive, his pleasure in chaos and impish desire to destruct. As one scholar points out, “Lancelot is obsessed with bad news. During the 1960s he lived for the latest tragedy on the evening news” (Ciuba 110). Lance’s quest for evil is not so much so he can stamp it out, but to relish in it.

Indignation is not the same as the death drive, but it does facilitate it. According to Freud and Lacan, everyone has a death drive, experiences a compulsion to destroy and to be destroyed, and sometimes takes pleasure in destruction. For the indignant, the compulsion because the thing he likes most about himself—it becomes a part of his identity and he enjoys the fact that most of society would find his pleasure disgusting. Indeed, Lance looks for opportunities to make himself the object of derision. For example, Lance explains that in his boredom he would give tours of his plantation home and try to offend visitors by giving apologists lectures on paternalism, saying that the

slaves “weren’t so bad off on Belle Isle” (59).⁸³ Lance asserts his love of chaos by stating, “The sixties were a godsend to me. The blacks were right, the whites were wrong, and it was a pleasure to tell them so. I became unpopular. There are worse things than being disliked: it keeps one alive and alert” (59). It’s more than that he became unpopular; he “wanted to be unpopular” and claimed this byproduct of his actions as having equal status to any byproduct that would have furthered civil rights (58). Since he has forfeited relationships, being the object of disgust makes Lance feel alive. He also appears to take pleasure in Percival’s disgust at his theory and his design of his new world order: “You are as pale as a ghost. What did you whisper? Love? That I am full of hatred, anger? Don’t talk to me of love until we shovel out the shit” (179). Each of these instances shows Lance turning his isolation into a source of pleasure.

In his indignation, Lance’s greatest source of pleasure is grinding against the “interesting.” In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai writes on the way “interesting” falls out of definitive categorization: “What is striking is the consistency of the judgment’s function: that of ascribing value to that which seems to differ, in a yet-to-be conceptualized way, from a general expectation or norm whose exact concept may itself be missing at the moment of judgment” (112). This “yet-to-be conceptualized” nature of interesting leads to Lance’s fetishization of it. The first thing to capture Lance’s interest in the novel is the symbol “0,” which proves his wife’s infidelity. Lance describes this moment in detail: “my eye slid over the page to the letter O. No, it was not the letter O

⁸³ When he gets no reaction he complains, “It’s impossible to insult anybody from Michigan” (60).

but the number 0, cipher, zero. It was her blood type, I-0 ... Then it was that the worm of interest turned somewhere near the base of my spine. Curious. What was curious? (27). Lance knows the “0” is out of place and gets excited by the dread of possibility. Lance’s experience in this scene maps onto Ngai’s assessment of the affect because “the experience of the interesting begins with a feeling—inquisitiveness, curiosity, wonder—falling somewhere between an affect and a desire” (116). Working out the logic, Lance continues to explain that his blood type “IV-AB” could not father a child with the blood type “I-0,” stating that such an equation “did not compute” (29). Being confronted with and tackling the interesting gives Lance a rush because he gets to play out an intellectual struggle for autonomy: to discover a fact, know it, and own it. He loves the irritant because his seething makes him feel strong.

Lancelot is thrilled by his wife’s cheating because it gives him interest. This spurs his philosophizing because encountering the interesting “affectively situate[es] the judging subject in relation to [his] lack of conceptual knowledge” (Ngai 132). Because Lance desires to have complete autonomy, his lacks are vulnerabilities that he cannot stand; yet, his anger about this—his own conceptual lack, not the cheating—makes him feel righteous and important like those great men he idealizes. Retelling the discovery to Percival, Lance attempts to explain his pleasure: “First, you must understand that the usual emotions which one might consider appropriate—shock, anger, shame—do not apply. True, there is a kind of dread at the discovery but there is also a curious sense of expectancy, a secret sweetness at the core of the dread” (41). Lance takes a perverse pleasure in indignation and interest. Lauren Sewell Coulter explains, “Throughout the

novel his reactions fluctuate among hatred for her deception, complete indifference to her extramarital liaison, and near ecstasy at the thought of discovering the something that will push him out of the mundane routine into which his life has fallen, that ‘secret sweetness at the core of dread’” (101). Margot’s infidelity is a pleasure for Lance because he can use it to make him feel alive and important. This knight finally has an errand: uncover all mystery and eradicate vulnerability. But Ngai explains, “If there is something generic about the judgment ‘interesting’ that underwrites its striking diversity of applications, it thus seems to have something to do with the radical indeterminacy of the feeling at its foundation” (131). In this way, interesting, as a minor feeling and in its indeterminacy, fuels Lance’s indignation because it calls him to categorize and frustrates his efforts to do so.

Lance’s indignation anesthetizes him to other emotions. By entering into this state of constant agitation, he becomes separated from the ordinary ebb and flow of affect, emotion, and relationship. Yet, because he likes his indignation, he sees this as proper. He attempts to explain how the fact he can only feel interest is appropriate:

You would think, wouldn’t you, that the new cuckold would respond with the appropriate emotion—shock, shame, humiliation, sorrow, anger, hate, vengefulness, etc. Would you believe me when I tell you that I felt none of these emotions? Can you guess what I did feel? *Hm. What’s this? What have we here? Hm.* What I felt was a prickling at the base of the spine, a turning of the worm of interest.

Yes, interest! The worm of interest. Are you surprised? No? Yes? One conclusion I have reached here after a year in my cell is that the only emotion people feel nowadays is interest or lack of it. Curiosity and interest and boredom have replaced so-called emotions we used to read about in novels or see registered on actors' faces. Even the horrors of the age translate into interest. Did you ever watch anybody pick up a newspaper and read the headline PLANE CRASH KILLS THREE HUNDRED? How horrible! says the reader. But look at him when he hands you the paper. Is he horrified? No, he is interested. When was the last time you saw anybody horrified? (21-22).

Translating all emotion through affectively weaker interest allows Lance to maintain his indignation, which needs a continuous source of stimulation. Like Anhalt's comments on how anger falsely points to truth, Ngai explains, "'Interesting' can thus be a way of linking feeling-based judgments to concept-based explanations under the radar—even making it appear as if aesthetic evaluations have a logical relation to facts" (128). Lance tries to make logical deductions and theory based on his righteous indignation because he feels right. However, people do, indeed, still feel emotions. Indeed, as Johnson contends, what the novel presents us with is "a perfectly logical lunatic, one whose perverse insights give us real perspective on our own condition whether he gains the same into himself or not. The insights remain, nonetheless perverse" (27).

In fact, in "The Loss of Creature," Percy mocks those whose highest level of pleasure is the interesting. Percy sets up the following scene:

There is the neurotic who asks nothing more of his doctor than that his symptom should prove *interesting*. When all else fails, the poor fellow has nothing to offer but his own neurosis. But even this is sufficient if only the doctor will show *interest* when he says, “Last night I had a curious sort of dream; perhaps it will be significant to one who knows about such things. It seems I was standing in a sort of alley—” (I have nothing else to offer you but my own unhappiness. Please say that it, at least, measures up, that it is a proper sort of unhappiness). (emphasis mine 56)

This reading from Percy’s essay gives insight to Lance because it gives us the opportunity to reflect on two conflicting desires: Lance’s desired autonomy, and his desire to tell his story and be seen as important. He wants to fortify himself from fragility to others, yet still needs his indignation to be recognized by others. In this way, “while the characters pursue a cosmic evil, Percy’s readers examine it in purely human terms” (Johnson 28). While Lance works so diligently to make himself appear monumental by taking complete control over his narrative, the way he values his obsessions is quite sad. That, at the end of the novel, all he is left with are the fragments of his theory is incredibly sad. In a rare moment of expressed vulnerability in the last few pages of the novel Lance says, “I feel so cold Percival” (253). Lancelot desires the interesting because it is “a judgment based not on an existing concept of the object but on a feeling, hard to categorize in its own right, that in spite of its indeterminacy aptly discerns or alerts us precisely to what we do not have a concept for (yet)” (Ngai 116). The interesting is Lance’s slight. It is what keeps him from having that which he thinks he deserves,

absolute security through philosophical truth, yet it is central to his identity because he could not remain indignant without it.

Lance is driven to madness by the ambiguity of the interesting and is compelled to fit it into his philosophical scheme. In the process of doing so, he feels the need to appear and believe himself to be very technical and methodological in his categorization.

Perhaps this is because the interesting has both “affective as well as conceptual indefiniteness” as well as a “forensic dimension” that spurs one to search for evidence (Ngai 117). Lance even diagrams the sexual positions he observes while spying on his houseguests as if he might glean some insight from them. Lancelot likes thinking about his efforts to know for certain his wife’s infidelity in scientific terms because it gives him a sense of control over knowledge. Lance strives for Aristotelian categorization without the virtue of temperance. Yet, his detached empiricism is doomed to fail him. In his essay, “Walker Percy, the Catholic Church, and Southern Race Relations (ca. 1947-1970),” Farrell O’Gorman explains how Percy went from being a supporter of segregation to being a critic of it. O’Gorman claims that Percy maintained his support of segregation

as he attended medical school and began his residency in New York, turning increasingly to science in a vain attempt to construct some sense of order in the changing world around him; but, as he would later insist, for all its elegance science never taught him anything about how to live—and it certainly never spoke to his racial views. (71)

C.E. Smith seconds how Percy came to see scientific empiricism as “an incomplete way to view the world,” claiming that such a method, “while useful, reveals very little about emotional, ethical, and religious human relations” (399). Having come to this realization, Percy puts Lance in a similar situation as he tries to reduce his connection to others with reason. Given Percy’s views, it is not a surprise that Lance is unable to form an accurate theory of human nature.

Lancelot wants to hold knowledge together, as if, if he could just get his arms around it, he could understand it and transcend fragility. When he finally catches his wife having sex with another man, his reaction is to use his arms to physically hold his wife and her lover together. He walks up to the bed unnoticed, and then wraps his arms around the pair of them and squeezes them together. Lance confesses, “I was squeezing them, I think, and breathing hard but feeling very light and strong, so light I imagined that if I had not held them I would float up to the ceiling” (240). Lance physically keeps his wife’s lover pressed on top of and into her in order to assert control over their bodies. Lancelot physically holds them together in the same way he tries to hold his system of knowledge together. He needs to be about to get his hands around it, all of it, if only for a short time. He needs to eradicate mystery because mystery cannot be controlled and calculated. Lance’s problem is a common one in western philosophy; Murdoch explains, “It is a deep paradox of moral philosophy that almost all philosophers have been led in one way or another to picture goodness as knowledge: and yet to show this in any sort of detail, to show ‘reality’ as ‘one’, seems to involve an improper prejudging of some moral issue” (38). Lance’s indignation keeps him unable to stray from his hypothesis. He isn’t

seeking truth; he's seeking verification that his philosophizing has allowed him to transcend fragility.

There is something about the goodness and the vulnerability of love than Lance can't understand. It would be easy to read Lance as a misogynist, and, in fact, I won't make an argument that he's not. However, there is something else going on, too. Lance's issue is not just that he hates women because he thinks they like being raped, but that he cannot fathom taking pleasure from vulnerability. When discussing his fixation on Margot's infidelity, Lance asks Percival, "Why is it such an unspeakable thing for one creature to obtrude a small portion of its body into the body of another creature? Is it not in fact a trivial matter when one puts it that way? I don't think women attach too much importance to it" (16). Lance's indignation and closed-off orientation leaves him unable to understand any type of pleasure that might come from letting others in. For Lance, everything is all or nothing. He imagines that any penetration must mean one entirely gives up the self, which is why he is adamant that women must desire to be raped. After reflection, he claims that sex is not a category at all, but is "a kind of possession" (21). Lance "continuously applies methods and reasoning of science to areas like sex and the sacred which by his own admission are ineffable. And he is continuously frustrated" (Ciuba 107). Because he desires extreme autonomy, he doesn't understand pleasure as a shared and mutual experience. Indeed, as Donaldson notes, "What emerges from Lance's

cagey and sometimes infuriating narration is a portrait of corrosive solitude and isolation” (67).⁸⁴

Lancelot participates in a legacy of indignation and failure of love in southern literature. Despite the sarcasm Lance directs at Percival for his beliefs throughout the novel, there is no doubt that Percy prefers Percival’s assertive ‘yes’ (72). Lance is trapped in a paradigm of his own making, one that he constructed for himself so that he could feel more righteously indignant and stave off fragility. Percival’s “yes” is best read not only as assertive but also as expansive. This “yes” is a response not just to Lance’s questions, but it is a model for interaction. Here, Percy’s Catholicism informs his perspective. In a homily, Bishop Robert Barron describes how “Saint Augustine defines sin as being *in cavernis inse*, caved in around oneself,” and that this type of egoism is a “no” to vulnerable interpersonal (and divine) connection. He says that “[God] does not like us in that little icy kingdom where we have imprisoned ourselves.” Reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he explains how Christ is a “yes” to life-affirming moves. He says, “that with Christ it is not yes or no as it is with us ... God is nothing but yes.” While this particular reading participates in Christian ethics, it also maps on rather well to virtue and care ethics. Lancelot is stuck in binary opposites: boredom or indignation, yes or no, acting or reacting. But virtue calls for temperance, and, as Nussbaum points out, vulnerability. Lancelot actually seems to enjoy his stay in his cell, and this is not entirely surprising because it allows him to remain in a safe state of being.

⁸⁴ I suppose there is a way in which Lance could be read as a predecessor of the incel movement.

There are no outside factors here that risks bursting into his neat understanding, especially since he refuses to talk to the psychologist, or anyone else except for Percival. Even his new love interest, Anna, is desirable to him because he thinks that, because she was gang-raped, she has returned to an infant-like state: pure, but also malleable and controllable. While Percival advocates for a “Godlike love” to make the world livable, “Lancelot cannot agree. Intolerant of whatever is not extreme he mocks his friend’s generosity of spirit” (Ciuba 111). Lance’s indignant intolerance keeps him from forming relationships.

Indignation is desirable because it allows Lance to appear a certain way without considering whether or not that feeling is deserved; because, even if the feeling is not deserved, it means something to feel, or even appear as if one feels, it. When reflecting on the locals’ excitement about film production in their town, Lance makes a disdainful comment,

The world had gone crazy, said the crazy man in his cell. What was nutty was that the movie folk were trafficking in illusions in a real world but the real world thought that its reality could only be found in the illusions. Two sets of maniacs.

Somehow they dropped the ball between them. (152)

Lance picks up on a tendency for people to prefer the narratives of illusions to real life; he suggests that in masquerading in life to be more like the illusion, it is the masquerading that fades away, not the illusion. This is one example of Percy’s tendency to recycle illustrations of a particular concept; he also poses this dilemma in *The*

Moviegoer and *Lost in the Cosmos*. In these examples, Percy suggests that people have lost such a sense of reality that they are looking to media for examples of what life should be. Lance is disdainful because he, unlike the other characters sees that people would not be doing this if their lives were not empty of meaning.⁸⁵ However, Lance is also guilty of this: he just prefers his illusions in the form of heroic tragedies instead of modern film and television. Lance's solution to this phenomenon is to be indignant; he is confident he is right because of the intensity of his feelings, or at least the intensity of what he wants to feel. The twist is that Lance doesn't feel anything in the end. He was wrong, but so much of the novel is taken up with him trying to sustain a feeling of indignation. Lance may actually be right about how the townspeople are responding to the movie (albeit a little elitist about their excitement), but his reaction is also incorrect.

At the end of the novel, Lance asks, "Why did I discover nothing at the heart of evil? There was no 'secret' after all, no discovery, no flickering of interest, nothing not even any evil." (253) Ngai's description of interesting seems to answer Lance's question: "Because the real problem posed by the interesting is thus not a dearth of admissible evidence but rather the proliferation of too many possible kinds, the task of legitimizing this particular evaluation becomes unusually difficult to the extent that it also becomes unusually easy." (120) On one hand, this can be incredibly exciting as an inexhaustible source of irritation/pleasure; on the other hand, it can point to the futility of structuring meaning. Ngai claims that the interesting "denotes (in its more fundamental sense) the

⁸⁵ Like Keen's song, this speaks to the loss of ironic distance, where the playful critique of irony fades away so that the object of critique is all that remains.

positive knowledge of limits” (110-111). Yet, even confronted with evidence of his own limitations despite his indignant efforts to surpass them, Lance still rejects temperance. Lancelot wants complete and radical freedom from all others and the fragility that accompanies the position of being in relationship. But, in working towards this, he severs ties from value and loses conception of the good. When comparing *Lancelot* to Gothic tropes, William Moss argues, “Lancelot Lamar encounters, paradoxically, not the terrors of the Gothic but the danger of escape from those terrors, suggested in the popular song sung by the girl that Lancelot hears everyday from his cell: ‘Freedom’s just another word, Lord, for nothing left to lose’” (29). In *Lancelot* the terror isn’t what might happen to you because you’re vulnerable, but what might happen to you if you desire invulnerability. Percival is a crucial character because he is the good moderate that Lancelot will not tolerate. Lance scorns Percival’s goals, saying, “So you plan to take a little church in Alabama, Father, preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives?” as if this life would not be worthy of living (256). What Lance fails to value is that this would be a life in which he could form meaningful relationships and connections with others. I agree with Brinkmeyer’s reading that “Lance’s attack on Percival and his faith merely mask his disturbing awareness of his own insufficiency as all-powerful self” (163). Lancelot has no connection with others; instead, he mocks them. The grandiose nature of his indignation eats up his value. *Lancelot* is a critique of a man who embraced his solitude as a way to stave off further vulnerability, instead of seeking comradely and mutual dependence in others.

In this chapter, I have discussed the ethical implications of indignation and started some groundwork for defining it as a state of being. The texts show how anticathartic feeling gets aestheticized and wrapped up in narrative networks. Feelings don't always point us in the wrong direction, just as they do not always point us in the right one. Tracing affect reveals how certain structures of feeling can pervert the natural flow of affect. I'll concede that indignation may make good political agents (for example, some scholars point out that Abner is an exemplar for the claims of Marxism), but it does not make a good friend or loved one. Percival, literally, barely gets two words in during his entire dialogue with Lancelot because Lance is so consumed in his own desires he cannot talk about anything else. When his anger becomes the thing he likes most about himself, he sacrifices all other pleasures, including love.

Chapter Two: On the Ambivalence of Empathy

“Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all?”

— William Faulkner *Absalom, Absalom!* (174)

“Social and developmental psychologists, philosophers of virtue ethics, feminist advocates of an ethic of caring, and many defenders of the humanities believe that empathetic emotion motivates altruistic action, resulting in less aggression, less fickle helping, less blaming of victims for their misfortunes, increased cooperation in conflict situations, and improved actions on behalf of needy individuals and members of stigmatized groups ... I find the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated.”

— Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (vii)

Absalom, Absalom! is a famously complicated text from which readers must labor to comprehend and discern meaning. In his article, “*Absalom, Absalom!* The Significance of Contradictions,” Leon S. Roudiez gives a personal account of his first time reading the novel:

My experience, not an unusual one, upon first reading the novel, was one of gradually piecing together the story of Thomas Sutpen; like the other characters in the novel, I was intrigued, and I ached to discover exactly what happened. Much unease began to develop as I reached the part of the fiction set in Harvard; not, however, until I got to the last few pages were the underpinnings of my narrative swept away; everything crumbled when I read those arresting final lines. (60)

Roudiez’s experience gives an accurate account of how it feels to read William Faulkner’s novel. In order to comprehend it, Faulkner demands that readers piece together an assemblage of competing and comparative narratives within an affectively

and ideologically competitive southern space. Feelings are created and traditions demand to be remembered, and characters and readers alike are caught in between these two modes of knowing. Harold Strauss, who reviewed *Absalom, Absalom!* for the *New York Times* in 1936, “doom[ed] the book to obscurity” for its challenge to epistemological pleasure, complaining that, “page-long sentences ... occasionally deal simultaneously with the doings of young Quentin in 1910 and of the Sutpens in 1860.” He adds that the novel exhibits “one of the most complex, unreadable and uncommunicative prose styles ever to find its way into print.” Indeed, the plot lines and narrative speakers are often hard to situate and make clear. Additionally, the narrative is challenging thematically because Faulkner begins the novel with Miss Rosa’s perspective, which frames Sutpen as a “devil” and explains how he has ruined her family, yet later in the novel we are called to sympathize with him because of unkind treatment during childhood that he has difficulty processing. Throughout the novel, readers’ feelings are not in control, yet Faulkner’s style is such that we do not feel manipulated either, only confused—like Roudiez—unable to make sense out of the gaps in the narrative and our feelings towards the completing and pulling forces of logic and emotion. As Peter Brooks puts it,

often we find ourselves suddenly faced with hermeneutic shifts of gears, forced to reconsider the very integrity of narrative events in terms of its hermeneutic possibilities and determinations; so that we often find ourselves in the position of ... Shreve McCannon (relatively, of course, the outsider in the narrative), wanting to shout, as he does, “Wait! For God’s sake wait.” (287)

Indeed, the text resists our knowing it. But unlike Strauss, Brooks suggests this is pleasurable; readers' desire to know what happened to the Sutpens—"Why do they live at all"—and why it happened to them is the pleasure of the text, and, in its epistemological exercise, Faulkner's style makes this a deferred, and prolonged, pleasure.

However, this pleasure is also anticathartic. While the Sutpens' rise and fall may approximate a tragedy, Faulkner's modernist style fractures the typical build-up and purgation of large emotions such as pity or fear. Clifton Fadiman's 1936 negative review for the *New Yorker*, "Faulkner, Extra-Special, Double-Distilled," attempts to make sense of the novel's style by categorizing Faulkner's sentence type, including what he calls "the Non-Stop or Life Sentence," "the Far Fetch, or Hypertrope," and the "Anti-Narrative" (289-290). He writes:

Then we have what may be called Anti-Narrative, a set of complex devices used to keep the story from being told. Mr. Faulkner is very clever at this. He gets quite an interesting effect, for example, by tearing the Sutpen chronicle into pieces, as if a mad child were to go to work on it with a pair of shears, and then having each of the jagged divisions narrated by a different personage: the author, Rosa, Quentin, Quentin's father, Quentin's grandfather. All these people do a neat job of mixing up the time sequences, delaying climaxes, confusing the reader, and otherwise enabling Mr. Faulkner to demonstrate that as a technician he has Joyce and Proust punch-drunk. (290)

While Fadiman is scorning Faulkner in this review and has some mistakes about the number of narrators, he is on to something. Indeed, Fadiman's language plays neatly into

Brooks's argument that narrative pleasure is as much about deferral as about closure (with these states, of course, mapped onto the psychoanalytic dialectic between Eros and Thanatos). So from both my perspective and Brooks's, there's nothing necessarily "anti-narrative" about "a set of complex devices used to keep the story from being told." Faulkner is purposefully "keep[ing] the story from being told," "mixing up the time sequences," and "delaying climaxes," but the end goal of this is not to confuse (although that is an aspect of it); the end goal is to highlight the anticatharsis in the novel as a consequence of white southern structures of feeling.

The novel does not prevent or actively combat empathy. Quentin both feels for and identifies with Henry; his "empathy" for Henry is not blocked. Shreve identifies and empathizes with Bon, and often the narrator goes so far as to link the four together: "four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (334). In this way, Faulkner allows Charles-Shreve one final victory over Quentin-Henry by taunting Quentin as the living assemblage of white southern narratives with the cathartic release of cosmic insignificance. Indeed, the novel indicates the possibility for a cathartic ending by suggesting the insignificance of white southern culture within a larger, cosmic scheme. However, the novel is not going to be cathartic; particularly, the novel will not be cathartic for Quentin, who readers experience much of the Sutpen tale with, and the novel might not be cathartic for some of Faulkner's readers who desire use the novel as evidence of southern exceptionalism. From his experience with Quentin, Shreve seems to already know this because he knows that Quentin will not accept forgetting as a valid option, and he will not be able to accept that pity and fear are beneficial responses.

Nearing the end of the novel, Shreve points out that almost all of the original characters have met their deaths:

“it clears the whole ledger, you can tear all the pages out and burn them, except for one thing. And do you know what that is?’ Perhaps he hoped for an answer this time, or perhaps he merely paused for emphasis, since he got no answer. ‘You’ve got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left” (378).

Shreve asks Quentin twice if Quentin wants to know his final conclusion after hearing about the Sutpens; both times Quentin answers “no.” Shreve progresses anyway;

“Then I’ll tell you. I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won’t show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings ...” (378).

That Shreve suggests all of Quentin’s world is destined to disappear, and that thousands of years from now, not only will no one care about it, but anything resembling the people or culture will be gone creates productive space for pity and fear concerning one’s own insignificance. Shreve appreciates this, and he is taunting Quentin with this idea. Shreve suggests that if Quentin would learn to embrace this perspective, he could feel and move past the shock and the horror of it. However, this is just creates more turmoil for Quentin because he is locked into a structure that is primarily about honor, and he cannot accept the South’s own insignificance.

This anticatharsis is perhaps illustrated best in the final lines to which Roudiez refers. Shreve McCannon asks Quentin, who has just finished the story of Sutpen, one final question about the South:

“Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?”

“I dont hate it,” Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; “I dont hate it,” he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark;

I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it! (Faulkner 378)⁸⁶

This is not a cathartic ending. It is more reflective of static circling than a purging release. As Roudiez says, the lines are “arresting”; they keep the reader caught in place, staring at them, stuck at the end of the novel with no exit route and no guide for readers to manage the story they’ve just received. This is the perfect ending for *Absalom, Absalom!*. The anticathartic ending of the novel is appropriate because much of the novel is devoted to ambivalent pulls and constant reorientation.⁸⁷ Indeed, even stylistically the novel is caught ambivalently between two drastically different styles, modernism and the gothic; at one moment the writing is fragmentary and apprehension seems so far away and intangible, and at the next moment the writing is gothic and apprehension looms and seems inescapably close and threatens corporeality. While we may have a desire to figure

⁸⁶ All italics in quotes from *Absalom, Absalom!* are, and in subsequent quotes will be, original to the primary text.

⁸⁷ To be clear, I am using the term “ambivalent” for its denotative meaning of have contradictory strong pulls, not for its inaccurate colloquial usage to refer to some feeling of aloofness or lack of feeling or care. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as “Of, pertaining to, or characterized by ambivalence; having either or both of two contrary or parallel values, qualities or meanings; entertaining contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person or thing; acting on or arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites; equivocal.”

out what happens (and more importantly why it happens, since fairly early in the text we are given a shorthand of the basic plot), we can discern just as much meaning about the South—“*What’s it like there*”—from the text by paying attention to how Faulkner gives us this story.

Though much has been written on Faulkner’s modernism, most notably by Richard Moreland, few have attended to how the ambivalence in his text portrays and creates affect. This is reasonable given that Faulkner’s affect is incredibly difficult to discern. The affect of *Absalom, Absalom!* is fragmentary, specifically fragmented empathy, which is an exceedingly common form of empathy in spaces where feelings are structured by desires sustained through anticatharsis.

Near the end of his chapter, Brooks claims that there is a “seemingly universal compulsion to narrate,” and he does provide “an apology for narrating, an enterprise apparently nostalgic, oriented toward the recovery of the past, yet really phatic in its vector, asking for hearing” (312). He concludes the chapter by quoting “the first agent of narration in the novel, Rosa Coldfield, to give her the last word, for it is she who talks of ‘*the raging and incredulous recounting (which enables man to bear with living)*’” (312). But what is this man living on? These narrative acts help Rosa construct meaning, but they do so in a way that restricts flourishing. Because she constructs meaning in this way, Rosa must see it live on, even if the act of passing it on to another is harmful. If Brooks thinks Rosa embodies something beautiful and good about narrating’s relationship to living, he should be reminded that her living is subsumed by rage. Indeed if Rosa is living on her need to tell her story, which indeed she might be, she is not a worthy model for the

good life. That Brooks describes narrators as “phatic” is notable because it suggests the larger insignificance of a human need to tell stories. Rosa’s need is particularly phatic. She is the ideal of indignation described in Chapter One. She sits in a dusty “dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers” with “her legs ...straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children’s feet”; her only pleasure coming from requiring Quentin listen to a story he most definitely does not want to hear and which probably contributes to his imminent suicide (7). As an indignant figure, Rosa perpetuates southern structures of feeling by passing her static mode on, by asking Quentin to validate her indignation and identify with her through the pleasure of loss. This indoctrination into narrative use keeps Quentin from seeing Shreve’s exit from southern structures of feeling, which offers less pathetic uses for narrative and building meaning.

Throughout the novel, we are introduced to many characters and many timelines. There are many possible avenues for empathetic identification, and Faulkner makes aesthetic moves that leave these lines open—lines that often only to get splintered by southern structures of feeling. Closely attending to the text through an affect theory reading illuminates these subtle but recurring moments. However, Quentin is still a focal point for most of my analysis because he is an active character in the text and the character through which readers access the Sutpen tale, either as guide or companion.⁸⁸ In

⁸⁸ Brooks explains, “the reader [often] stands in much the same position as Quentin at the outset of the novel, listening to Rosa Coldfield’s narration” (289). And yet, Quentin knows the outline of the story already, and the reader doesn’t. In those opening pages, the

this chapter I argue that Faulkner creates his novel so that Quentin and the reader undergo a process of co-assembly of history and memory, while simultaneously being presented with the empathic identification traditionally available in narrative. The novel enacts in Quentin and engenders in readers a feeling of being pulled, jerked, or precariously forced to straddle the forces of southern memory, history, and ideology while participating in an intimacy difficult to articulate, and therefore, only and best articulated through modernism's fragmentary style. In so doing, I mean to describe a particular but not uncommon type of fractured empathy that, unlike most identifiable emotions, is difficult to describe and locate. Brooks "take[s recovery of the past] to be the aim of all narrative" and admits that *Absalom, Absalom!* may indeed thwart a straightforward recovery (311). But he continues, "Yet the attempted recovery of the past makes known the continuing history of past desires as it persists in the present, shaping the project of telling" (311). While Brooks uses epistemological drive to do this, studying feeling and the way Faulkner manipulates feeling through his mix of aesthetic styles even better "makes known the continuing history of past desires as it persists in the present" because such a study shows the style not to be an impediment to the recovery of knowledge but an active simulation of how the continuing history of past desires structure the ability to feel and connect to others.

In writing about the type of ambivalent empathy I claim to be present in *Absalom, Absalom!*, I want to be clear about the forces at play, and why it is important to

narrator emphasizes that Quentin is so familiar with these people that his own individual identity seems insubstantial by comparison.

appreciate how Faulkner aestheticizes this competition. As human agents who make meaning from logic and feeling, and who use both of these to create empathic identification, we are susceptible to being pulled into feelings that align with particular ideologies, without even recognizing this alignment. Faulkner uses narrative to align Quentin and his readers to look back on southern history and southern memory and to feel the pull such a posture opens. In this way, Faulkner shows how structures of feeling make possible “affect-genealogies,” which Christopher Nealon argues is a way a writer can construct “a lineage of invisible kin” (14). At the beginning of the novel, Faulkner narrates how, because he grew up in the South, Quentin is a vessel for the southern past and southern desires:

Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward ... (12)⁸⁹

However, while Quentin maybe feeling with past, dead others, he is also full of them, and has little to no room to feel with humans he might come into daily contact with.⁹⁰ No

⁸⁹ I must ask the reader to be generous as I indulge in the primary text; most quotes from *Absalom, Absalom!* will be in block quote format. As Warren Beck puts it, the “organic quality of Faulkner’s style, sustaining through essentially poetic devices an orchestration of meaning, makes it impossible to judge him adequately by brief quotation” (57).

⁹⁰ Perhaps this is what leads Shreve to take an active role in telling the story of the Sutpens. If the whole (white) world of Jefferson feels similarly, then Quentin might indeed be “feeling with” people he comes into contact with. Faulkner sends Quentin to Harvard to “feel with” someone different.

doubt, this is a type of backward-looking empathetic identification, something Heather Love discusses in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. While I do not always agree with the ethical implications of Love's work, her descriptions of backward-looking feelings are helpful for detailing what is happening with the structure of southern feeling. *Absalom, Absalom!* is comparable to the work she does with queer literature because she engages in narratives that seek to "describe what it is like to bear a 'disqualified' identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it," and because her framework is one that enables a "backward turn" (4). However, this backward-looking identification does not just champion the past but also forecloses a decidedly different future (indeed, his need to protect white southern womanhood leads Quentin down a path similar to Henry's) and other avenues of empathetic identification. Since structures of feeling play a large role in building identities, they also play a role in limiting said identities—categorizing what they are and, perhaps more importantly, what they are not. Yet, empathetic identification with others unlike ourselves is still possible, under many conditions. Faulkner's compression of time and space and confluence of character pain artfully show the difficulty of achieving empathy as well as the confusing and disorienting nature of inhabiting another's feelings, particularly when that other's feelings are structured by a white desire for exceptionalism. Again, Shreve's suggestion of seeing one's situatedness through evolutionary time offer a way out of this cycling of living in and producing anticathartic feeling. However, the only southerners in the novel who seem to understand this speak very little: Judith and Clytie. This chapter advances

Brooks' reading of the novel by using affect theory to argue that the epistemological gaps in the novel are filled with uncanny empathetic identification.

Ambivalent Empathy in Southern Structures of Feeling, an Uncanny Affect

The way William Faulkner depicts empathetic affect in *Absalom, Absalom!* is incredibly frustrating, modernist, but also approaching verisimilitude (which is, of course, what many high modernists explicitly claimed to be doing) because it models the way that southern structures of feeling fragment empathy. By examining how feelings thought to be secure, such as empathy, become unmoored and anticathartic, this chapter also advances Ngai's ideas about how the contemporary moment (broadly defined as the twentieth-century to present) is one in which emotions no longer have a direct link to social action or change (*Ugly* 5). Empathy is generally labeled an emotion, and not an affect, because it is considered to have a clear relation to an object. However, Faulkner's modernist style, interrelation of characters' narrative arcs, and gothic density show that the conditions of the twentieth-century society South have made emotions that were once clear ambivalent. While much has been written praising literature's ability to produce empathy, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* exemplifies empathy's messiness, its ambivalence and fluidity. While I do not go so far as suggest that empathy is undesirable, I resist the urge to argue that empathy is a unified emotion that has a self-evident desirability and caution others to do the same. Indeed, Suzanne Keen also calls into question empathy's productiveness by pointing out that "Author's empathy can be devoted to socially undesirable ends that may be rejected by a disapproving reader. Indeed, empathetic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a

reader's moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy" (xiii). In *Empathy and the Novel*, she does not tether reader's affective experience of empathy to altruistic outcomes (xv). That empathy can sometimes be clear and motivating does not mean it necessarily leads to positive results.⁹¹

Empathy is an odd and contested term. Indeed, some scholars even still use it as a synonym for sympathy. However, it is also a quickly growing area of scholarship. In her book on empathy and literary modernism, Meghan Marie Hammond, a scholar on empathy and literature with whom my ideas best align, argues that empathy is an affective category that seems slippery yet inexhaustible. She explains empathy as "a cognitive and affective structure of feeling, a way of bridging interpersonal distance" (5). Providing some context for the rise of empathy's popularity and its juxtaposition with its predecessor, sympathy, Hammond writes:

Victorian literary sympathy depends on distance, on acknowledgement that the other *is* other. The modernist texts ... in the tradition of twentieth-century empathy, are caught in the difficult process of denying or obliterating that otherness. Thus the modernist turn to empathy is a restructuring of an already existing set of desires and concerns relating to thinking and feeling with others.

(4)

It is important to note that, while Hammond is not an affect theorist, she clearly identifies the challenge empathy has as one of restructuring sets of desires. Like other scholars on empathy, she distinguishes between sympathy and empathy by stating that sympathy is a

⁹¹ A clear example of this would be Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*.

way of “feeling for” that engenders stronger and more stable emotions such as pity, whereas empathy is a way of “feeling with” which can often be a confusing experience (Hammond 6-7).⁹² Additionally, Janet Strayer defines empathy as a “vicariously experienced emotion,” adding that it is a “fairly immediate shared sensory and emotional experience” (218, 219). However, it is important to note that an awareness of this type of directional feeling—*with* and *back* instead of *for*—calls attention to the fact that empathy is both cognitive and affective. Indeed, all of the scholars working on empathy acknowledge both the cognitive and the affective components. Keen, like Strayer, calls empathy “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect” which can be “provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (4). However, she makes the distinction that empathy “need not be a conscious response: the neonates who cry at the sound of other babies’ cries are almost certainly unaware of their primitive empathy” (Keen 4)⁹³. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner

⁹² Hammond elaborates, “empathy encompasses both the cognitive process known as ‘thinking with’ others and the affective process known as ‘feeling with’ others. Each of these processes, the cognitive *and* the affective, is in turn referred to in discourses of empathy as a form of ‘feeling into’” (63).

⁹³ Current psychological and cognitive research suggests that depending on certain factors—many of them focus on class—one’s predisposition can disable or enable one’s receptivity to certain feelings. For example, Paul K. Piff et al. conducted seven studies for their report of social class and ethical behavior and consistently found that “upper-class individuals are particularly likely to value their own welfare over the welfare of others and, thus, hold more positive attitudes towards greed” (4086). In one of their observations, they found that luxury vehicles are more likely than others to cut off both pedestrians and other vehicles in pedestrian walkways (Piff et al. 4090). In their conclusions, they suggest that the financial independence of the wealthy allows for a disconnection to feeling any obligations to others. Additionally, Daniel Batson et al. conducted a study in which they found that people are able to block empathy when they believe that they will be asked for money. That is, people seem to be able to disable certain affects as a way of cutting off rationality.

balances the emotional pull of empathetic feeling with the rationalized pull of white desires.

Scholars on empathy do not agree on the way it is best represented or transmitted aesthetically. It is empathy's inherent messiness that makes me question its self-evident effectualness, and why I think *Absalom, Absalom!* is an excellent example of what empathy in social solutions is really like, and, consequently, why when we invoke empathy in political arguments, we probably mean something much less messy.⁹⁴ Keen suggests that easy readability is best for engendering empathy; she makes the point that, "the author's use of formulaic conventions of a thriller or a romance novel would increase empathetic resonance, while for other readers (perhaps better educated and attuned to literary effects), unusual or striking representations promote foregrounding and open the way to empathetic reading" (xiii). On the other hand, Hammond argues that empathy is best and most actually represented and transmitted through a modernist style. Interestingly Keen claims that "*Personal distress*, an aversive emotional response also characterized by apprehension of another's emotion, differs from empathy in that it focuses on the self and leads not to sympathy but to avoidance" (4-5). She argues that this distress makes the reader reorient attention to themselves, writing:

⁹⁴ Perhaps this has something to do with empathy being a relatively new term (according to the *OED*, the term was first used in 1895, and first used with a meaning close to its current meaning in 1909). Hammond claims, "The term 'empathy', coined by the psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener in 1909, came into the world at roughly the same time as literary modernism. Yet it was not used in literary studies until the 1920s and does not appear to have been in common use until after World War II" (1).

I hazard that personal distress caused by novel reading leads people to stop reading, to put the book down, or to disengage full attention by skipping and skimming. None of the philosophers who put stock in the morally improving experience of narrative empathy include personal distress in their theories. Because novel reading can be so easily stopped or interrupted by an unpleasant emotional reaction to a book, however, it certainly contributes to aesthetic emotions, such as those Sianne Ngai describes in her important book *Ugly Feelings*. (5)⁹⁵

I diverge from Keen because empathy can be linked to personal distress. Indeed, empathy can often cause personal distress when readers are asked to empathize with someone whose lived experience challenges the validity of their social commitments. Empathy can be like Sianne Ngai's ugly feelings, and it is not wrong to categorize empathy as a minor feeling or affect; indeed, I think it is best described as spontaneous, fleeting, and difficult to define.⁹⁶ My understanding of affective empathy differs from Keen's because I am not ready to eliminate "personal distress" as a form of empathy, nor do I believe that

⁹⁵ Keen criticizes Martha Nussbaum among those "philosophers who put stock in the morally improving experience of narrative empathy [but do not] include personal distress"; however, I think this is largely inaccurate, and would point to Nussbaum's reading of *Agamemnon* in *The Fragility of Goodness* (5)

⁹⁶ I also diverge from Keen in her assessment of modernism's ability to transmit empathy. On Modernism, Keen claims the style is one that decreases sensibility. She writes, "the rise of the middlebrow (often female) reader sustains empathy as a goal of literary representation even while fragmentation, difficulty, deliberate obscurity, and exploitation of alienation effects enjoyed their vogue. This does not mean, however, that modernist experimental fiction eschewed empathy, rather that it recast the representation of consciousness and feelings as one of the primary tasks of novels rejecting conventional representation" (58).

narratives that transfer empathy need to be highly accessible or committed to realism. Like Hammond, I believe that narrative complexity can heighten empathic feelings and that feeling empathy does not necessarily mean feeling good. In modernist fiction, Hammond “see[s] deep ambivalence about empathetic experience — it is desired and feared in equal measure ... So while the strain of literary modernism [she] examine[s] values empathetic experience as an ideal, it is also teeming with voices that recognise potential for danger, or even violence, in acts of empathy” (4). Empathy’s fragile nature makes it more an affect than an emotion. Hammond supports this when she writes: “One of the things that makes the concept of aesthetic empathy so congenial to modernist thought is the fact that it is understood to be *already lost* by the time it is recognized and defined” ... “empathy requires an endangered frame of mind” because it is fleeting, and so quickly subjugated into sympathy (121).

Empathy is much less productively effective and much more uncomfortable than many advocates for empathy like to acknowledge. Indeed, at a recent conference, the upshot about many presentations on literature and culture had to do with creating or advancing empathy, without ever explaining why empathy is desirable. My argument contends that while Faulkner’s complex narrative structure in *Absalom, Absalom!* does not particularly make empathy easy, it relates empathy stylistically, aesthetically, and affectively in a way that reflects the actual difficulties of empathy in the American South. This is to say, the realism Keen advocates misses the mark on verisimilitude.

When I claim that Faulkner’s aesthetic illustrates the fragmentation of empathy under southern structures of feeling, I mean that the pull from different forces in the

novel often confuses the relationship between empathy and action. For example, the novel is set up so that readers know at least a bare outline of the plot before the end of the second paragraph, which undercuts the typical force of a novel's climax: a stylistic decision that would not generally be associated with a call for political action.⁹⁷ This is to suggest that the climax of the narrative in typical narrative structure should be Henry's killing of Charles Bon. However, if there is any typical, structural climax in the novel, it is the discovery of Sutpen's drive: being turned away from the front door of a rich white man's house by a black house slave. Read in this way, we are set up to empathize with the "devil" Sutpen, the man whose desire to be exceptional by buying into a white southern mythology causes so much misery.

A reverence for myth and mythmaking make empathetic emotion intangible, almost incorporeal. Because the novel is a meditation on narrative itself, Quentin represents one affected by empathy.⁹⁸ The narrative difficulty and structure of the novel

⁹⁷ The second paragraph of the novel ends with the following summary: "*It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson.*" (9) Even in this provided outline, it is difficult to tell who destroyed whom, or what motivates this destruction.

⁹⁸ In the original publication of Brooks' argument on the novel, "Incredulous Narration: *Absalom, Absalom!*," he considers the novel "as a problem in 'narratology,' ... [because] it reflects on its narrative design and intention, particularly as it reflects on the very concept of plot as a structuring interpretive operation applied to, and elicited by, the unfolding meaning through and within temporal succession" (247).

also produce a type of fragmented empathy that is most prevalent in the twentieth-century South. Structures of feeling shape the atmosphere by engendering some affects while diffusing others. Lauren Berlant explains this particularly well in the first essay in *Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, wherein she uses the example of pilgrimages to monuments of loss to show how such pilgrimages work by placing a person within a structure of feeling so that they can feel correctly; that is, they can orient their affective receptiveness to be in line with national identity. In a similar manner, southern structures of feeling work to get (white) southerners to feel “correctly” by keeping people in contact with the myth of southern exceptionalism. Indeed, in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor explains that cultural memory “is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection,” and asserts that “Memory is embodied and sensual, that is conjured through the senses; it links the deeply private with the social, and even official, practices” (82). This is highly similar to the way that Raymond Williams defines structures of feeling in that memory provides linkages to other structures.

However, Williams calls the past “the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience” (132). He valorizes the extreme present and feeling because of their ability to be outside of social structures. While some affect theory considers affect’s presentness to be ruined by thought, Williams does not completely reject thought from this paradigm. Instead, he writes that “We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought”

(Williams 132). In his canonical text *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward comments on the strength of history's force in the South, stating that "the illusion that 'history is something unpleasant that happens to other people' is certainly not" an illusion southerners suffer from, and suggests that its unpleasantness influences the way that southerners are able to engage with the world (170). Instead, Woodward explains that history is inseparable from southern identity. Additionally, Woodward explains that "Because [the South] identified the internal security of the whole society with the security of its labor system, it refused to permit criticism of that system. To guarantee conformity of thought it abandoned ... tolerance and resorted to repression of dissent within its boarder and to forceful exclusion of criticism from outside" (181-182). Additionally, Minrose Gwin's introduction to the special edition of *The Southern Literary Journal* on history, memory, and forgetting explains that "remembered history" is a spatial and temporal entity that lingers in southern literature (1). These desires and histories create southern structures of feeling. We can see an articulation of southern structures of feeling's effects during the moment in the text when Clytie tries to stop Rosa on the staircase by reaching out to touch her. Thinking about her own reaction to Clytie's touch, Rosa explains,

Even as a child, I would not play with the same objects which she and Judith played with, as though that warped and spartan solitude which I called my childhood, which had taught me (and little else) to listen before I could comprehend and to understand before I even heard, had also taught me not only

to instinctively fear her and what she was, but to shun the very objects she touched. (140)

Rosa reflects on how she came to have racist feelings towards Clytie before having the language to comprehend or understand race. Raised under southern structures of feeling, Rosa is conditioned to feel the difference between life that is precious and life that is not before she really understands why such a difference exists. Indeed, the gothic slow revelation of difference throughout the novel causes anxiety to those living in this structured feeling. But by avoiding Clytie's touch and any objects Clytie touches, Rosa exemplifies how embodied knowledges perpetuated by structures of feeling often go unarticulated and unchallenged, which leads to a sense of intuited consensus that suggests such knowledges are unchallengeable. Rosa's reflection here epitomizes how Patricia Yaeger talks about the southern "unthought known," which she defines as the unseen everyday ... species of racial blindness" (xii). In this way, the unthought known can be thought of as the pseudo-knowledge diffused by the structure of feeling. Because this knowledge is not based in logic, it is easily threatened and much anxiety can be produced when this happens.

Rosa's reflection on the moment Clytie touches her shows how the threat to the pseudo-knowledge of structured feeling produces anxiety and disorientation. Faulkner writes:

Then she touched me, and then I did stop dead ... I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at

that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh. Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering ... Yes, I stopped dead—no woman's hand, no negro's hand, but bitted bridle-curb to check and guide the furious and unbending will ... the two of us joined by that hand and arm which held us, like a fierce rigid umbilical cord ... (139-140)

This touch creates a momentary intimacy wherein Rosa fleetingly experience empathetic identification with Clytie as another human being. This flash of empathy is that which is “cut[ing] sharp” and the southern structure of feeling is “the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering.” In her excellent reading of this scene in *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland argues that a “touch can encompass empathy as well as violation, passivity as well as active aggression ... touch crosses boundaries, in fact and imagination” (100). The ambivalence or strong pull between the extremes of empathy and violation, passivity and aggression exemplify the oscillation between self and other that characterizes fragmented empathy. Holland explains that the erotics of racism limit our ability to recognize the other. She writes: “even when we recognize someone as ‘human,’ we destroy the pleasure of recognition and of reciprocity. We do not permit ourselves fully to interpret or see the human we encounter as having the same consciousness or even the *potential* for the same as us” (Holland 100). In our desire to mitigate felt vulnerability, we prefer to think of the other as unable to impact our lives and lived experiences beyond any degree that we permit. Faulkner’s description of Rosa’s fixation on Clytie’s touch is an example of empathy breaking through the larger

narrative of white southern tradition: “The touch is so compelling here that the prevailing narrative of race is undone and a multitude of possibilities find fruition” (Holland 103). As much as southern structures of feeling are set up in a way to inhibit interpersonal connection, intimacy finds moments in which it can refuse to be denied.⁹⁹

Southern structures of feeling are built on a narrative of white exceptionalism, which persists through a myth that is able to hold whiteness to be superior, yet also somehow fragile and in need of protection. Because this is the base of the structure, the affective goal is stasis and a reduction of fluid feeling, so feelings are generally pushed toward anticathartic states of being such as melancholia or indignation. However, even when emotions that are generally associated with change and movement occur, emotions such as empathy, the southern structure of feeling fragments these strong emotions to reduce their socio-political productiveness. That is, the value that empathy can add to potential action has even less potential under these structures—feelings can’t compete with white southerners’ commitment to their exceptional fantasy. Hammond explains, “Literary modernism trained readers to believe that a more radical joining of subjectivities was possible. Yet the driving ambivalence of modernist empathy signals that fellow feeling, in whatever form, is an act whose dangers we must constantly assess” (4-5). Rosa’s terror at the intimacy shared with Clytie shows the strength and,

⁹⁹ Holland rightly claims, “The intimate moment that Rosa and Clytie share is ordinary. It is quotidian intimacy that forces us to realize the other as *someone* with whom we interact and have an impact upon; our acknowledgement of this connection represents the touch and its fruition. We do not create intimacy; it is there awaiting our recognition. Let me rephrase this: we are bound intimately to others whether we realize or acknowledge such connection” (104).

consequently, the critical importance of attending to the ambivalence of empathy. The joining of subjectivities, especially of a black subjectivity with a white one, is radical because it expands what counts as lived experience in new ways that have the potential to spur new understandings about race relations. However, as Hammond argues and the novel's modernist aesthetic illustrates, empathy is often ambivalent. Almost as soon as Rosa is, not only touched but "cut" by Clytie's connection, Faulkner's prose parses the scene further until Clytie is not a person or a "Negro," but a disembodied hand.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner brings together an archive of southern history, culture, ideology, and identity to create a narrative set in southern structures of feeling. In fact, in an interview about *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner said that the novel is "a manifestation of a general racial system in the South which was condensed and concentrated ... a constant general condition in the South" (Faulkner 94). The novel consists of multiple narrative plots (as many as nine) and multiple narrators (as many as three proper narrators); however, as the narrative advances these all collapse into the narrative responsibility of Quentin, who, dislocated from the South at Harvard, reassembles the narrative of Thomas Sutpen when Shreve forebodingly asks/commands him to "*Tell about the South*" (Faulkner 174). Faulkner constructs the text in such a way that the aesthetics and affects of the narrative are inseparable from the burden of southern history and cultural memory. Quentin is forced to hear, remember, tell, rehear, participate in, and feel the history and cultural memory of his home space, Jefferson, Mississippi. Quentin pleads for us, Shreve, and whoever else will listen to "wait" throughout the retelling of the story as if it is all too much. Near the end, Quentin is about to finish the

story: “‘Wait, I tell you!’ Quentin said, though still he did not move nor even raise his voice—that voice with its tense suffused restrained quality: ‘I am telling’” (Faulkner 277). Faulkner does not end the sentence before showing us the anxiety of Quentin’s thoughts: “*Am I going to have to hear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this forever*” (277). Through the unfolding of the intertwined narratives, Faulkner forces Quentin, and the reader by proxy, to construct an intimacy to the past that is too felt and uncanny. Quentin’s telling of the story outside of the South and to a non-southerner forces him to reassemble the pieces of southern history and memory in a way that creates a felt and emotional intimacy which trouble his epistemological moorings. Of course, there are different levels of intimacy in the novel ranging from homoerotic to fleeting. Even Shreve, who, at times, seems to gloat over his disconnection from the intimacy of the story, cannot stop himself from developing a familiarity with the main actors. This is evident in his inability to stop calling Miss Rosa “Aunt Rosa.”

While Faulkner’s modernism is a compelling aspect of his style that definitely heightens the transmission of empathy, it is important to recognize how Faulkner blends modernist style and gothic style to achieve verisimilitude. While *Absalom, Absalom!* might be considered a high modernist text first, it is undoubtedly gothic: much of the narrative takes place with the Sutpen mansion as the setting and as an ominous force, there is a monstrous (or as Rosa would say, demonic) other whom we can’t know; there always seems to be a feeling of dread concerning the information one might discover.

Much of the feeling created by Faulkner's use of gothic style can be called uncanny. In his essay "The 'Uncanny'," Sigmund Freud quotes from Friedrich Schelling to define the phenomenon's key characterization, "*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light" (224). In "Faulkner's Dark House: The Uncanny Inheritance of Race," Martin Kreiswirth builds on Freud's theory of the uncanny by thinking about how "The uncanny has come to be seen ... as a more basic epistemic and phenomenological operation, a certain almost indefinable complex of disturbing sensations (not only terror and trepidation) caused by, at bottom, a hesitation in the production of knowledge" (127).

Like Brooks, Kreiswirth is interested in how the novel uses the production of knowledge to create a particular experience of reading the text, but he uses the uncanny as a way to describe this epistemological gap. He explains that with the uncanny, "there is a productive gap in the circuit: what is finally recognized and understood goes at first unrecognized. The uncanny is the flash of uncertainty that vacillates within this gap" (Kreiswirth 127).¹⁰⁰ This uncanny moment of terror and trepidation is how Faulkner uses ambivalence to find unity in the merger of modernist and gothic styles. Indeed, Sutpen's monstrosity, and the thing that makes him unforgivable to the community, is that he has no past—his knowability is not absolute. Faulkner writes that a "league of Jefferson women ... on the second day after the town saw him five years ago, ... agreed never to

¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Kreiswirth argues the novel is uncanny, and "that the peculiar combination of frustration and uneasiness that frequently accompanies the reading experience is the result of an elaborate discursive machinery designed to generate epistemic gaps, and gaps within gaps, that put representative undecidability on exhibit, and postpone, for as long as possible, the return of the repressed" (128).

forgive him for not having any past” (52). This similarity is evident in Zygmunt Bauman’s description of hermeneutical problems in *Modernity and Ambivalence*. He writes, “Unresolved hermeneutical problems mean uncertainty as to how the situation ought to be read and what response is likely to bring the desired results. At best, uncertainty is confusing and felt as discomforting. At worst, it carries a sense of danger” (Bauman 56). The gothic nature of the novel keeps a feeling of closeness and uneasiness in what we know to be true running throughout the narrative. To return to Fadiman’s ironically accurate description of the novel, “To penetrate Faulkner’s sentences is like hacking your way through a jungle. The path closes up behind you, and in no time at all you find yourself entangled in a luxuriant mass of modifiers, qualifications, relative clauses, parenthetical phrases, interjected matter, recapitulations, and other indications of a Great Style” (290). While Fadiman is being snide when he says “Great Style,” his description gives a good account of how Faulkner uses his sentences and modernist sentence structure to create a feeling of gothic claustrophobia.

Julia Kristeva explains that when the uncanny “creeps into the tranquility of reason itself we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others” (170). The uncanny is a productive companion for empathy because it causes us to feel that we might have an inadequate perspective, and that a better one could radically change our epistemology. When reading for the plot, audiences desire to uncover the truth about Sutpen. However, from Quentin’s perspective, the truth of oneself and the truth of Sutpen are both bound in the grand narrative of southern exceptionalism. The lurking truth and gothic horror for Quentin is

then that his own identity might be inadequate. The gothic style and its archetypal anxiety emphasize moments of vulnerability that call attention to opportunities to become a better person. The novel is disruptive to southern structures of feeling because “the withheld and then staggered revelations of Bon’s specific ‘difference’ that truly isn’t a difference in *Absalom, Absalom!* goes beyond characterization and narrative, flouting both basic rationality and secure human identity” (Kreiswirth 134).¹⁰¹ This negation of difference, when interpreted as a lurking threat in the epistemological gap, creates flashes of empathetic identification with the Other; the uncertainty of who destroys whom in the novel puts readers in a position, however briefly, to consider the position of various characters.¹⁰² This uncanny ambivalence keeps characters from exiting this particularly structured feeling, while at the same time threatens to reveal information that might be damaging to the myth; for example, one might be compelled to form an empathetic identification with a black man and encourage him to marry your white sister.

¹⁰¹ Kreiswirth explains how Rosa never saw Bon, but yet she recognized or described his face (128).

¹⁰² Holland expands this to a general human desire for particularity when she writes, “Our desire for absolute difference cannot be satiated. It keeps coming back to question the legitimacy of our own claim that we really are a single and unique consciousness. There is no endpoint to our gambits with the other, which break in upon our singularity, causing us to react indignantly, ‘Oh, it’s *you* again?’ We feel the same burden when touched by another.” (101) Presented in this way, Holland shows how easily our desires to be “unique” can quickly turn into a desire to be “exceptional.” Jean-Paul Sartre illustrates this in *No Exit*, where he famously claims, “Hell is—other people” by giving a scene in which three characters torture each other through conversation (47). This is torture because the individuals will never allow themselves to be vulnerable. Therefore, the Other is always an imposition and a combatant who has the ability to make one feel fragile.

Modernism's Uncanny Empathy, and Metaphysical Empathetic Identification

Another excellent example of a realistic illustration of empathy is the set of reasons Judith gives for why she wants someone to keep her letter from Charles Bon. Framed through Jason Compson's conversation with Quentin about the letter and flowing back in time, Judith, after giving her letter to Quentin's grandmother, tells her that she can keep it

“Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or dont read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying ...” (127)

In this section, Judith articulates an empathetic connection with humanity. However, her description also shows how these inherent and undeniable connections produce pain and limit the expression of one's own selfhood and identity. Judith's description of what life is like actually maps onto the way structures of feeling work. Structures of feeling are not set up so that each can weave her own pattern; they are set up to limit motion and limit

the patterns possible or even imaginable. Judith wonders why “the Ones that set up the loom” did not do a better job, but the “loom” is not set up to be productive. It (the loom/southern structures of feeling) is set up to make people who try to weave their own design get caught and tangled up, stuck and unable to move forward. The loom prescribes a fabric of being that is woven tightly so as to limit any vulnerable points of entrance. Southern structures of honor limit the freedom and playfulness that can accompany inconsequentiality. Even Judith, who recognizes her own inconsequentiality, cannot be free to experience the personal connections that mutual vulnerability facilitates because she is still living within the structure.

In *Resisting History*, Barbara Ladd claims, “The problem in Yoknapatawpha County ... is that many become obsessed with mourning the past, to the point that the transformation of memory for life in the present is no longer possible” (90). She compares how many characters participate in monumentalizing and memorializing the past instead of working within the confines of living memory. While Ladd points to Quentin as a ready example of a character who becomes obsessed with the past, she shows how Judith demonstrates a different option. Reading this scene, Ladd argues that Judith participates in living memory that resists the process of fetishizing history. By giving the letter away “with no real expectation that it will be either preserved or destroyed,” Judith refuses to get stuck in the process of memorializing; Ladd explains that Judith’s act “will constitute a living memory precisely because it can be forgotten ‘someday’” (91). Instead of memorializing her past by setting someone down to bear the story forward in the way that Rosa requires of Quentin, Judith makes meaning a different

way. When telling Quentin's grandmother that she doesn't even need to read or keep the letter, Judith makes the argument that in order for something to be remembered, and not memorialized, there has to be the possibility of forgetting and the acknowledgement of fragility.

While Ladd claims that Judith is the character who has the best relationship with memory, I argue that Judith's failed effort to make her own design is the most tragic aspect of the novel; however, her own explanation of why she cannot be successful in this, as well as her determination to try anyway, illuminate some similarities between philosophical naturalism and anticathartic structures of feeling. By giving away the letter as her only token of Charles Bon, and by acknowledging her own insignificance—both in her moment and in evolutionary time (she explains how marked stones will eventually be eroded and made illegible)—Judith accepts the tragic circumstance that Quentin rejects without even ruminating on the horror of doing so. Her words to Quentin's grandmother are very matter-of-fact. She is not crying out against her fate; rather, like Antigone, she accepts what she must do: "keep on trying or having to keep on trying." Because Judith can accept an end, she can participate in the present, whereas, as Ladd writes, "memory requires a sense of tomorrow that Quentin ... never possesses" (92). Interestingly, comparing Judith's relationship to memory with Quentin's gives us two different types of sorrow. While Judith is a tragic figure because she has accepted her fate, Quentin is a naturalist, and pathetic, figure because he shows himself to be stuck in a system of being that will not allow him to flourish. More than this, Judith seems to realize this distinction because she must go through the act of passing the letter to someone who might not care.

It is important to note that Clytie probably understands their tragic circumstances as well. In her article “The Yoking of ‘Abstract Contradictions’: Clytie’s Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!*”, Thadious M. Davis effectively argues that Clytie is Judith’s “black twin” (211). After arguing that Judith and Clytie model a white-black sibling relationship that Henry and Bon can never attain, Davis describes the similarities between the two female characters in a way that highlights their tragic knowledge:

The two are locked into a narrow existence; uncomplaining and stoical, they make the best of their lives ... and are as close to survivors as Faulkner comes in *Absalom, Absalom!* They accept a life without joy or frivolity; they accept the burden of existence and each other as human beings. Consequently, Clytie and Judith emerge together as the most admirable characters in the novel. (212)

In a way, Clytie’s act of destroying the house near the end of the novel is similar to Judith’s act of giving away the letter. She accepts that their tale has come to an end and she does not wish to memorialize it any more. Narratively, however, this is not the end of the novel, and readings that argue that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a tragedy overstep. *Absalom, Absalom!*, rather, depicts a naturalist trap: southerners cannot memorialize their exceptionalism and still be able to be exceptional tragic figures. In white southern structures of feeling, people desire to see themselves as a part of a grand narrative (tradition) of great actions and living. Judith and Clytie say that none of this matters, and we know none of this matters because we are not free to pursue the good life and we are not free to make connections with those around us.

The poetic language Faulkner uses to write this scene between Judith and Quentin's grandmother is beautiful, and his artful use of the word "you" deserves attention. At the beginning of the section, Judith correctly addresses Quentin's grandmother as "you"; however, as she continues, Judith uses "you" to refer to the position of both Quentin's grandmother and herself to explain how they (and perhaps all) are caught in a larger design that both cannot and must matter. Judith conflates individual experience in a type of metaphysics wherein the two undergo a merger that highlights mutual vulnerability in front of ontological limits. Their "you" has reached her limit of comprehensibility. Nevertheless, when Judith conflates "you" and "I" as if there is no difference between the two, she creates a hermeneutic gap from which the potential for a new type of knowledge arises: empathetic identification. In *"I am You": The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology and Art*, Karl F. Morrison, points out that it is common for "I" to be conflated with "you" in art and, especially, Western theology, and has long served as a way to promote understanding.¹⁰³ Because of a belief in a shared humanity and position of being caught in history, Judith gets closer to experiencing empathy than the other characters. By accepting the letter, Quentin's grandmother creates the possibility of a "partial common identity ... achieved by mediation" (Morrison 7). Morrison explains, "The 'I' and the 'you' were separate until a mediating act was performed uniting them in the crucial aspects. This might be a

¹⁰³ He claims, "'I am you,' was not an occasional accident of phrasing invented by whimsical writers, but rather the signature for a long and many-formed hermeneutic tradition" (Morrison 3). In his examples to explain his theory, Morrison's running example is John Donne's "Meditation 17."

sacrament (reenacting the historical mediation of Christ) ... It might be the mediating act of recognition and acceptance by another” (7).¹⁰⁴ Judith explains this as she continues to contemplate about mattering and connection in a way that is strikingly different from how other characters talk about mattering in the novel:

And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something ... (127)

For Judith, the transfer and acceptance of the letter by Quentin’s grandmother is a mediation on their separate identities.¹⁰⁵ Morrison explains, “mediation was itself possible because the ‘I’ was intrinsically like the ‘you’ in the aspects that permitted identity. The process through which the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ moved by degrees from remote

¹⁰⁴ Morrison explains that his work is in line with a tradition of thinkers from Martin Buber to Martin Heidegger. He claims Buber’s *I and Thou* is an important text that comes out of the Enlightenment and that he “contradicted substantial elements in the Western intellectual tradition when he criticized Meister Eckhart for teaching an identity between God and man that never really existed” (26). The phrase “I am you,” Morrison argues was and is a “growing theme in western culture” because it is at once a statement that engenders intellectual, spiritual, and historical thought (xxii).

¹⁰⁵ On the composition of identity, Morrison writes, “Either in the biological or in the esthetic paradigm, the identity achieved was selective. It extended to particular aspects of existence having to do with heart and mind, rather than an all-encompassing unity of the material world” (7). Therefore, the aspects that permit identity are both static and dynamic.

close likeness and finally to identity were mimetic as well as hermeneutic” (7). Judith creates this moment of mediation through her own vulnerability; she is willing to open herself to pain and rejection for the chance to create something new.¹⁰⁶ By offering the letter while claiming her own limitations, Judith conflates identities in a way that highlights mutuality in human limitations and vulnerability. Judith’s act has little to do with Quentin’s grandmother, indeed, she is more like a chorus witnessing Judith’s tragic transformation than a fully developed character. While my argument is that empathy in lived experience is not as effectual as most believe, I still think this illustration of empathy is beautiful, if not painful, in its bleakness. But its painfulness in no way detracts from the strength of its empathic bonds; indeed, we often form our strongest bonds with the other by realizing our mutual vulnerability.

Faulkner’s complex style forces readers to open up and look for stable lines of connection: someone, something, or some feeling to identify with, to embody so as to comprehend. This fits with Hammond’s claim that literary modernism, and its aesthetic tropes such as “free indirect discourse, free direct discourse and internal monologue,” are best suited to create empathy because “They create moments of ... cognitive alignment — character, narrator and reader briefly overlap” (24). In one example, once identification is formed, Faulkner advances empathy by actually conflating the reader with Quentin. When Shreve “plays” at telling the story, Quentin becomes distressed just

¹⁰⁶ Hammond builds on Robert Visser’s 1873 *Einfühlung*, which “suggests a bleeding through of subject and object”; his theory claims “we are not trapped by a singular perspective. Thus, early empathy stands as an implicit challenge to both wholesale solipsism and more nuanced understandings of the mind’s solitude” (65)

as readers become distressed at navigating another complication of the narrative's voices and actual plotlines of the expanding narrative.¹⁰⁷ When he thinks about hearing the story, he substitutes "I" for "you" in a way that becomes unclear if he really means himself, or us, the readers/listeners/community:

But you were not listening, because you knew it all already, had learned, absorbed it already without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it, with it, as children will and do: so that what your father was saying did not tell you anything so much as it struck, word by word, the resonant strings of remembering. You had been here before ... (Faulkner 212-213).

The excerpt is one of many possible ones that show Faulkner's complex and disorienting sentence structure, his mystifying use of italics, his stream-of-consciousness style, and his use of "you" that might be interpreted as both a character in the novel and the reader. Faulkner's style forces the reader to undergo Quentin's struggle of placing himself in the Sutpen narrative and its consequence. His aesthetic choices create feelings that are difficult to name, but that draw us in, looking for connection to the text and its characters.

This style puts readers in a vulnerable position and creates confusion. Hammond explains these feelings when she writes, "What begins as a dominant act [an emotional takeover in the form of empathy] in fact carries the promise of subjective confusion and

¹⁰⁷ An often quoted line in the novel is when Shreve stops Quentin so that he can try telling the story: "'No,' Shreve said; 'you wait. Let me play a while now'" (Faulkner 280). Because Shreve never stops "playing," he is able to see the story for what it is and remain free of the structures of feeling Quentin gets caught by.

loss for the person who ‘feels into’ an object” (66). By addressing the reader, “you,” Faulkner forces readers to be participants in the text; like Quentin, by now readers have learned the story and have been “living beside it.” This is also another example of Faulkner using “you” to create a hermeneutic gap. Discussing hermeneutic gaps in literature, Morrison argues, “Deprived of information needed to complete the pattern emerging before him, a reader or interpreter becomes a co-creator of the text in the process of reading. He enters into the text” (34). By creating this gap, Faulkner creates an experience wherein readers are Quentin, which is an uncanny experience because it collapses interpersonal distance and the distance of reality and fiction.¹⁰⁸ By using a disorienting style wherein readers must trustingly and in good faith pursue the narrative, Faulkner creates empathy that “prevents us from apprehending the foreignness of the foreign object by means of a built-in forgetting that makes unclear the origin of the experience” (Hammond 71-72). This hermeneutical gap, then, requires vulnerability from the audience as well; that we might be wrong, or even that we might not (be smart enough to) comprehend. Quentin realizes this and understands the practice of hearing and listening to the story as one that does make demands of him.

¹⁰⁸ Keen explains how readers are more likely to experience empathy because they understand that the narrative they are about to receive is not real: “the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction known to be ‘made up’ does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently ‘real’ appeal for assistance may do ... fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action” (4). While this argument has merit, it undercuts fiction’s desire to depict the truth. If all fiction is a form of autobiography, then it is all a demand from a real person—the author—to attend to what he or she says for some reason, and if we realize this, we might apply the same “suspicion and wariness” that we might to any demand from another in “real life.”

Like Quentin, in order to make sense of what's happening, we must think about our relationship to the past: what we have read and therefore already know or have inferred. Indeed, Faulkner writes with an aesthetic that makes felt "*the resonant strings of remembering*," signaling a cognitive, emotional, and intimate feeling such as empathy, however fragmentary. While Faulkner writes in the high modernist style that was coming of age in his time, he also writes so as to make his readers feel what it is like to live within southern structures of feeling: the content and affect of such a style make readers rely on the past and look for relations to comprehend and make sense of his aesthetic and affective messiness. Yet, this backward looking is also what keeps empathy ambivalent and always at the point of fissure. Feeling backward connects Quentin more deeply with his white southern heritage and his empathetic identification with Henry (and Henry's obsession with his sister's virginity), and diffuses his connection with other characters, such as Shreve. This feeling backward blocks Quentin from his own feelings and his own judgment. These "*resonant strings*" are those that bind him to southern structures of feeling. In a similar language, Gwin argues that stories about the past can be "cultural conduits of memory or 'acts of transfer' that mold, pass along, and sometimes enact cultural memory" (3). Like Judith's claim that everyone is caught on a loom, Quentin is saturated with white, southern structured feeling such that attempts to make other empathetic identifications are, at best, ambivalent. Indeed, because the burden of memorializing history grows, Henry, even more than Thomas Sutpen, embodies a more fraught nexus of southern structures of feeling.

Yet, Quentin still participates in the culturally “dangerous” practice of genuine listening; this practice is dangerous because it creates the possibility for some level of empathy, despite fragmentation. For example, when Shreve tells the story, Quentin is surprised by how much he sounds like his father, who told him much of the story. When Quentin resumes the story near the end of the novel, Shreve, who has never met Mr. Compson, suggests that now, Quentin sounds like his Father. Quentin thinks:

Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, ... it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (Faulkner 261-262)

In this section of text, taken from a larger section of italicized thought, Quentin struggles with putting together why this story produces anxieties and contradictory affects in those who tell and listen to it and how it connects all of them in the process. Here, Faulkner's prose shows an understanding of how affects can transfer with and through the past and the lived experience of one now dead can continue to affect the living. The deep

importance placed on whiteness and preserving that whiteness at the expense of other desires and commitments are like pebbles thrown by Sutpen and Henry (who ruined their lives for this cause) that creates the ripples that are still felt by Quentin. This illustration calls to mind Christopher Bollas's "unthought known"; while the importance of whiteness is verbalized by some—most notably in this scene with Rosa and Clytie noted about—it is not left unsaid by many other characters; in fact, we don't even discover why Henry won't let Charles Bon marry Judith for quite some time. And yet, he also feels a connection with Shreve. By participating in an intimate relationship of hearing and listening, Quentin and Shreve participate in empathetic identification wherein they experience, in brief flashes, the experience of another. These experiences highlight how empathy is not a straightforward emotion that leads to change. Even if empathetic identification is a good thing because it can bring us a kind of knowledge, there are no necessarily ethical consequences that flow from it. For example, Shreve does indeed feel some empathetic identification, yet claims in the end that it doesn't matter.

At the end of the quoted section, and at the end of the novel, Quentin feels an intimacy to others that is difficult to articulate. He feels obligated and connected. Yet, the fragmentation of the empathy caused by southern structures of feeling make obscure the directness we like to associate with empathy. Quentin struggles to decide between his obligations as a white, southern man, and the obligations that empathetic identification make: to care for the agency, lives, and happiness people more than he cares for social hierarchy and traditions. This is to say, empathy is valuable, but it is wrong to place the work of commitments on an emotion so often fragmented when filtered through

structures of feeling. To be clear, empathy is most often experienced in this fragmented form. While southern structures of feeling may be particular because of a particular history involving specific entanglements of race, economics, and class, feelings are often structured in a way that prevents change. To progress with readings on empathy in literature, scholars need to stop taking empathy's positive nature as a given. In the novel's structural and thematic formations, the novel enacts a constant reorientation to past hopes, ambitions, loyalties, and suffering which overwhelms Quentin to such an extent that he cannot even understand or articulate his feelings at the end of the novel. Quentin is troubled because he is confused by what he is feeling and who he is feeling with. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while many contemporary critics valorize empathy as a mode of political engagement, feeling with does not bring Quentin to ethical action; instead, the immanence of this reassemblage of southern identity becomes a burden too heavy to bear.

Conclusion

Empathy's radicalness is often overemphasized at the expense of empathy's ambiguity, which is key to understanding the affect. Empathy troubles the lines between subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and community. Perhaps this is what Roudiez refers to when he writes that the "underpinnings of my narrative" were "swept away." The narrative causes us to lose the sense of "our/my narrative" and enter into the empathetic space. Perhaps Roudiez's statement that "everything crumbled" refers to something akin

to Walter Pater's thick wall of personality which assumes that feeling is not sharable.¹⁰⁹ This is to say, for the reader, the affect and aesthetic consequences of the novel build an intimacy to the past and others even if structures have been built to disable such a feeling. This intimacy highlights our obligations to others not by making us feel like good sympathetic citizens, but by making us feel bad, confused, disoriented, but together. Empathy's "success" in *Absalom, Absalom!* depends entirely on one's empathetic preferences; that is those whom we prefer or are most comfortable or most readily identify with. However, empathy should be considered when appreciating the novel's aesthetics and use of epistemological gaps; Faulkner's ability to put readers in position with characters is astounding. Ambivalence dominates the novel. Ambivalence connects the horror in the novel's stylistic choices: modernism's horror of indetermination and the gothic's horror of determination. On one hand, Faulkner's modernist style shows how empathetic identification gets fractured under southern structures of feeling; on the other hand, his modernist style also shows how empathetic identification breaks through in an environment where feeling is tightly structured as to limit spontaneous feeling.

While *Absalom, Absalom!* highlights the anticathartic nature of ambivalent empathy, I should end by reemphasizing that empathy is not an ethics. Indeed, empathy

¹⁰⁹ Pater believes that the experience of art and beauty is inherently personal. He writes, "Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" (728-729). Roudiez's description of crumbling and being made fragile or broken suggests that the novel was able to fracture this wall and connect the reader with others through some kind of empathic identification, however ambivalent.

encourages an ethics of the nice, which is no ethics at all. We want to wish some well because they are nice, or kind, or mistreated. But the nice should never be confused with the good. Feeling for and with others can encourage niceness, which can be good, but it can also unequally distribute care and shirks the responsibility of forming a comprehensive ethical framework. As Paul Bloom argues in *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, emotional empathy “leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with” (9).¹¹⁰ Furthermore, he claims, “It is corrosive in personal relationships; it exhausts the spirit and can diminish the force of kindness and love” (9). Emotional empathy needs its rational counterpart in order to form commitments that have a lasting benefit. Christian ethics possesses a good method of thinking about obligations to others through commitments. Followers must love one another not because they are similar, but because they are required to. In Jesus’s call to love our neighbor, what determines who receives our care, in this case, ought to be not whom we empathize with, but who is in close proximity, whom we encounter (as the Good Samaritan encountered the man who had been robbed). Interestingly, in Linda M. Turner’s experiment on social work and narrative empathy, she finds that “The ability and motivation to envision changes to oppressive policies and to suggest creative solutions for communities are enhanced when

¹¹⁰ Keen echoes this by referring to Peter Singer: “Indeed, it may seem perverse to point out that the altruistic acts prompted by empathy may conflict with justice. Practical ethicist Peter Singer offers a dramatic example of this kind of conflict. He contrasts the outpouring of support for victims of 9/11 with the lack of response to UNICEF’s announcement that an estimated 30,000 children died of disease and malnutrition on 11 September 2001 (One World 151-21)” (22-23).

founded on empathy, compassion, and commitment” (854). It’s important to note that empathy, compassion, and commitment are three separate things that can work together, but should not be conflated. Indeed, Bloom argues that compassion is a better moral guide than empathy (23). But if we are tasked with the challenge of identifying an emotional cognition to break through structures of feeling, love is the best option. In *Absalom, Absalom!* characters have fleeting moments of empathetic identification, but these feelings are not able to supersede their commitment to white southern culture: Henry’s intimacy with Bon is not worth his desire to protect white womanhood. A better ethical paradigm requires reflection over rumination. In their article, Boyraz and Waits define reflection as “self-focused attention that is motivated by intellectual curiosity and epistemic interests in the self, whereas “rumination is conceptualized as a maladaptive form of self-focused attention that is motivated by anxiety and involves chronic negative thinking about threats, losses, and injustices to the self” (84). While some argue that the novel is tragic, they usually do so using the wrong evidence, often claiming that the novel depicts the defeat of southern culture and its exceptional design. If the novel is tragic, it is only so for the readers, not for Quentin or any of the living southerners. The end of the story is not cathartic for Quentin because he continues to ruminate; however, the end of the novel can be cathartic for readers if one transfers pity and fear to Quentin.

Chapter Three: On Compelled Apathy

“It has been a favorite conviction of mine that there can hardly be an art of living where there is not moral and material security, like a capital fund stored up by original thrift. I have no doubt that the Fairchilds have a high art, but I am inquiring about what looks like the obsolescence of their capital investment.

— from John Crowe Ransom’s Review of *Delta Wedding*

“Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. A phenomenology of happiness might explore how we attend to those things we find delightful.”

— from Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*

“We are all unfair people. We are such sweet people to be so spoiled.”

— Shelly Fairchild in *Delta Wedding*

Scholars need not read far in scholarship on Eudora Welty before encountering a reference to Diana Trilling’s scathing contemporary response to Welty’s 1946 novel, *Delta Wedding*. Indeed, Welty scholars seem “compelled”—to use the Fairchilds’ favorite word—to address Trilling’s allegations. But why has Trilling’s response produced such an affecting hold on Welty scholars? What is it about the response that makes it necessary for Welty champions to continually address Trilling’s accusations and argue for her political and moral activism? In her review for *The Nation*, Trilling argues that Welty’s depiction of the Fairchilds is an approving testament to their lifestyle, including the system that enables it. Her review makes the claim that, in not directly condemning the Fairchilds for enjoying the fruits of an exploitative southern labor system, Welty condones the Fairchilds’ behavior and the Delta plantation culture they embody. As Welty’s punishment for not passing “moral judgment” on the Fairchilds, Trilling concludes that the author “gives signs of becoming, instead of the trenchant and

objective commentator we hoped she would be, just another if more ingenious dreamer of the Southern past” (61).

Yet, if by “objective” Trilling means one who can provide a true-to-life representation, then she doesn’t seem to really want objectivity at all; in fact, no one seems to want this. Trilling’s response to *Delta Wedding* and critical responses to Trilling are equally telling of how disconcerting, even unnerving, readers find “objectivity” or a lack of clear political partiality in the face of southern culture. Trilling wants Welty to indict southern culture, but Welty writes instead of baking cakes. Care—and monitoring the dispersal of care—seems to be the focus of Trilling’s anxiety, not a concern with objectivity. Continual reference to Trilling in Welty scholarship suggests that scholars want to clear Welty from charges of social apathy. Scholars who find Welty’s familiarity with the Fairchilds uncomfortable—for reasons similar to Trilling’s—are therefore compelled to make arguments for the political activism of baking cakes and enacting circumscribed social roles.¹¹¹

In fact, much scholarship on *Delta Wedding* focuses on small details in the novel, marshaled as if to avoid a rather obvious claim: the apathetic Fairchilds are quirky and likable, even delightful. In “Dark-Purple Faces and Pitiful Whiteness: Maternity and Coming Through in *Delta Wedding*,” Tenley Gwen Banks suggests that readers who like the Fairchilds are either stupid—“that they see, but that they do not *comprehend*”—or

¹¹¹ See articles by Ann Romines, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, and Laura Sloan Patterson for examples of scholarship that argues for the political power of cake baking and other circumscribed subversion. Such interest in subversion of minute consequence approaches what Martha Nussbaum calls “pessimistic flirtatiousness,” in which scholars delight in these small subversions because there is a lack of hope anything greater can be done.

morally deficient, practicing racist “mental acrobatics that must be performed in order to refuse recognition of human suffering” (65).¹¹² No one seems to want to say that one might find the Fairchilds delightful. However, we need to talk about this quality because their delightfulness is key to how the novel works, and to how the Fairchilds sustain their social status and their apathetic posture. The Fairchilds are able to live on what I call an economics of apathy because of their delightful quirkiness.

Such a lack of care, an apathy, is an affective and aesthetic mood driven by systematized myth. *Delta Wedding* shows an economics of apathy, in which apathy is promoted to maintain a myth. This apathy produces anxiety in the novel’s readers—but, just as significantly, it also produces pleasure. I would find any claims that the only real pleasure comes from critiquing the Fairchilds for scholars who write about or teach the novel to be disingenuous.¹¹³ Critical investigations into the formal and affective elements that make it possible to “like” characters are incredibly undertheorized. While building

¹¹² Some of Bank’s language is rather strong on this point but takes a turn at the end of the article: “Welty believed that her role as a writer of fiction was to connect with her readers, not to alienate them. She would rather influence a broader audience to question their unconscious assumptions about sex, race, and class than to write a ‘crusading piece’ that would assuredly meet with hostility from conservative white readers. That the Fairchilds are not painted as horrible villains but rather human beings themselves with good and bad in them ... invites this reader to relate to relate to them but at the same time to question the grounds upon which the Fairchilds’ world and their reader’s own are built” (77).

¹¹³ In a reversal of the process Jon Smith critiques his colleagues for indulging in, my claim assumes that Welty scholars take pleasure in the Fairchilds, but must feign to take pleasure only in the act of critiquing the Fairchilds. While he is “suspicious of academic enjoyment” because no one will claim they like the pleasure of critiquing and being worked up more than the pleasure of the text, I find that *Delta Wedding* creates the opposite phenomenon (5).

such a theory is not the main focus of this essay, I do consider how Welty allows the Fairchilds to make themselves likable as a strategy for myth conservation.

While I focus largely on apathy and the Fairchilds' ability to aesthetically disguise their apathy, at the base of this study lie anxieties about care: both the Fairchilds' anxieties about care and the reviewers' apprehensions about Welty's care (and even further, Welty scholars' care concerning how we perceive Welty's care). Indeed, this reading is just as much a reading of reactions to the text as it is a reading of the text itself. A premise informing my argument is that myth, an assemblage of commitments and convictions, creates structures of feeling; because of its concentration, the Fairchilds family mythos is an intensified version of white southern exceptionalism. In *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, Paula Ioanide explains, "Emotional economies that are attached to race and sexuality ... have the unique capacity to foreclose people's cognitive receptivity" (2). I argue that this phenomenon goes even further to foreclose people's receptivity to affect and general vulnerability. To better appreciate Welty's ability to depict a quirky but emotionally guarded family, this essay offers a definition of apathy as an aesthetic category and discusses this affect as a mood for myth maintenance. Apathy is fashioned as a mood connoting aristocratic status and circulated so as to provide economic benefits. The Fairchilds' quirky aesthetic and apathetic mood allow them a comfortable existence that is based on an exploitative labor system, yet still appears charming. In *Delta Wedding*, we see the effects of a family that operates in the confines of a structure of feeling designed for and by their family myth: one that relies on their whiteness to affect a false fragility.

The Fairchilds' family myth, or Fairchildsness, merges reality and fantasy to provide a grand narrative of internal Fairchild cohesiveness: through their family mythos, the Fairchilds have everything they need to make sense of the world. Here, again, Trilling's words echo:

Miss Welty is frank to acknowledge the possible blemishes on the surface of the society she so much adores; she specifies snobbery, xenophobia, "mindlessness"—the kindly euphemism, we gather, for idiocy or insanity—and others of the distractions and sorrows that we have so often been told are part of the price the South pays for its heritage of pride. (61)

These phenomena are quite similar to my interests in the novel: the Fairchilds' inability to care freely is the price they pay in order to live a life structured by the comforts of their myth. Like the unjust actor in Plato's "Ring of Gyges" fable,¹¹⁴ the Fairchilds end up being enslaved by their own desire; particularly, their desire for their own exceptionalism. Welty writes *Delta Wedding* in such a way that we can see how the Fairchilds barter their agency for their insularity, and in their efforts to make themselves less vulnerable, the Fairchilds become worse people. The novel shows how care is weaponized and commodified at Shellmound. Welty shows that in taking commitment to others and vulnerability out of the power of intimacy and replacing it with money and a commitment to myth, the Fairchilds maintain their stratified lives and their quaint "mindlessness."¹¹⁵ Therefore, reviewers' reactions to the text are warranted because this

¹¹⁴ See "Book II" of *The Republic*.

¹¹⁵ While Trilling attributes the recurrence of "mindlessness" in the novel to the Fairchilds, it is important to note that Partheny describes herself as "mindless." Five of

negotiation—of vulnerability, care, agency vis-à-vis security, apathy, compulsion—should produce anxieties about the value of care.

Delightful Quirkiness: An Aesthetic Strategy

However, such anxieties and love for Welty should not drive scholars to oversimplify the novel or Welty's rendering of the Fairchilds. That the Fairchilds are delightful is a critical element of the text because it is through this delightful quirkiness that they obscure their staunch apathy.¹¹⁶ The Fairchilds cultivate an aesthetics of quirkiness in order to develop an ethos of fragility; this is a way for them to claim a kind of vulnerability (read: humanity) for themselves while maintaining a lack of vulnerability where it really matters. In an insightful review of the novel, John Crowe Ransom attempts to mediate the ardent and conflicting responses to *Delta Wedding* (brought on, I argue, by both the Fairchilds' apathetic and delightful qualities) by focusing on the intersection of culture and economics presented in Welty's scene:

the six times the word is used, it refers to Partheny, while the sixth instance occurs when Ellen refers to Maureen as the "mindless child" (276). However, while Trilling ignores the origin of "mindlessness's" use for the sake of her critical bite, she is on to something about the way the Fairchilds envelop themselves in an aura of whimsical thoughtlessness, as if their happiness is by chance and not an exploitative system.

¹¹⁶ In her argument about the cuteness in avant-garde modernist poetry, Sianne Ngai claims that such an aesthetic has gone under-recognized and undertheorized because associating works of art with cuteness risks minimizing their artfulness. She writes, "it is easy to understand why critics have gone to lengths to avoid the subject of cuteness in the poetry of Stein herself, for they are the same associations repeatedly summoned, by contemporary reviewers such as H. L. Mencken forward, to reduce Stein's writing to the 'naughty-naughty twitterings' of Mother Goose of Montparnasse" (68). Such a resistance is easy to imagine amongst Welty scholars who must continue to argue for the artfulness of "Miss Welty" against critics who see her as subpar to the genius of William Faulkner.

How can Miss Welty's Fairchilds afford to live so causally on their sensibilities, seizing expertly upon the charming experiences that life brings them yet apparently heedless of the moral and material shortcomings of their establishment? I have been careful to intimate that in the background of the Fairchild behaviors, if rarely brought to explicit attention, there is a sense of a material culture, i.e., an objective economic and social establishment. The planter family is a microcosm of the collective society. (64)

Here Ransom pinpoints one of the major conflicts for readers: the Fairchilds are charming; however, they are able to produce this charm because of their apathy toward the economic system that supports them. Their isolation allows for fantasy and romanticism, which is necessary for their charm, because it detaches them from their corporeal realities. Their apathetic coyness and separation encourages readers to indulge in pastoral romanticism that can be more fantastic than any lived experience sullied by exposure, reality, and closeness. If they were not isolated, we might better see the mechanisms that allow their privileged position. The charm born of this apathetic distance, then, apologizes for the apathy by emphasizing the fragility embedded in quirkiness. *Delta Wedding's* apathetic affect affords a unique oscillation between closeness and distance, quirky charm and irritation. Because the Fairchilds only remain charming and fantastical if you never get to them, Welty's focus on them also allows us to become irritated by their flaws.

By suggesting, "The planter family is a microcosm of the collective society," Ransom implies that their relationship to the economic system is representative of society

generally, and their coercive charm representative of (white) southern culture. This highlights how readers might not be as different from the Fairchilds as we would like to think; perhaps, all that separates us is a bit of status and luck. Ioanide supports this idea by claiming that “hegemonic emotional economies help to reproduce white ignorance in people’s affective, embodied, and reflexive structures” (12). People are apathetic towards certain affective appeals in order to protect themselves culturally and economically from feelings that would damage the resolve of the system, idea, or belief that buttresses their worldview.

Welty’s multivalent construction of feeling in the novel heightens the anticathartic nature of the text. Trilling is wrong to believe that if readers like anything about the Fairchilds they morally agree with them. But she is correct to perceive that people do like them, and to the extent that people do like them, this is problematic, for the readers if not for the novel. There is a desire to uncomplicate the narrative instead of to appreciate the novel because of its complications—above all, its alignment of apathy with a delightful, quirky aesthetic.

However, the mood of apathy that Welty allows to break through the delightful aesthetic façade makes this system of maintenance clearer to readers, which leads to reviews such as Thomas McGrath’s:

That the Fairchild family is, finally, a family of parasites, whose existence is maintained on the basis of land monopoly and Negro wage labor, is something which is never allowed to get into the book. Yet any logical explanation of the never fully articulated fear of the family’s instability, the sharpest and most real

conflict in the novel, must be in some way related to the family's class and social position. That such an explanation might never enter the minds of the characters is understandable. But for the writer to allow them to exist as under a glass bell, to abstract them from their real basis as a social organization, is to make their actions almost motiveless, their attitudes understandable only from a false, metaphysical and timeless viewpoint. Thus, in spite of the demonstrable ability of the author, the picture she gives us lacks the necessary perspective. (66)¹¹⁷

Yet, McGrath's comments show that he has indeed picked up on Welty's cues about the exploitation latent in the scene: the hum of the cotton press and the dust of cotton all over the house are just some examples among many others. However, he loathes the appearance of the Fairchilds' happy independence and his call for the "necessary perspective" speaks to an anxiety caused by ambivalent feelings caused by the coercive Fairchilds' likability (66). McGrath criticizes Welty for "allow[ing the Fairchilds] to exist under a glass bell" and for "abstract[ing] them from their real basis as a social organization," but he misses the way this is functioning in the text (66). The novel is often controlled by the Fairchilds' interiority, and so this isolation McGrath is picking up on is reflective of how the Fairchilds construct images of themselves. That he claims the

¹¹⁷ No doubt, McGrath's claims are overstated here, as both Patricia Yaeger and Brandon Costello have effectively argued that the Fairchilds' treatment of others and even the systematic economic exploitation that it is built upon does "get into the book" (Costello 44, Yaeger 104). Yet, although these things are "in the book," they are not dwelled upon or foregrounded. Even quantitatively, moments where they appear take up far less space than the depiction of the Fairchilds' inner lives.

narrative is put forward in a way that makes “their actions almost motiveless” is indicative of the way the Fairchilds have internalized their quirky aesthetic.

To say that *Delta Wedding* depicts an apathetic mood is not to say that the novel makes one feel apathetic; indeed, the reviews attest to the opposite effect. The aesthetics of the novel are a combination of apathetic stasis in plot (non-movement) and stream-of-consciousness modernist style (movement). Welty’s modernist style seems unconcerned with its own narrative complexity, unaffected by time or any sense of immediacy, and ambivalent about its absence of a conflict-driven plot. The reviewer for *Providence Sunday Journal* writes, “I may have read some passages twice. I certainly feel as if I had” (B.C.C. 51). The structure of the novel seamlessly slips in and out of character consciousness and moves from flashbacks to the moment of the story with a sort of aloofness that forces readers to deal with the confluences of interrelated stories about the family myth. Helen L. Butler’s review explains that the novel “travels in a curvilinear [sic] style, coming back again and again to the starting point, piling up mountainous array of detail in the process” (67). This apathetic mood helps Welty produce contradictory feelings of nearness and inconsequentiality in the reader’s relation to the Fairchilds; readers become disoriented and are forced to focus on the Fairchilds to sustain comprehension. This disorientation is exacerbated, as Sarah Ford claims, by the “ambiguity inherent in free indirect discourse,” which complicates the ability to locate Welty’s or her characters’ moral judgments (136).

Welty’s style is one in which everything can seem normalized in a type of true-to-life depiction of slowness, and it mimics the way the Fairchilds continually reorient

readers' focus for their own benefit. However, though the novel is divided into seven days, the writing can also suggest its indifference to the reader by negating any expectations of a plot-based drive. Instead, the Fairchilds are always requiring from those around them—particularly in the form of attention, from the other characters and from readers: in a way, these “requirements” from the Fairchilds are what moves the novel forward instead of a plot. Their quirkiness aids them in this endeavor because quirkiness calls to be seen, to be recognized, and to exact attention—in these ways, it is both delightful and grating. Indeed, quirkiness is a particularly fitting aesthetic for the Fairchilds because there is a quality to it that exhausts its viewers. Its high level of performativity and of what Sianne Ngai class animatedness is delightful and alluring, but also taxing (*Ugly*).¹¹⁸ The quirky is just slightly off from what's customary, while being not quite (but much more performative than) queer. It exploits this gap in expected appearance as an expansion of the personality; they make themselves large enough to

¹¹⁸ See Logan Hill's article, “Inside the Delightfully Quirky, Absolutely Fabulous, and Utterly Exhausting World of Cruise Performers” in *Esquire* for a visual essay on commodified quirkiness. One example he provides is of cruise comic Jo Little: “Monday night, Little takes the Princess Theater stage wearing a quantity of crystals typically reserved for New Year's Eve ball drops. Accustomed to working European and Australian cruises, and anxious to charm these North Americans, she launches into the WWII standard ‘Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,’ hamming it up with the house-band trumpet player. She's met with polite applause: Even for this older crowd, the tune is ancient. So she switches to comedy, working hard and fast to win fans with a rim-shot drumroll of jokes about the Home Shopping Network, menopause, plastic surgery, dieting, the cruise buffet, the cruise toilets, her husband and child (she has neither), and her height. Little—who later tells me she wants to ‘give people the *Ha ha* and the *Oh, wow!*’—belts out big-voiced, lovely ballads while unloading bags of gags, from jokey PowerPoint slides and her LED-lit dress to her bedazzled Spanx.”

take up so much visibility as to purposefully leave very little to any of those they mistreat.

Previous work by Ngai is incredibly helpful for developing an aesthetic theory of quirkiness. In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai constructs a theory of the cute to discuss how the aesthetic embeds itself in culture and manipulates viewers for its continued security. Quirky is like Ngai's named categories—zany, cute, and interesting—because there is a “contradictory mixture of feelings at [its] foundation”: it is both delightful and insufferable, and the mixture of these feelings heightens the Fairchilds' likability (*Our* 19). Welty makes the Fairchilds seem personable; however, like cuteness, their quirkiness is a strategy for survival. Though the Fairchilds distance themselves from the outside world by cultivating apathy towards others, many readers do not see this (indeed, the Fairchilds don't seem to see it themselves) because they use an aesthetics of quirkiness to play up their fragility.

The quirky aesthetic shares many similarities with the cute aesthetic, while also integrating animatedness, peculiarity, and frivolity. Yet, the cuteness of the quirky is its strongest strategy, and much of Ngai's groundwork on the cute is applicable here: “In vivid contrast to beauty's continuing associations with fairness, symmetry, or proportion, the experience of cute depends entirely on the subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object” (*Our* 54). The cute calls to us to for identification and comfort; “The cute commodity flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy ... The cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands” (Ngai *Our* 64). But, it's important to

see this aesthetic as a strategy and to think about it as a racially situated strategy: the Fairchilds are only able to use quirkiness because of their already secure and privileged position.¹¹⁹ Working from a position of power and prestige, the Fairchilds use quirkiness as a particularly white aesthetic—one that takes up a role of the readymade, helpless victim to combat any possible charges of aggression or cruelty.

The Fairchilds use quirkiness to cultivate an ethos of fragility, which becomes justification for keeping history and economics at a distance. Their focus on “vulnerable” Fairchildsness can be seen as a form of the cute “put[ting] its displays of weakness to powerful or strategic use” (*Our* 69). Ngai writes “the cute object seems to insist on getting something from us (care, affection, intimacy) that we in turn feel compelled to give” (*Our* 98). The Fairchilds’ quirkiness works in a similar way: they present their quirky lives as dainty, dependent, and in need of extra care, while masking the fact that they are the opposite of marginal and dependent. Bank argues how the novel sets up “readers to enact the same erasure that the text performs, in effect placing readers in the story with the intention that those sensitive to the story’s racial dynamics will come to realize their own complicity and will as a result adjust their moral allegiances” (59-60). Yet, as Ngai shows, “aesthetic judgments are precisely judgments based on feelings as opposed to principle or concepts”; aesthetics stimulate widely shared feelings made possible through encompassing conditions—in a Kantian manner, they are universal but

¹¹⁹ This is not to say that there cannot be a black quirkiness. However, quirkiness is non-threatening and non-sexual, and senses of threat and sexuality are both qualities which are often projected onto black persons. Black quirkiness does exist. Indeed, there is a particular quirkiness to black Atlanta personae André 3000 and Donald Glover/ Childish Gambino.

not rational (57). For Ngai, as for many affect theorists, the study of feeling inevitably leads to a study of the structures that allow the feeling. The novel, then, does not ask us to choose between the Fairchilds and the neglected others; it compels us to find the Fairchilds delightful, and we are left with a modernist cognitive dissonance, wondering how we came to like such repellent people. Reflecting on the way that the cute can become monstrous, Ngai asks if this ability “is a sign of the aesthetic’s internal instability, or how the experience of cuteness often seems to lead immediately to feelings of manipulation and betrayal” (85-86). As the Fairchilds enlarge their personality, they seem to enlarge what they have to lose. Ironically, since they are the most powerful they are in a position of always safeguarding against loss. The false simplicity of their quirky existences—their celebrated difference and particularity—is contingent upon the smallness and powerlessness of everyone else.

For all its similarity to the cute, the quirky also contains an element of the exhausting feeling that Ngai calls “animatedness.” Ngai theorizes animatedness through the circumscribed agency of black performers in their own representation. We can see how the Fairchilds’ quirkiness borrows from this aesthetic to heighten their artificial fragility. Indeed, the Fairchilds are continually moving—Laura is in fact fascinated by their constant movement, which she likens to exotic birds at a zoo (Welty *DW* 103). Of animatedness in black representation, Ngai contends that we “see how the seemingly neutral state of ‘being moved’ becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control” (*Ugly* 91). For the Fairchilds, their animated quirkiness is double layered: on one

hand, they want to be perceived as fragile and delightful as a strategy to obfuscate their unethical economic stance; however, on the other hand, the Fairchilds' devotion to their mythos does require a subjection of autonomy to the myth.

Modernism and Apathetic Moods

Welty's modernism is definitely a reflection of Virginia Woolf's impact on her conception of fictional form, especially as it relates to Woolf's credo that modernism is truer to life than realism. In "Modern Fiction," Woolf argues, "Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers," and that "For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology" (162). *Delta Wedding's* "non-plot," modernist style emphasizes the importance of affect and mood. Fundamentally, affect is about something other than plot. Of course, affects attach to plot, but we generally assume this happens in a straightforward way: readers are propelled through the plot with affect, and they get a pleasure of closure at the end.¹²⁰ The virtue of modernist texts is that they show how aesthetics, moods, and affects can be just as important as plot, or even more so, because readers do not ordinarily notice them. While

¹²⁰ Indeed, in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks takes a psychoanalytic approach to genre theory to argue that there is a desire to keep reading and have the pleasure of the novel continue, but that the greater, Thanatos desire for the end of the novel is a more complete desire. Brooks claims, "the desire for the text is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text" (108). Yet, while Brooks argues that desire propels readers through plots towards the pleasure of the end, modernist fiction relies heavily on affect to bolster that desire.

Welty does not rely on plot, she does rely on moods: moods that should shock us, or should make us realize how easily our mood can be affected especially by aesthetics.

Indeed, Harriet Pollack's *Words between Strangers* explains that Welty's writing style is purposely obstructive and frustrating to the reader, because "once a reader identifies which of his expectations are frustrated, he is usually on his way to understanding the fiction at hand" (106). Yet, despite these "frustrations," readers are compensated with their Fairchilds charm. While the difficult text might push us back, the animated quirkiness of the Fairchilds calls to us to attend to them; because of their quirky vulnerability, we feel that—in order to feel correctly—we must feel charmed by them. McGrath gets a detail incorrect when he claims that Troy eats the patticake that Partheny intends for George; in the novel, Troy and Robbie each take just one bite before giving it to Pinchy. Indeed, in the Fairchilds' perpetual fussiness, small details are often overlooked or poorly understood. This is a phenomenon of the novel that deserves more attention because it highlights how the novel's strategy is to make such basic questions as who does what to whom insignificant before all-encompassing Fairchildsness. Complaining about Welty's modernist style, a contemporary reviewer identified as "B.C.C." claims:

The book, not in any very common sense a novel, suffers from what I should call the genealogical fallacy. To the genealogist - and to Miss Welty - certain figures are important and valuable because they belong to a certain family. Certain anecdotes, too, are valuable because they belong to the family that the genealogist for novelists is working up. They do not in this kind of writing have to be good

anecdotes. Even Miss Welty seems to admit this, saying “old stories, family stories, Mississippi stories were the same as very holy or very passionate.” The character who uses this language is out of sympathy with the doctrine, as I am, but Miss Welty sees nothing disproportionate about it. (51)

The reviewer’s claim that the novel is genealogical is more precise than he or she might realize. *Delta Wedding* is a chronicle of the Fairchilds written in a way that shows how their place of privilege allows them to control their sense of narrative, even if that control requires modernist re-circling and tired anecdotes. While it would be easy to say that the Fairchilds are responsible for the tired anecdotes and Welty is responsible for the modernist re-circling, there is not a real distinction between these. Though Welty’s modernism is indebted to Woolf’s modernism, she refashions modernist style in a way that pushes against the conception of the modern as the luminous “now” of life, and presents readers with a modernism that expresses tiredness and weight.

Delta Wedding’s mood makes us feel as if our presence is inconsequential to the act of story-telling, and, indeed, that the narrative itself is apathetic towards us as observers—as those who have already heard the story of George, Maureen, and the Yellow Dog many times over. Yet again, this also adds to the Fairchilds’ aesthetic delightfulness because it casts their lives and concerns as small and quaint. Even while this quaintness covers up the fact that their lives depend on an increasingly global economy, their construction of their ethos as smallish works because of its turn away from the audience, which serves to heighten their brand of charm. Jacques Rancière explains how aesthetics can act as a politically active regime of visibility against social

structures of visibility that only allow certain objects or people to be seen. He explains how a “politics of aesthetics, which means the way in which the aesthetic experience—as a refiguration of the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and reception—intervenes in the distribution of the sensible” in order to give more influence to sense and sensation (Rancière 5). Welty shows us how the Fairchilds engineer visibility, more or less consciously, to highlight the performance of their myth and to ignore the fragility of their myth within their historical situation.

Delta Wedding produces anxiety for readers by disrupting expectations when scenes that seem like events are minimized and often rushed over and returned to and reoriented to a narrative Fairchildness, enacted by the practicing of the story of the Yellow Dog, for example. Like Ngai’s cute, the quirky is trivial and present “images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality [which] all point to a deficit of power” (18). The drive of the novel is uninterested in developing the story of the runaway or specifics surrounding the workers’ conflicts. Readers become attuned to scenes, and then we are denied them: they have either already happened or are not pursued. In a move of aesthetic apathy, we are welcome to listen, or not, which heightens the novel’s overall mood of apathy, an affect confirmed by reviewers who complain that the novel is too difficult and too dull (Butler 66, McGrath 66, North 54, Rosenfeld 57). Woolf contends that if a writer “could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style”; she continues, “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of

consciousness to the end” (160). The novel does not reify desired expectations of caring for others that we tend to have for characters we like, and, even more, the Fairchilds will receive no comeuppance at the end. Instead, soon after we hear a passing comment about the runaway’s death (her body being thrown into the bushes), the novel ends with a Fairchild picnic under the stars (307).

By positioning the Fairchilds’ maintenance of their family myth as a function of preserving a sense of collective memory and its social stronghold, we can begin to recognize apathy is a part of a system constructed to defend against the contingencies of history, including the uncomfortable recognitions of class and race-based issues. Within this system, apathy acts as a method of affective, economical, and ideological conservation; it promotes stasis, which materializes aesthetically as a lack of plot. *Delta Wedding* dramatizes apathy as a mode and mood of southern (as well as American or global) economics. The narrative and aesthetics of the novel create an experience of apathy that ignores the outside social forces by keeping labor unfelt and by restricting care for anyone who might be seen as threatening to the Fairchilds myth (for example, Robbie Reed, and, as Aunt Tempe points out, to a lesser extent, Troy Flavin). Bank claims that Welty “denies [readers] neutral territory,” suggesting that readers either see the struggles of characters such as Pinchy, or that they are complicit in the Fairchilds’ erasure of black presence (64). Why do we like them in spite of ourselves? And, why is it so important that we deny or eradicate that like? Many have argued that Welty’s writing, despite surface appearances and her own claims, is political. If this is so, then *Delta Wedding* takes up the difficult political task of showing how people can be both

delightful and terrible, that it is quite mundane for this to occur. Part of the novel's apathy, or even constructive cruelty, is to make readers like the Fairchilds, and then feel defensive for liking horrible people. These negative feelings are reflective of how the apathy Welty narrates profoundly resonates with readers, as well as how anxious people are about care and its distribution.

Apathy is a difficult feeling to qualify. It is definitely not hate, but it is not quite tolerance either. Instead, it points to a deficit of feeling, but still a feeling nonetheless with low resonances of rejection, reservation, and disassociation. To say one is apathetic about a piece of art is to say that one has not engaged with the object on any meaningful level: it is a judgment through the negation of judgment—through the negation of engagement, and in this way, it can be either purposeful or by happenstance. However, to be on the receiving end of apathy is to feel distanced and rejected, possibly even endangered, and definitely anxious. Additionally, as a mood, apathy can seem rather cool. There is a style of nonchalance associated with the image of the apathetic, a blasé sophistication, which is not at all disassociated from class comfort, privilege, or security. The apathetic gives off a sense of being in, of being comfortable, and of being untouchable. Apathy compels because of its disaffected situatedness; it takes more than it gives; it affects but remains unaffected.

While apathy may seem like an affect that seeks some sort of transcendence—the ability to be above the fray—its situatedness and orientation to, or against, the uncared for object, or persons, reinscribes it into a perpetual present. This perpetual present provides a helpful disconnection with any complications history might bring with it. For

these reasons, apathy is the ideal affect for the Fairchilds. Because the Fairchilds are the town and the others are there to serve them, they can be independent from the reach and worry of the rest of the town; indeed, in this small, Delta world the Fairchilds do not need to attend church or be cognizant of which day is Sunday to be perceived as a great family (Welty *DW* 325). That is, whereas the church and the Christian mythos generally provides an ahistorical privilege, the Fairchilds' status allows them to be independent of that authority. Yet, they can still be presentist enough to shuck the baggage of history, which is transformed from its broad historical mode into an intimate family mythos. The Fairchilds participate in apathy, because neither indignation nor melancholia would fit with their quirky aesthetics. This is the best strategy for them because it enables them to remain likable despite their apathy. Yet, because they cannot use the fortitude of extremity melancholia or indignation provide, the Fairchilds use apathy as an anticathartic feeling to promote stasis.

Apathy and quiriness allow them to have all the benefits of a collective memory without having to situate such a memory or their tangible class benefits in a historical context. Even the occasions on which the Fairchilds' retelling of their stories do seem to be bound up with history their telling of these stories have little to nothing to do with the historical event and everything to do with establishing a genealogy of Fairchildsness. In his article "The Politics of Melancholia and Memorialization in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*," Travis Rozier uses frameworks by Sigmund Freud and Giorgio Agamben to suggest that the melancholic loss of the past becomes its own fetishized object in order to argue that the Fairchild women "define loss by constructing the past" (288). Rather than

historical import, the Fairchilds' discussions of the First World War, the Civil War, and even "Great-Great-Uncle George ... the one who had been murdered by the robbers on the Natchez Trace" are discussed to reinforce the staying power of their stasis, their transhistorical permanence (Welty *DW* 102). Indeed, after noting Great-Great-Uncle George, Welty writes, "But boys and men, girls and ladies all, the old and the young of the Delta kin—even the dead and the living for Aunt Shannon—were alike—no gap opened between them" (*DW* 102).

For the Fairchilds, things matter more than people and therefore receive more care and monitored maintenance. The Fairchilds' quirky fussiness over things is another source of delightfulness or charm for many readers, and one of the ways the Fairchilds use an aesthetics of quirkiness to play up their fragility is through their emphasis on heirlooms—the nightlight, Ellen's lost brooch, poetry books. Thinking about this phenomenon of fetishization and the cuteness of things, Ngai cautions, "if things can be personified, persons can be made things, just as Marx's analysis of the commodity form, fetishistic animation and reification constitute 'two sides of the same coin'" (*Our* 92). Similarly, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sarah Ahmed points out "that it is the objects of emotion that circulate" (11). Building on Marx in a way similar to Ngai's theorization of the cute, Ahmed examines the "processes of production or the 'making' of emotions. In other words, 'feelings' become 'fetishes', qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (11). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed explains, "Objects can become 'happiness-causes'

before we even encounter them. We are directed towards objects that are already anticipated to cause happiness” (28).

As a mood for myth maintenance, apathy at first seems unhelpful: indifference is rarely an identified mode of any type of maintenance or production. Yet, the Fairchilds are not apathetic towards their own myth; instead, apathy is a method of disengaging from outside forces, which allows the family to disregard issues that might threaten their ability to take joy from their social position. The Fairchilds participate in an economy of taking outside life, historical forces, and the complexities of others’ lives, and filtering them through a lens of familiarity. Indeed, even the consequences of World War I are only perceived by the family in the heroic tales of Denis and George, and the use value of these stories seems to have more to do with Fairchildsness than the Great War. ““Denis’s poetry,”” which the family periodically recites in memory of the fallen family member, is remembered and appreciated as Denis’s and not as Horace’s (Welty *DW* 244). Apathy enables the Fairchilds to ration sentiment in a way that expresses an economically-minded orientation to the value of certain and specific affective bonds—relations to others are appraised for what they might add or detract from the Fairchild mythos.

As a mood, apathy can also heighten the quirkiness of familial dramas and idiosyncrasies. For example, Dabney must take the heirloom nightlight and not the store-bought flower bowl. The aunts’ fussiness over Dabney’s wedding present, while not a highly memorable scene in the novel, is telling in the way that care is disregarded for the project of maintenance. The aunts want to give the night light because the act of giving it, while it means less to Dabney—she likes the flower bowl because the adorable animals

etched into the glass remind her of her aunts— means more to them and their investments in Fairchildness.¹²¹ Here, quirkiness ensures that emotional and economic investments will produce returns that strengthen the myth of Fairchildness and replenish the economic status quo. As Ahmed puts it, feeling happy becomes required:

A happy life, a good life, hence involves the regulation of desires. It is not simply that we desire happiness but that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well. Good subjects will not experience pleasure from the wrong objects (they will be hurt by them or indifferent toward them) and will only experience a certain amount of pleasure from the right objects ... We assume that we experience delight because ‘it’ is delightful. (*Promise* 37)

Delta Wedding shows that the price of myth-maintenance, of myth itself, is a loss of affective agency (hence the Fairchilds’ “compulsions”) and a turn away from progressive history in order to privilege the conservation of collective memory. The affect of such a move makes reactions such as Trilling’s easier to understand. Ahmed claims, “To say that we love what tastes delightful is not to say that delight causes our love but that the experience of delight involves a loving orientation toward the object, just as the experience of love registers what is delightful” (*Promise* 24). Here, she is explaining how

¹²¹ Rozier explains how, later in the novel, Dabney destroys the night light by dropping it absentmindedly. He claims that “Dabney, who should cherish the nightlight as a piece of her, disregards it for Troy,” and, indeed, Welty writes that when it broke, “They heard that but no cry at all – only the opening and closing of the screen door as she went inside” (Rozier 296, Welty *DW* 242). Rozier believes that the breaking of the night light shows how the Fairchilds’ nicely maintained identity is, too, breakable (296).

pleasure works culturally to manipulate us toward particular desires and expected paths, but it is also helpful for thinking about how mood works in the novel.

Arguing that the novel shows how their myth relies on an economics of apathy makes seemingly odd restrictions on affective ability by linking such abilities to economic regularities. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick thinks about how the maintenance of binary structures influences affective attunement. She claims that a “problem with reifying the status quo is what it does to the middle ranges of agency. One’s relation to *what is* risks becoming reactive and bifurcated, that of a consumer: one’s choices narrow to accepting or refusing (buying or not buying) this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntariness” (Sedgwick 13). *Delta Wedding* performs and aestheticizes this predicament wherein characters must choose to protect the Fairchilds’ myth from outside influences, or risk being subsumed by history and the forces of the modern world. Even in trying to customize her choice, Robbie Reed must choose what to buy and what to reject. Sedgwick’s likening of subject-motivated maintenance to a discourse of consumerism opens up ways to think about apathy as an economic mode and not as an open-ended emotional register. Therefore, the Fairchilds’ apathy becomes an economic phenomenon with an impetus in the plantation’s myth of aristocracy and reality of capitalist modes of production. Additionally, thinking of these economically grounded affective modes as “reactive and bifurcated” shows the Fairchilds to be “compelled” by myth systemization, affectively limited or disabled. Welty’s writing emphasizes how desire leads to choices that rely on consumerist logic.

In *Delta Wedding*, the Fairchilds' myth gives the family an operational code for preserving—if not acquiring. In *Plantation Airs*, Brannon Costello examines the fragile nature of the Fairchild myth and how economics easily makes the Fairchilds anxious about this fragility. Through his analysis of the Fairchilds' paternalism, Costello points out that, in order to preserve their economic status, the Fairchilds have an odd way of conceiving of familial behavior; he explains that the Fairchilds claim to see their black workers as “an integral part of the extended plantation ‘family,’” but that this is “a belief that ignores the way in which familial behavior can serve as a coercive tool” (38).

Costello clarifies:

Welty examines in particular how paternalism works to obscure the economic base of the Fairchilds' aristocratic status, a status that they perceive as natural and essential. The Fairchilds want to downplay the crass fact of money and its formative capacity in their privileged life, and paternalism as a form of labor relations helps them in this endeavor by enabling them to see their laborers as putative family members. Welty critiques this myth of an insular, self-perpetuating aristocracy by highlighting key moments at which the machinery of coercion and exploitation, the true relationship of employer and servant, becomes visible and disrupts the Fairchilds' carefully maintained façade. (39)

However, while Costello analyzes how the Fairchilds maintain their myth through a paternalism-based method of economics that shows an apathy towards their workers, the Fairchilds' perverted sense of familial behavior—in true capitalistic fashion—must expand or die. Also investigating the Fairchilds as a “coercive” family, Elizabeth

Christine Russ explains that Welty conceives of the plantation as an image of systemization, a place that “had long portrayed itself as simultaneously egalitarian and aristocratic, a realm of individual opportunity and a highly structured, hierarchal community that, while supposedly fostering harmonious relationships amongst all of its members, relied on social coercion ... to maintain the order necessary for the production of wealth” (Russ 84). Yet, the Fairchilds extend this pattern of emotional economics; the family uses emotional restraint and apathy not only to keep the workers from ever being financially independent, but to keep family members affectively dependent within and among the Fairchilds themselves. This phenomenon is reflected in Bank’s claim that, “Welty’s novel contains a striking consideration not only of the harms inflicted on the victims of racism and sexism but also of the ways in which the oppressors’ lives are controlled and stunted by their own exercise of domination” (60). Given such a large and close family, there is a strange lack of unconditional care or affection. Even George Fairchild, the most-loved character, is always clouded in the Fairchild women’s extraordinary feelings of suspicion and nervousness; both the young girls and the adult women are continually questioning his care and monitoring his decisions.

Delta Wedding aestheticizes the confluence and competition of vulnerability and structured feeling, in part through the repeated use of the term “compelled,” which is how the Fairchilds themselves refer to their disposition. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Laura, after an absence from Shellmound, returns and makes a realization about her mother’s family: “The Fairchilds’ movements were quick and on the instant, and that made you wonder, are they free? Laura was certain that they were *compelled*—their

favorite word” (Welty *DW* 103). As both insider and outsider, Laura is in a prime position to identify odd quirks in the Fairchilds’ behavior; this type of quirky “animatedness” that Laura recognizes highlights how the family is conscripted to the system that promises them security. On this point, Ahmed explains, “The promising nature of happiness suggests happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing. To promise after all is to make the future into an object, into something that can be declared in advance of its arrival” (*Promise* 29). While adherence to their myth provides them with a certain level of security, it tricks them into thinking that this security is happiness; this something that Robbie Reed has a difficult time assimilating to because she thinks happiness is when she feels happy with George in Memphis.¹²² The Fairchilds, then, are compelled toward apathetic treatment as a way to promote stasis and myth security. Robbie vocalizes this clearly when she tells the Fairchilds, “*The people you love keep you the way you are [emphasis original]*” (Welty *DW* 253). This is an important project because, as Ioandie writes, “Unconscious beliefs and emotions do not just structure people’s ideological fantasies; they help construct people’s sense of self, meaning, and desire. Relinquishing these beliefs, emotions, and fantasies is tantamount to relinquishing the very bases upon which people construct meaning in their lives” (22).

Compulsion develops as an interesting connector between affect and the Fairchilds’ general mode of operation. On one hand, how much can people really control the way they feel and are affected? Indeed, one of the interesting aspects of affect is the

¹²² Robbie’s happiness is based on consumerism and a high degree of selfishness, but she is still helpful to juxtapose with the Fairchilds.

lack of control one has over how the body feels. However, on the other hand, *Delta Wedding* shows how capitalism, as Sedgwick suggests, turns everything—including one’s ability to feel—into a model of buying and selling that is overdetermined in binaristic ways. To this effect, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre explains how deficiencies in generosity can lead to “deprivations of the attentive and affectionate regard of others”:

To act towards another as the virtue of just generosity requires is therefore to act from attentive and affectionate regard for that other. To this it is sometimes said that our affections are not ours to command. But, while in particular situations this may be true—I cannot here and now decide by an act of will to feel such and such—we can of course ... cultivate and train our dispositions to feel, just as we can train our dispositions to act and indeed our dispositions to act with and from certain feelings. (122)

MacIntyre suggests that habituation cultivates feeling. In a similar way, we can train ourselves to block feeling, or, at the very least, cultivate a particular and static feeling. In “Not in the Mood,” Ahmed makes a similar claim when she argues “A mood becomes *an affective lens*, affecting how we are affected [emphasis hers],” explaining, “Being in this mood or that makes the worlds appear this way or that. But perhaps given this state of general attention, specific things or situations are more likely to come into focus” (12). By keeping their moods apathetic and their feelings anticathartic, the Fairchilds cultivate a lens through which to see their quaint little world, which happens to be a way that does not allow certain things or situations to come into focus.

Ahmed suggests that “one must be in a mood for a course of action to be agreeable or possible” clarifying that “We might *have* a feeling, but be *in* a mood [emphasis hers]” (13). In “How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood is Made,” Jonathan Flatley supports this claim, adding, “Only within a mood or by way of mood can we encounter things in the world as mattering to us” (503) He claims, “a mood creates our world at a given moment. Thus, in some moods collective political action might not even enter one’s consciousness except as something impossible, futile, foolish, or obscure” (Flatley 503). Both Ahmed and Flatley build on Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Stimmung* to develop a theory of how moods connect people and their orientations towards others. The Fairchilds operate within a mood of blasé apathy as a way to stop excess emotion from pointing towards some call for change. They want to keep notions of political action obscure so that their myth remains secure. In order to do this, however, they not only cultivate a mood of apathy at Shellmound, but also refuse to attune to others’ moods. As Ahmed suggests,

An experience of *non-attunement* might then refer to how we can be in a world with others where we are not in a responsive relation, where we do not tend to ‘pick up’ on how they feel. This sense of not being in harmony might not even register to consciousness. We might even have screened out from our awareness that which is not consistent with our own mood, which might include a screening out of the bodies that lean another way [emphasis hers]. (“Not” 18).

Welty’s modernist aesthetic does an excellent job of aestheticizing the process of this attunement and non-attunement by providing multiple streams of consciousness all

working in and through mood stabilization. The Fairchilds' whiteness, and the way that whiteness is inseparable from their family mythos, also facilitates non-attunement. In "The Bad Faith of Whiteness," Robert E. Brit builds on Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* to argue that "As a form of identity and consciousness, whiteness is a species of bad faith" because it is a type of "self-deception, a lie to the self" (55, 56). He explains, "The person in bad faith ultimately flees the truths and perplexities of human existence; in short, he flees himself and alienates himself from his fellows" (Brit 57). Sartre's desire for radical, existentialist freedom provides a drastic juxtaposition to the Fairchilds' systematic control of affect and mood.

The Narcissistic Fetishization of Myth and Systemic Capitalism

Welty's art intervenes in the Fairchilds' plan by giving even marginal visibility within the shared space of Shellmound to scenes that disrupt the myth. For example, Pinchy's presence and her effort to "come through," and Man-Son's wave to Dabney, make visible the presence and immanence of the Fairchilds' discomfort with intimacy. When Dabney is on her way to visit her aunts, a wave from the field worker reminds Dabney of when George broke up a fight between Man-Son and his brother. However, witnessing the breaking up of a knife fight is not the most troubling aspect of the scene for young Dabney. Instead, "all the Fairchild in her screamed at his interfering—at his taking part—*caring* about anything in the world but them" (Welty DW 124, italics in original). Dabney's reaction to this moment shows a certain conservative understanding the Fairchilds live by: care is precious and valuable, and should not be doled out as if it were endless. This contact, the friendly wave and acknowledgement from Man-Son to

Dabney shows that the Fairchilds feel as if they should not be engaged in an exchange of care that might suggest any sense of reciprocity or fluidity. Dabney answers the kindness by rejecting the exchange: “‘Man-Son, what do you mean? You go get to picking!’ she cried. She trembled all over, having to speak to him in such a way” (Welty *DW* 126). Dabney’s trembling here is not unlike her mother’s, which Trilling criticizes in her review as something that could happen “only on a Southern plantation” (60).¹²³

This trembling, however, shows that as much as the Fairchilds might be invested in preserving the status quo, the historical present of the novel is deeply situated in a moment of social change. The trembling in these two scenes emerges when the Fairchild women cannot secure the apathetic distance their myth promises and relies upon and are made to feel the vulnerability of engaging with the other. Dabney receives warm wishes on her upcoming nuptials from a worker, and Ellen is in a social moment when it is appropriate to acknowledge the exhaustion of the gardener. In reasserting their higher status over the black workers in these scenes, Dabney and Ellen are put in the uncomfortable position of actively rejecting care and calling attention to social divisions, when so much of their myth maintenance work goes towards efforts not to see them.

Yet, it’s important to appreciate that in constructing the Fairchilds world (both the family and the town), Welty chooses to present readers with a narrative that gives only marginal visibility to the workers and the most vulnerable. Welty could have written a

¹²³ After Howard, the gardener, laments the struggles of caring for a thorny flower, Ellen gives him an “indignant” look and commands “just hush” (Welty *DW* 315). Welty writes, “to her astonishment she was trembling at Howard’s absurd, meek statement, as at some imprudence” (Welty *DW* 315).

very different novel, but we are stuck with the fact that she didn't—that she asks us to look at the Fairchilds, and indeed, that she asks us to feel with the Fairchilds. Therefore, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that we are meant to identify with the Fairchilds, at least up to a point—but even if this is so, what we then do with that identification is up to us. Denying the identification actually takes us out of the very difficult political position Welty is working so hard to create: that is, to be delighted and to enjoy the static whimsy of the Fairchilds, even though their commitments cause harm to others. Ngai explains that, “art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness” (*Our* 109). Welty correctly assesses the power potential of her novel and aims for an achievable goal: she does not write a sentimental novel in order to engender political outrage about plantation-style economic exploitation; instead, she writes a novel that makes us charmed with the “aggressors,” which should show any politically-minded readers just how hard it is to fight a political fight by pitting feeling against feeling.

The Fairchild myth is most directly threatened with the reluctant incorporation of Robbie into the family. Indeed, although Robbie is George's wife, she remains distanced, as she is referred to as Robbie Reed and not Robbie Fairchild. The family's lack of care for Robbie, a member of the working class, leads her into a situation, arguably the climax of the novel, in which the Fairchild women confront her at Shellmound. This encounter exposes two aspects about the Fairchilds: their actual, that is, not mythologized, relationship to their own historical situation; and how their conception of reality is maintained through their apathy as closed notions of care and affection. In this encounter,

Robbie proclaims, ““You’re all a spoiled, stuck-up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world”” and then humorously adds, ““You’re not even rich! You’re just medium”” (Welty *DW* 253). Finally, nearing the end of her argument, Robbie summarizes her point and critiques the Fairchilds’ idea of happiness by stating, ““I think you are already the same as what you love. ... You’ve just loving yourselves in each other—yourselves over and over again!”” (Welty *DW* 254-255). In this argument, Robbie tries to get the Fairchilds to see themselves from the outside perspective toward which they have been so apathetic; she wants the Fairchilds to recognize someone, namely herself, outside of their circle of care. Robbie aims to point out that the Fairchilds’ love is not accessible to a non-Fairchild (even though she is one) and that this fact creates the felt tension between them and everyone else. By suggesting that the Fairchilds do not really see the outside world and that they cannot conceive of loving anyone unlike themselves, Robbie shows how the Fairchilds’ overreliance on myth takes a toll on their affective receptivity and agency. Similar to how the Fairchilds (almost certainly) do not pay their workers enough for them ever to be financially independent, neither do they dole out affection in a way that would make one feel unconditionally cared for or independently secure.

Additionally, Robbie rather rudely suggests that their aristocratic myth does not translate into modern notions of status: ““Only four gates to get here, and your house needs a coat of paint!”” (Welty *DW* 253). But, what is most interesting about this detail is that Robbie also seems, however unselfconsciously, to imply that the Fairchilds’ system of care (since care and capital are so closely related in this novel) does not translate into

modern notions of familial care. The Fairchilds emphasize extended family over nuclear family. While the extended family values mutual dependency and unity, it is also necessary for the type of control needed to keep their myth healthy and flourishing. Robbie desires a nuclear family because it provides more freedom as it moves away from large networks of interdependency, and allows people to move and act in smaller units. Throughout Robbie's scenes in the novel, it becomes clear that what most upsets her is George Fairchild's compulsion, his placing of Fairchild needs before their marital union. Robbie sincerely wants George to love her more than he loves his family, which is why she is upset at him risking his life for Maureen; she does not want her husband to be compelled to obligations to the extended family. The family resists the idea that George could love his wife more than any other member of the family, and "would disbelieve" that George could ever beg her to love him (Welty *DW* 251). Robbie wants George and his affections to be completely independent of the family at Shellmound in a way that seems unthinkable to the Fairchild clan. While she suggests that the Fairchilds have outdated notions of class and status, she also suggests that they have outdated notions of family, including lines of allegiance and affection. The resulting implication suggests that the nuclear family—as opposed to the extended one—is a more advanced stage of a capitalist-based economics of care. Robbie's argument claims that discernment of different strata of family and affection are needed for modern functioning relationships. As an emblem of change in the novel, Robbie's argument has adapted to an even smaller circle of care. Though readers might enjoy the way she calls out the Fairchilds on their apathy, her character undercuts any hopes that the family will become less apathetic in

the future as largescale plantation models become less profitable. Generationally thinking, Robbie Reed is poised to replace Aunt Tempe's large family and noblesse oblige with the nuclear family and neoliberalism.

Troy poses both a greater and lesser problem to Fairchildness, as family-worker and family. Troy is a greater fracture in the façade of the Fairchild myth than Robbie, because he is necessary. Battle's bad business practices have made it necessary to have a competent overseer in the family. However, he is less of a problem because everyone in the family seems to know this, and this understanding eases his entrance into the family. Tempe rationalizes this when she explains, "'when people marry beneath them, it's the woman that determines what counts. It's the woman that coarsens the man. The man doesn't really do much to the woman'" (Welty *DW* 294). Shelley, then, rightly interprets her aunt's meaning: "'You mean Troy's not as bad for us as Robbie'" (Welty *DW* 295). However, this is not to say that Troy is free to feel and care as he pleases. When discussing the way people attune to moods, Ahmed argues, "one's ability to preserve the mood of a situation requires working not only on feelings, but drawing on tactic knowledge about how moods are shaped, even created" ("Not" 21). While Robbie poses a problem because her apathy has no quirky veneer, Troy ruins the mood because he cares too much. After Shelley and Laura's awkward encounter with Dr. Murdoch, Troy attempts to make Shelley feel better: "'Don't cry! He's any old fool,' Troy exclaimed suddenly. His face was glowing-red and concerned" (*DW* 240). However, Troy is reprimanded by Tempe for this outburst of affection. This scene is his first lesson in affective withdrawal and an important one for Troy to learn as he enters the Fairchilds'

class. Tempe requires Tory to be enveloped by their apathetic mood, which can happen with effort: “attunement can be an effect of work, of how some labour to be in tune with others. If the labour is successful, it disappears as labour. The smoothness of attunement might even require the disappearance of labour” (Ahmed “Not” 21).

Apathy participates in an economy of putting bodies in certain spaces. Privatization of care becomes a way of guarding some bodies and leaving others (for example, the runaway’s body) to survive or die, as they will. While Welty gives visibility to peripheral characters, she does so in a way that is realistic, revealing that these characters are relatively uncared for and unsafe. Indeed, in “Power Changes How the Brain Responds to Others,” Jeremy Hogeveen, Sukhvinder S. Obhi, and Michael Inzlicht argue that people in powerful positions, including class-based positions, “tend not to process individuating information about the less powerful” (755). They write that powerful people tend to ignore peripheral information, and that “when the powerful ignore ‘peripheral’ information in social settings, the outcome can be quite negative from the perspective of the powerless” (755). This argument has sought to situate apathy as an economic function of myth. History, then, becomes related to care and recognition. The plantation workers, Robbie, and to a lesser extent, Troy, fall outside the circle of affective care because of the Fairchilds’ inability to recognize and understand those who are not directly related to, or not yet incorporated into, the family’s mythos, including their self-perception as aristocratic and benevolently paternalistic. Historically inscribing the Fairchilds as capitalist points to a relabeling of the family as apathetically conservative and as participating in an economy not culturally specific to the South.

The novel's southern setting, affect of apathy, and anxieties about care are what engender H.L. Menckenesque comments about *Delta Wedding*. For example, Isaac Rosenfeld, who admits to not being "able to get through more than a hundred pages," writes that "the social contradictions of the South are also the greatest you will find in this country; and they are such that the whole society may be called the antithesis of art. I do not see how a serious Southern artist can really and truly feel at home in his home" (57, 59). However, the social contradictions in the novel are not particularly southern. Being apathetic towards interests and appeals that would require one to change a belief or to donate money is a defense against the outside world that psychologists have associated with the upper class across regional boundaries. In addition to the findings of Hogeveen, Obhi, and Inzlicht, Michael W. Kraus, Stéphane Côté, and Dacher Kelter found that "Social class affects ... the emotions that people perceive and express in social interactions," and that people who are more powerful have lower empathetic accuracy (1722). This is to say, the type of contradictions in *Delta Wedding*—the portrayal of this lovable family who are apathetic about the social conditions that make their lives better—is common.

The Fairchilds' wealth is accumulated through shrewd choices including action and inaction, care and lack of care. *Delta Wedding* provides an excellent model of American economic conservatism. Yet, the reviewers seem to reject the novel more because of the southern setting than the actual issue of apathy. Northern reviewers have a tendency to criticize white female southern writers for not giving an overt condemnation or indictment on southern culture. Indeed, reviews of Elizabeth Spencer and Shirley Ann

Grau appear to echo Trilling's major criticism.¹²⁴ Reviewers such as Trilling and Rosenfeld attempt to seem like good northern progressives for suggesting that Welty is a southern nostalgic because she does not condemn the Fairchilds' southern ethos. Yet, the bigger issue is an economics of apathy that, as Ransom's review suggests, is a larger problem of which the plantation is only a microcosm. Indeed, most narratives of exceptionalism must use some level of apathy in order to sustain praise; the American economic system is a particularly good example as it is intertwined throughout the novel in numerous ways. The particular objects of note in the novel are the American Beauty roses brought in for Dabney's wedding. Robert McIlvaine states that "the rose, or more specifically, and appropriately, the American Beauty rose [is] a symbol of the gaudy materialistic society" (183-184). In discussing the American Beauty's appearance in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, McIlvaine suggests that its appearance in literature could be an allusion to "a striking statement made by John D. Rockefeller, Jr in 1902. In a speech before Brown University YMCA, the young Rockefeller memorably introduced the American Beauty rose into the lore of social Darwinism" (184). McIlvaine then gives Rockefeller's famous statement:

The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest. The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which brings cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is

¹²⁴ In a review of *Keepers of the House* (1964) for the *Boston Globe*, reviewer Elizabeth Bernkopf criticizes Grau by writing, "Has a reader a right to quarrel with an author's point of view? I don't know. I do know that this reviewer would find this a far stronger book if Miss Grau as a Southern woman herself, had taken a position on one or the other side of the bitterly fought struggle between whites and Negroes."

not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God. (Rockefeller qtd in McIlvanie 184)

Not only does the rose allude to the economic macrocosm—which connects to what Ransom calls the Fairchilds microcosm—but this specific rose is referred to in the text because it is compared to Troy’s working-class status. After narrating that “Troy came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney,” Welty writes, “His hair flamed. Had no one thought that American Beauty would clash with that carrot hair? Had no one thought of that? Jim Allen blinked her sensitive eyes” (DW 301). What is playful about this observation is that, although Welty frequently gives readers insight to character consciousness, these questions are the narrator’s. Here, Welty indulges in a rare moment of interjection to mock her delightful Fairchilds. While Costello explains that the Fairchilds work very hard not to call attention to the “money” aspect of their status—efforts which manifests as apathetic quirkiness—Welty seems to be enjoying this detail that they missed.¹²⁵

In “Must the Novelist Crusade?” Welty warns, “Fiction writers cannot be tempted to make the mistake of looking at people as not at all *like us*” (150). The Fairchilds are as the system of economics conditions us to be. *Delta Wedding* highlights the ordinariness of apathy. When journaling, Shelley writes, “We are all unfair people,” and while she is obviously reflecting on her family, this is also a moment when Welty makes a point about

¹²⁵ Costello describes the scene in which Aunt Mac washes the payroll money and explains that the Fairchilds do this because, “it mystifies and obscures the origins of the money ... thus allowing the Fairchilds to imagine themselves as unconnected to the common outside world” (44).

the type of culture of care the novel ultimately enacts and invites the audience to feel (Welty DW 173). In a more poignant part of his review, Rosenfeld writes:

I think the dullness of Miss Welty's novel may be traced to the fact that though she draws upon social resources of custom and speech, it is not really a society that she is dealing with, but the sensations of one. The events occur discretely, as they would to someone who, though situated within this society, did not have any ongoing extended relationship with it. Transitions are not keenly felt, and therefore the experience of connection, which is the essence of society, does not enter the novel in the form of a clear, continuous, dramatic line.

While I disagree that the novel is dull, sensations are Welty's medium of choice in the novel, and the society she depicts is purposefully underdeveloped. The true-to-life writing style Welty uses is symptomatic of a lack of a dramatic plot line, but it should also call attention to the normalcy of apathy. Concerning Welty's "Must the Novelist Crusade?," Suzan Harrison claims, "While [Welty] rejects one particular paradigm of the relationship between fiction and politics, she does not thereby deny fiction's connection to the world of social interaction, ethics, and value judgment" (91).

Delta Wedding makes no direct argument for political overhaul, but this is not really the primary function of art. The novel does, however, incite questions regarding happiness and selfishness, as well as the ethics of a cultural economics apathy, specifically when they meet at the intersection of economics and care. To be clear, this is not an apologia for the Fairchilds or their behavior; they may be "compelled," but they

are not helpless. Instead, they hide behind the fantasy of this compulsion, marketing their quirkiness in a way very similar to how Ngai discusses cuteness:

By returning us to a simpler, sensuous world of domestic use and consumption, populated exclusively by children and their intimate guardians, cuteness is the pastoral fantasy that, somehow, the commodity's qualitative side as use-value, or as a product of concrete, phenomenological labor, can be extracted and therefore "rescued." (*Our* 66)

By privileging their myth above genuine interpersonal connection, the Fairchilds choose to give up agency in exchange for security. While the purpose of this essay is to show how myth creates structures of feeling that dictate receptivity and shape the fluidity of affect, this chapter also argues that care is a critical term that merits more attention in southern and American studies; academics and public reviewers alike monitor it, discuss it, and criticize it, but usually without thinking about it as a topic that deserves critically rigorous discussion.

Buried around the middle of the novel Welty permits a Fairchild to articulate her anxiety about care. In her journal, Shelley writes, "I think Uncle G. takes us one by one. That is love—I think. He takes us one by one but Papa takes us all together and loves us by the bunch, which makes him a more cheerful man" (Welty *DW* 173). Shelley is trying to discern not only what it means to love, but also what it requires. In "In and Out of the Circle: The Individual and the Clan in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*," Sharlee Mullins Glenn explains that the novel highlights a "conflict between the need for individual autonomy and the equally powerful need for community and family" (50). While Welty

is dramatizing a conflict between communal, mutual dependency and individual affect, the Fairchilds community and family is wrapped in commitments to a mythos that treats care like an expensive commodity. Shelley's confusion is striking because she notes that her father's group-love consolidates his obligations, making "him a more cheerful man," but cheerfulness does not indicate the greatest love (Welty *DW* 173). The obligation of individualized love is often pushed aside in order to maintain their quirky charm, equipped with aloof apathy.

Chapter Four: Exhaustion, A Case Study

“‘I’m interested in how people with a conscience deal with the compromises they have to make.’”

— Denise Giardina (qtd in. Oder 69)

“‘You had a right to be riled. But they aint no reason to be all by yourself because of it.’” — Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven* (46) [sic]

Because of the novel’s exhausting affect, Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven* (1987) provides an interesting study of feelings and their ability to challenge commitments. *Storming Heaven* is a staple in the canon of Appalachian literature, but it gets little attention outside of that literary circle despite its brilliant use of stylistic excess, which corresponds well with the political feelings of neoliberal American identity politics. The narrative depicts a moment in American history when poor, white Appalachians were coerced, swindled, and murdered in order to remove them from coal-rich land: land that, once they were forced to give up, became the places where they worked, mining coal under their former homes in order to rent company tenant houses and acquire credit at company stores. This work is done under the steady eye of mine guards, often from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, who use threats, intimidation, and weapons to quash strikes, kill strikers, and keep miners working and living in fear. The characters in the novel refer to these guards as “Baldwins” and “gun thugs.” Giardina’s novel is a political novel with a political goal: make readers feel politically and ethically committed to challenging unfair working conditions and neoliberal

exploitation.¹²⁶ While the majority of Giardina's novel is set during the coal mining wars of the early twentieth century, the narrative functions according to a contemporaneous style of American political exhaustion emerging during the latter half of President Ronald Reagan's second term—emerging, that is, at the moment Reagan's economic policies (particularly anti-union policies) have become a part of American lived experience.¹²⁷ The reason Giardina offers an interesting challenge to my claim that feelings cannot match the power of commitments is because she attempts to use exhaustion to create attachments to political and ethical causes. She sees the static nature of melancholia and indignation, and depicts it realistically through characters who see their own powerlessness as a part of their identity and through characters who seem to enjoy the “riled” affect of embattlement. While Giardina understands melancholia's and indignation's inability to challenge the status quo, she still sees potential in the staying power of anticatharsis. Exhaustion, with all its resonances of hard work and honest labor, is the affect Giardina uses to shift the mechanisms of southern Appalachian structures of feeling away from past political and social loss and toward an alignment of political activism and futurity.

Exhaustion appears to have potential because it plays into familiar feelings within the normative structure. The feeling is associated with hard work, a fundamental of

¹²⁶ However, she claims her books “are actually more theological than political” (Giardina qtd in. Oder 69).

¹²⁷ Giardina has firsthand experience with coal camps. She “spent her first 13 years in Black Wolf, a 10-house coal camp in southern West Virginia,” writes Norman Oder, and after Giardina was ordained by the Episcopal church, she “returned to a church in her childhood territory. Within a year, she left, after clashing with superiors over her criticism of coal companies” (69).

American exceptionalism and identity. This is particularly true of poor or working-class white identity, which often confuses and conflates exhaustion with virtue. In a cruel trick, American culture offers empty virtue to citizens who work hard and are paid little. This is evident in country music songs such as Aaron Tippin's "I Got It Honest," and Loretta Lynn's "Coal Miner's Daughter" to commercials using exhaustion as virtue to sell Ram Trucks.¹²⁸ Also, exhaustion is, like the other feelings studied here, familiar because it is anticathartic. The enervative aesthetics of *Storming Heaven* give the reader an experience of exhaustion, which resonates during the high-capitalistic environment of the American 1980s because of the affect's ability to make labor felt. Specifically, exhaustion is not excitement, nor is it resignation. It is entirely within the moment of Reagan's de-unionization of the American labor force. This moment of de-unionization and the emergence of high neoliberalism creates an aura of exhaustion with currents of anxious, frenetic labor production, and ritually deferred rest.

This chapter seriously examines the political potential of exhaustion as an aesthetic feeling by defining an aesthetic category for exhaustion, and considering why exhaustion might be an effective mood and style for political instantiation in the American 1980s. *Storming Heaven* illustrates how an aesthetics of exhaustion produces an embodiment of agent-generating exhaustion. The novel is a piece of historical and political fiction that revives the struggles of the West Virginian and Kentucky miners

¹²⁸ The phenomenon in country music is something Curtis W. Ellison examines in *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven*. For an example of Ram Trucks' commercials, see their 2014 Super Bowl advertisement titled "Farmer," available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7yZdOl_e_c.

against the cruel, union-suppressing capitalistic forces of the 1910s and 1920s during a moment in the 1980s when, again, Appalachian miners were striking against absentee mine-owners and doing so without the support of the anti-union national government. In its structural and thematic formations, the novel enacts a constant onslaught of action, death, loss, anger, and mourning. These moments build towards the novel's overall feeling of exhaustion.

Giardina's affect of exhaustion interpellate readers into the politics of her work; that is, the exhausting aesthetics of the novel work to compel readers to feel as if the exhaustion they feel is a result of their already involved political subjectivity in Giardina's fight against American labor abuse and governmental apathy.¹²⁹ In this way, *Storming Heaven* creates an affective space for readers to feel a part of the civic movement though some kind of prior agreement that permitted their own exhaustion. By using a style that creates an emotional response that is highly connected to the body—a feeling of exhaustion—the work of the novel implants itself under the skin and into the consciousness's of Giardina's late 1980s audience: Americans who might be culturally primed to accept exhaustion as an acceptable, and even desirable, political mood and style. This cultural attunement to exhaustion has continued if not grown, making

¹²⁹ I use Louis Althusser's term to refer to a process of building and acknowledging ideological affiliations and political subject identities. The reader's aesthetic exhaustion hails him to identify as among Giardina's politically exhausted subjects. I do not take the process of interpellation to be either positive or negative, rather just an unavoidable mechanism of identification and cultural production: the mechanism is the same whether the resulting subjectivity works for the good or not. However, for my argument on how exhaustion builds these types of political identifications, it is important to note that interpellation forms these identifications and feelings of commitment and without introspection or meaningful obligation.

Giardina's aesthetic use still viable for current audiences. However, while I work through this theory of exhaustion and read the novel in order to think about how exhaustion is working, I believe that whatever connection the feeling is able to attach is ultimately confused. I have no doubt that Giardina writes with ethical goals in mind. Indeed, in an interview, she claimed, "'There's a responsibility to say something that's true, make people think, but also help them connect with something larger than themselves'" (qtd in. Oder 70). While these are admirable goals, I am suspicious as to whether exhaustion is a good affective avenue for this work. Instead, perhaps, Giardina's stylistic decadence confuses *eudaimonia* with exhaustion.

An Aesthetics of Exhaustion

While affect theory has been growing steadily since the 1990s, exhaustion is an overlooked aesthetic category that has a lot to offer for our understandings about the mechanisms of structures of feeling and the ways those mechanisms can shift or be shifted. Unlike the minor emotions, such as "agitation," which Sianne Ngai focuses on, exhaustion is not "a term which is likewise used in the philosophical discourse of emotions to designate feeling *prior to* its articulation into a more complex passion, but that also underlies the contemporary meaning of the political agitator or activist [emphasis mine]" (*Ugly* 31). Instead, exhaustion is a feeling that lingers *after* a more complex passion, and this style of lingering heightens the impact of the aesthetic category. For example, in *Storming Heaven*, the mistreatment and death of one of the narrators makes readers feel complex passions such as rage and horrification; however, after this happens twice times (the novel has four narrators), an affect of exhaustion

lingers and that lingering helps the politics of the novel become embedded in readers by generating a nervy, bodily affiliation with the those politics as well as the dense aura of labor of the historical moment. This is to say, exhaustion is an after-feeling of over- or prolonged-stimulation.¹³⁰

As an aesthetic category exhaustion links with the contemporary moment by creating and then embedding itself into contemporary readers. The exhaustion that I argue Giardina disperses, while set in early twentieth century Appalachia, is of the American 1980s: a moment of labor systemization when national and transnational forces influenced Appalachia and when the labor of American workers became a frenetic undercurrent of American affect, an affective phenomenon not at all unlike today's political exhaustion driven by compulsory social media posting and instantaneous reporting.¹³¹ Both in the fiction's historical setting and in the novel's contemporary situation, *Storming Heaven* is embedded in a transnational stage of capitalism that permeates and defines effective categories of affect. For example, in her article, "'Storming Heaven' in the Decade of Greed," Kim Gillespie notes how, in the 1980s, the A. T. Massey coal company (the company that Giardina calls American Coal in the novel) underwent a massive restructuring that posed a large risk of jobs in the union-

¹³⁰ In this way, then, exhaustion is also not exclusively an affect from too much of a negative feeling such as rage or anger; indeed, one can be exhausted from too much laughing or too much sex. Context matters.

¹³¹ This feeling is heightened by its historical juxtaposition. The post-WWII period that some people look back to as the golden age of American labor—when wages were generally rising, when the gap between the rich and the poor was not exponentially growing, and when unions themselves had real bargaining power, lies precisely between the “present” of the novel and the 1980s.

heavy state of West Virginia. Gillespie explains that “A.T. Massey contended that because it faced international competition it had to reduce labor costs through decentralization in which each unit of a parent company would be treated as a separate company and would negotiate a separate labor contract with the union” (103). The hectic structuring, restructuring, and systemization in the moment of *Storming Heaven*’s publication produces an environment in which, as Ngai suggests, affects become detached in less powerful and in less politically productive ways because of constantly shifting and ceaselessly production.

However, through her use of decadent stylistic excess Giardina creates an excess of emotion to create a more identifiable feeling: exhaustion. Using exhaustion, Giardina explores how some affects might still “link up” with the political climate in mimetic and essential ways. While Ngai writes, “there is a way in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance,” exhaustion takes a completely different approach, as it is the feeling of an aligned, lived experience (*Ugly* 10). This feeling reverberates and resonates in a compulsory process of bodily attunement. In “How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood is Made,” Jonathan Flatley claims that we are all (almost violently) situated in a particular moment and that moods are a style of participating in that moment. He writes:

We are all thrust not just into specific historical contexts but also into a given position therein. Mood arises out of and discloses to us this situatedness. And if we attend to it, mood can help us to see the “thereness” of our “there,” the

particularity of our position in a given situation, the givenness of that situation
and the necessity of always finding ourselves in some there. (Flatley 506)

The aesthetic category of exhaustion produces an embodied affect that draws attention to itself and its situation—people generally backtrack their feeling of exhaustion to its impetus. When exhaustion is invoked via an aesthetics, this impetus, then, is the moment in which political or ideological affiliation has the potential to be produced.¹³²

Because of its consuming nature, exhaustion can be a difficult affect to describe—it requires an intimacy with the body that rarely receives thought; sometimes the feeling is apparent and one realizes one's exhaustion, and sometimes one can feel exhausted for some time before even registering the feeling. It is associated with depression as well as with active engagement. In fact, exhaustion as a term is treated as irreducible.¹³³ Yet, exhaustion is a valuable affect for affect theory because it is grounded in the bodily experience (even mental or emotional exhaustion still weighs on the body itself). Indeed, it cannot exactly be conceptualized without its relationship to the body, be it with sensations of nerviness, heaviness, or emptiness. To experience exhaustion can be an experience of the contradictory impulses of bodily heaviness and psychic restlessness. As an aesthetic experience, exhaustion does not need to be logically unpacked: one can feel

¹³² However, this also risks readers feeling manipulated and thinking that the author has broken some agreement of good faith. Indeed, discussing exhaustion as a literary aesthetic and affect raises questions about what readers agree to experience and be done to them through the act of reading a novel. Below I look at one review who feels “manipulated,” but not necessarily to the point of simply closing the book.

¹³³ Additionally, while we all feel it, exhaustion is also specific to each individual; in conversation with others about the feeling, one individual stated to me that it is like a “grip of fear that closes [her] throat,” while another claimed, “Sometimes when I am too exhausted I can't sleep.”

exhausted without reasoning how exhaustion functions, or what it means to feel exhausted.

Ngai writes that the feelings she examines “are explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions” (*Ugly* 6-7). She also explains how “Moods like irritation and anxiety, for instance, are defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the ‘suddenness’ on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends” (*Ugly* 7). Exhaustion, while not completely unlike Ngai’s affects, is different in a slightly more productive (as “productive” relates to agency) way. Specifically, while Ngai describes the *noncatharsis* of her minor feelings, exhaustion is more of a methamphetamine-like anticatharsis, a surging non-end, which, apropos of the 1980s, is frenetic and nervy in its felt surge of labor. Instead of interfering with the outpouring of other emotions, exhaustion consumes other feelings by making them feel a part of the exhaustion and with the other irritants of exhaustion. In turning other feelings into an exhaustive experience people can feel the virtue that American structures of feeling tie to valorizations of “hard work.” Because exhaustion is anticathartic, any virtue associated with the feeling results from confusing the feeling with eudaimonia, a kind of happiness associated with the working toward human flourishing.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines this type of happiness as a habituation in which a good man develops a habit of “living well and acting well” (1095a 14-1095b14)

Exhaustion is rarely discussed as an aesthetic or affective category; in fact, my research found only one other scholar working on this feeling. In his article, “Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion,” Andrew Hoberek considers *The Road* to talk about exhaustion as an aesthetic and an affect, which he argues is created through thematic representations of exhaustion and through formal decisions such as anti-climax (487). Hoberek contends, “*The Road* seems exhausted at the level of style itself” exhibited through its “stripped-down prose” and “terseness” (487). He argues that the novel “eschews ... grand destruction in favor of the *longue durée* of political hopelessness ... In *The Road*, things occasionally get briefly better, and they often get briefly worse, but for the most part they hover around the same dull level of misery and hopelessness” (490). And yet, he notes that the novel has a deep sense of “potential”; Hoberek concludes that the exhaustive style and affect of the novel creates a new “possibility of ‘becoming’” (490, 497).¹³⁵ *Storming Heaven*’s style and affect of exhaustion work in similar ways: the novel undercuts climax through the perpetual horrors characters are faced with, and it undercuts resolution through its afterword. While things definitely get worse, the perpetual death and destruction in *Storming Heaven* keep

¹³⁵ Hoberek argues that McCarthy’s writing pursues themes and styles adopted from Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. McCarthy advances Hemingway’s and Faulkner’s themes of ruin and abject humanity in *The Road* through its sense of hopelessness. However, Hoberek argues McCarthy’s style illustrates a new potentiality. When examining the final paragraph of the novel, Hoberek claims, “While it right insists upon what has been lost forever cannot be ‘made right again,’ this passage nonetheless epitomizes the stylistic concomitant of the sense of potential that inhabits McCarthy’s bleak narrative. ... Here, in a notion of genre style as a fixed form committed to a radically unfixed protentional, lies the possibility of ‘becoming’ that has existed all along within the style itself of this most seemingly exhausted of novels” (488).

the readers exhausted. It is not that the novel no climax, but that it has too many, and none of them at the very end. Like Hoberek's discussion of *The Road*, Giardina's writing keeps a sense of potential and a sense of near-hopeless adversity in tension.¹³⁶ It is important to note that while it is incredibly unlikely for the characters to succeed in their endeavors—and, given that these characters exist in historical fiction, readers know they do not succeed—Giardina avoids the level of hopelessness Hoberek identifies in McCarthy's novel.

Feeling exhausted is not exactly the same as feeling tired, though there are definite overlaps and tiredness can be subsumed into exhaustion. While one can feel tired in general, exhaustion connotes a connection (cases of exhaustion from laughing, sex, and political instantiation are prime examples)—you are exhausted from and by something that you have given yourself over to (however willingly/knowingly), that you have allowed to use your bodily, mental, and/or emotional labor. To be exhausted is to be used up or consumed by something or some effort. Exhaustion cannot be shrugged off; just because the exhausting event (say, a novel about the coal mining wars) ends does not mean that the subject is released from affect. In this way, exhaustion has even less of a “purifying release” than Ngai theorizes about affect under contemporary structures of feeling; however, Giardina sees a potential in that dull fixity. Indeed, exhaustion is

¹³⁶ Rondal narrates: “I loved that phrase, ‘the fullness of time.’ I shivered to whisper it to myself, for I sensed I was living in it, right then. Nothing afterward would be so important, not like what was happening there on Blackberry Creek. We are put on earth for the fullness of time, we spend our days reaching it, and then we pass on. Some people die right then, with the passing of the fullness, and others breathe on, grieving all their lives that time is being strangled and they are not yet dead” (181).

identified by its ongoingness, especially if more work is demanded. For these differences, exhaustion, as an aesthetic affect, feels like it carries the possibility of imbuing political subjectivity because it drains the feeler, whether or not that person has performed the labor she now feels connected to. Exhaustion also has an interesting relationship to care. Prolonged exhaustion can simulate bonds of care, and, perhaps, this simulation can lead to obligation, as something felt, but perhaps not commitment, as something willed.

No doubt, there is a way in which exhaustion as a style and literary affect can be quite problematic: it can collapse the distance between literal and metaphorical exhaustion in a way that blurs working-class and middle-class valences. Indeed, hard laborers might think it is laughable for someone to assert that reading a novel can be an exhausting experience. And yet, collapsing distance between actual miners and readers of her novel seems to be the goal in Giardina's political fiction. Flatley describes how writing can produce "affective attunement" for the reader, and that when this happens, "Things matter in a new way, a way that is manifestly and consciously plural. A new 'we' has come into being, one that enables, in its turn, a different 'I' to be experienced and articulated" (510). Indeed, because it can be felt in different ways, exhaustion is a prime aesthetic affect for engendering an affective attunement. Giardina hopes that the experience of an aesthetic that produces exhaustion interpellates the reader as subject by embedding her political ideology into the fibers of the body, and in so doing, imbues the reader with an agency that might have been absent before the aesthetic experience by essentializing the American aura of labor to the reader's lived experience—her personal

exhaustion, which feels like an exhaustion brought about through caring for a personal commitment.

Exhaustion as the Political Style and Mood of the Late 1980s

Exhaustion is not new, but it is timely for thinking about political attunement, regionally and nationally structured feeling, and how identities cohere.¹³⁷ *Storming Heaven* was published in 1987, seven years into the appearance of the 24-hour news cycle, seven years into the Reagan administration, and during a time of palpable expenditure and exhaustion, and a sharp rise in American identity politics.¹³⁸ This is the last decade of the Cold War and the first of the War on Drugs, and, during this time, I argue that exhaustion emerges as a characterizing mood of late 1980s American social and political atmosphere.¹³⁹ In his essay “America During the ‘80s: Summing up the Reagan Era,” Karl Zinsmeister argues that the 1980s could be characterized as a continuous moment of “fanfare” in political reform and social backlash (110). He notes that “the pace of technical innovation—which accelerates largely without regard to ditherings beyond the laboratory—continued to defy most people’s expectations,” suggesting that this innovation had an overwhelming effect on an American public that was unprepared for the speed or level of change (Zinsmeister 111). Zinsmeister also

¹³⁷ The *OED* notes that “exhaustion” was used as early as the 1640s.

¹³⁸ *CNN*, the first 24-hour news channel launched June 1, 1980. On a related note, *The Weather Channel* launched May 2, 1982; my mother remembers her father being mesmerized by *The Weather Channel*: constantly watching the new source of information for changes and updates.

¹³⁹ I would also argue that exhaustion a mood that has become increasingly more dominant as access to information, and others’ comments on that information, become hectically and frenetically available.

reminds us that this is a moment when computers, cellular phones, laser printers, and new drugs are readily introduced into the public space. This is to say that the 1980s did not just open access to information, but it kept that information constant and unavoidable, leaving many Americans feeling the difference.¹⁴⁰ This feeling of inescapable information, change, and type of stasis adds a layer of fatigued tension on which political issues build.

Reagan's rise and the Republicans' capture of the Senate brought a whirlwind of political change to the American public, which—as might be expected—produced both action and reaction. His time in office marks a period of conservative neoliberalism: a deregulated market and a decline in unionism.¹⁴¹ In their article “Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Declining Union Organization,” Henry S. Faber and Bruce Western show how Reagan's appointees to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) worked to undercut the power of unions and support the managerial force. They recount how, “Under a line of Dotson Board rulings, employers obtained greater latitude to interrogate union supporters, make misleading campaign statements, speculate about the adverse effects of unionization and discharge union supporters” (Faber and Western 393). Overall, their article charts how, during the Reagan administration, governmental and commercial forces constantly suppressed unions and widely sanctioned companies to monitor their

¹⁴⁰ This feeling of an unavoidable onslaught of information inspires David Croneberg's *Videodrome* (1983), a film in which characters are hypnotically drawn to the television sets that occupy their bedrooms, their offices, and storefronts.

¹⁴¹ Specifically, Farber and Western note “the summer of 1981,” when Reagan personally fired striking air-traffic controllers as a moment when de-unionization began to have a cultural and political presence (385).

workers for threats of unionization. In order to illustrate just how busy this time was for the implementation of Reagan's new labor policies, Paul C. Weiler notes how "the Dotson-led Reagan board overturned some forty NLRB doctrines and developed a number of novel positions of its own, almost invariably antithetical to the union position" (19). Weiler also comments on the effect of these policies and argues that the labor market Reagan creates "can and does inflict immediate and severe distress upon individual workers and their families," and reminds readers that, "After all, what is being purchased and sold in the labor market is control over the time and activities of a human being" (21). This severely distressing control on labor made itself felt both bodily and psychically in the daily lived experience of American workers and activists. Giardina's writing seeks to capitalize on this national attunement to exhaustion and political attentiveness.

The coupling of a social fatigue with the atmosphere of American culture accelerated through advancing technological and media forces with the suppression of unionized labor brought on by political forces creates a moment when, by the late 1980s, exhaustion is not only the dominant mood, but has also become the dominant style. Already a major player in American ethical posturing, exhaustion gets further instantiated, not only as a way of life, but also as a desirable style of functioning in life. While everyone might be exhausted from the perpetual force of information, no one wants to be left behind—no one wants to appear to not care; and, while everyone might be exhausted from working under unregulated conditions, no one wants to be considered a freeloader. Socially and politically, exhaustion becomes a way to feel productive—one

needs to feel exhausted to feel as if he is informed, and informed about the “right” issues.¹⁴² Exhaustion, then, feels like a productive affect in this historical and political moment because of its ability to transfer an affectation of engagement, and thus a feeling of being politically active and socially important. In this way, exhaustion as a mood also becomes a style of political vitality, but questionable when viewed as a commitment.

The 1980s and its moment of American high capitalism are also linked to other modes for which scholars have offered conceptions of affect and agency. Gillespie defines the 1980s as a “decade of greed,” and claims that “*Storming Heaven* is a national allegory of the 1980s to the degree that the lives of individual characters represent the combative social relations of the decade, understood not as isolated experiences or events but as constitutive of the national identity” (103-104). While I agree that *Storming Heaven* is a national allegory of the 1980s and its lived experience, Gillespie focuses on how *Storming Heaven* portrays the greed and anti-union sentiments of the Reagan era.

Instead, thinking about how the novel produces a political affect of exhaustion helps us think about how feelings get linked up with “commitments.” While greed might define the affect of those controlling and benefitting from the deregulation, it does not function well as a political aesthetic because it does not offer the psychic and bodily space for readers to feel a part of the mood. Additionally, in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai offers “zany” as our contemporary aesthetic and theorizes the zany’s relationship to labor in high capitalism. “Zaniness,” Ngai argues, “calls up the character of a worker

¹⁴² This tendency is sometimes referred to as “hashtag activism” that relies on a nebulous, feelgood concept of “awareness,” and which generally eschews substantial involvement or effort.

whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labor” (*Our* 9). In working out some of the implications of the zany, Ngai claims:

What is most essential to zaniness is its way of evoking a situation with the potential to cause harm or injury—a feeling that could not exist without some reference, however implicit, to a being whom that harm or injury might befall.

Post-Fordist zanies in particular suggests that simply being a “productive” worker under prevailing conditions—the concomitant casualization and intensification of labor, the creeping extension of the working day, the steady decline of wages—is to put oneself in an exhausting and precarious situation. (10)

Zanies display the embodiment of labor that is dissociated from the social value of its product. Zaniness is a hyper-expenditure of effort in a way that calls attention to its own lack of power and autonomy. Ngai’s description of changes to the mode of American labor is accurate as it pertains to commercial and production spheres, but can be further developed in how that commercial affect translates into the public sphere. Exhaustion transcends work and leisure. While zany’s underlying nervousness seems applicable to exhausting experiences, its isolating nature forecloses a lot of social involvement and political identification. For example, Ngai writes that, “zanies are not persons we imagine befriending” and “zaniness does not seem to call forth a subject response in any way mimetic to itself” (9, 8). Zaniness, as she defines it, is escapable; it is something that can be denied and scoffed at. Exhaustion permeates the 1980s, but in a way that becomes almost a proverbial badge-of-honor.

Indeed, exhaustion can seem quite politically productive. Fredric Jameson asserts that one who wishes to invoke political action “listens for the collective desire and crystallizes its presence in his political manifestos and ‘slogans’” (71). Exhaustion, whether valorized as a symbol of the virtue of American hard work, or valorized as a symbol of effort or awareness (“wokeness,” if you will) can become such a desire. Americans, accustomed to the barrage of information and political messages, wanted to feel a part of the action, and the feeling of exhaustion becomes a desired and identifiable disposition; indeed, as we will see in textual examples below, people often compete for who can claim to be most exhausted. For these reasons, exhaustion emerges as an aesthetic category, which unlike feelings such as greed or zaniness, has the possibility of building social and political (if not necessarily ethical) attunements. How much historical timeliness matters for exhaustion to have potential is difficult to say without a close consideration of any particular moment under consideration. Even more, that exhaustion has a presence in this moment which makes it a politically viable aesthetic category might speak to how the structures of feeling in the moment have disordered pursuit of real forms of eudaimonia.

Familiar Feelings and Giardina’s Affective Shrewdness

Giardina’s depiction of feeling in *Storming Heaven* shows an astute understanding of common southern Appalachian emotions, emotions common to poor or working-class whites, and the political potential of such emotions. Her writing shows how some characters immerse themselves in stuck feelings of loss and indignant embattlement, and righteousness can be used momentarily to boost morale. Under careful examination,

Giardina also critiques withdrawal as a way to valorize care and vulnerability. In this section, I show how Giardina displays the ineffectiveness of choice feelings to better reinforce a sense of exhaustion and try to instill a sense of virtue in exhaustion.

Melancholia and Embattled Indignation

Melancholia and indignation are expected feelings among these mistreated characters. After all, they have much cause to feel melancholic or indignant: their land was stolen from them and now they are forced to work like indentured servants to the people who now claim ownership of their land; they are not paid enough to stay fed, and the camps are plagued with typhoid due to poor camp planning.¹⁴³ Giardina understands these feelings and her characters who are stuck in them. Rondal's younger brother Talcott is a good example. After Rondal is taken in by C.J. to receive an education and grow up in a home above the poverty line, eight year-old Talcott must continue to work in the mines. He quickly grows melancholic with phases of indignation. When C.J. attempts to explain how they might overthrow the mine owners, he responds, with melancholic resistance, noting all the ways in which his life is harder than C.J.'s and how he doesn't care to hear people's opinions on the treatment of miners. When he leaves C.J. thinks, "I couldn't get nothing else out of him on any subject. Ever since Rondal left, it was like he'd closed himself off behind a wall of stubborn" (123). While Talcott eventually breaks out of his melancholia, his bouts of indignation cause damage to the group's socialist

¹⁴³ When the miners ask to have the privies relocated away from the water supply, the coal companies respond that "there is no money for such frills. As for disease in the camp, it was caused by the filthy habits of the miners and their families" (93).

plans when he shoots a would-be homerun baseball out of the air; this angers the mine owners and their punishment of the local families expedites their plans.

Through Talcott and other characters, Giardina shows how these states are not productive to pursuing virtue. Yet, she also acknowledges how they can be very alluring and tempt people into a stasis that is more invested in pleasure than action. During one of Rondal's narrations, he describes the thrill of being worked up while discussing the terrible situation with coal companies:

We didn't always get along at our meetings. We was all so different from each other. Me and Doc was socialists. Ermel by that time was one of the big shots in the Democrat party machine, close to getting his man elected as circuit judge. Isom weren't nothing, far as I could tell, except he liked to argue and drink his daddy's liquor. We had fights all the time and we loved it. (129)

Here, Rondal depicts the pleasure of discussing his anger at the coal companies with his friends, and the pleasure of their own indignant righteousness. They become thrilled by the idea of the fight and their own political correctness instead of any actual action. By including this scene, Giardina acknowledges the very real and appealing pleasures of embattlement, but she is right to note them briefly, and to let few characters indulge in them to any great extent. Indeed, there seems to be something about human nature that takes pride in one's own suffering, as if suffering, in and of itself, is virtuous. When Carrie is among the United Mineworkers who are traveling to the battle (which is based on the real Battle of Blair Mountain) she listens to how the men "cursed, speculated on which boss man was the meanest, played poker, tipped tin cups of homebrew" (254). The

men find honor in their abuse.¹⁴⁴ In depictions such as these, Giardina shows her awareness of how feelings allow people to cohere in certain ways; this adds a certain degree of realism and believability to her characters and their reactions to situations.

Giardina also includes depictions of pleasure in righteous indignation that are clearly meant to convey negative judgment. After Rondal is removed from the battle because he was shot by a machine gun in the spine, rendering him paralyzed, Carrie gets a wagon and a team of horses to carry him back to the Homeplace with the hope that he might heal. She's stopped along the way by the corrupt sheriff's men who await her "leaning on their rifles and grinning" (278). They question her and sexually proposition her. Finally after she pulls out her own weapon the state policeman with them says, "Let her go, ... This thing is over anyway," and one man responds, "That's the hell of it, ... Pretty soon there won't be any more fun" (280). Again, Giardina's dialogue and use of expressions is incredibly believable, and highlights how pleasure can become attached to righteous indignation and displays of power and powerlessness. Giardina sees a way out of unproductive stasis; however, she tries to use exhaustion to break out of indignation and use the staying power of exhaustion to infect others with care instead of using stasis to compete over who has been the most harmed.

Despair and Resignation

Rondal's mother is a key character whose feelings, or lack thereof, Giardina passes negative judgment on. At the beginning of the novel, she argues with her husband and tries to stop Rondal's and Talcott's father from taking them into the mine to

¹⁴⁴ I am again reminded of Bone's fantasies in *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

supplement the family's income. However, after the mother loses this argument, she sees this as the loss of her ability to care for her child, then completely forfeits her vulnerability by stopping herself from caring for her sons, particularly Rondal. After the mother sees her sons return bruised and broken from the mines, she realizes her inability to protect them. She withdraws from her obligations to them in order to protect herself. At this point, young Rondal understands that his mother no longer cares for him. The narrator notes how she refuses to punish him anymore when he makes mistakes. After Rondal has spent a few days in the mine, he does something at home for which he should be in trouble. When he sheepishly confesses to his mother and asks if she will punish him, she declines (25). When C.J. offers Rondal an education that would take him away from the mines, she says, "'I don't care,' ... in a flat voice" (28).

The mother, then, puts all her care and affection into her baby, Kerwin, and into her religious practices. Later in the novel when Rondal is thinking about Carrie, he considers that "she's not like Mommy, who can't be hurt by anyone but Jesus" (246). That Giardina would write this criticism is telling, because she is an ordained Episcopal minister. In this way, Giardina criticizes the mother's despair and resignation. She highlights this resignation even further, providing an instance that should provoke disgust: a black union organizer is casually tossed into the coal furnace in front of Rondal (who is now adult and a union organizer) as a warning: "They tossed hum inside the furnace and slammed the door. They raised me up. 'Go on home,' Denbigh said. 'You've got twenty-four hours to get out of Justice County or you're dead'" (83). His mother, however, is upset by this event because Rondal's leaving will mean the family will need

more money, and so the last son Kerwin, will have to go into the mines. She tells Rondal, ““You are good for nothing ... You have ruined your brother over some foolishness. He’ll go down in the mines. He’ll pay for your sins”” (83).¹⁴⁵ Giardina presents Rondal’s mother so as to criticize her withdrawal from care, and she goes a step further by critiquing her use of Christianity to do so. Giardina places great value on care, which is why she hold Rondal’s mother’s actions up for reader criticism.

The Aesthetic Exhaustion of *Storming Heaven*

The novel opens with an exhausting realization. The first chapter, which takes place at least seven years before the second, sets the tone for the novel by depicting a scene in which the characters are encroached upon by the outside world. Through the narrator C. J. Marcum, Giardina literally opens with labor—that is, childbirth. Structurally, the novel opens with the birth of one of the main characters and the narrator of the next chapter, Rondal. This productive and procreative form of labor is quickly contrasted with railroad speculators—embodiments of inescapable technological and innovative forces—coming in to hustle the locals out of their land. Giardina writes how the locals are inexperienced with the legalistic jargon: “*Junior patent*, they kept saying. *Senior patent is what we own. That takes precedence. Ask any judge*” (5). However, when Giardina follows with the history of this event and the railroads pass the mineral rights to coal companies that can use them to force the surface landowners to move, readers are

¹⁴⁵ Kerwin does die in the mines, along with Rondal’s father, when miners are still required to work through gas-filled mines.

allowed a moment of hope because C. J. Marcum's Pawpaw had refused to sign any documents concerning his homestead.

These first opening pages of the novel create a space for readers to feel hope in the new life of a child and pride in the local's ability to outsmart the speculator and to understand, or at least value, the worth of what he has. This pays off because, a few paragraphs later, he does not receive an eviction notice like the rest of the town. However, the first shock that begins to build exhaustion comes soon after. By the third page of the novel, C. J. Marcum tells that he and his Mamaw "heard a shot" and "found [his Pawpaw] toppled over into one of the [bee] hives. We was both stung all over when we pulled him out of there by the legs. He was shot through the head" (6). This grotesque image, juxtaposed so closely with a moment of pride, requires a completely oppositional shift in affect. It rips readers out of their settled contentment in Pawpaw's smart choice and into the unsettling image: the supposed hero shot through the head, hung over a bee hive covered in stings. What's more is that, without giving any time to process, Giardina makes the next line of the novel "Sheriff come round in three days and nailed the notice to vacate on our cabin door" (6). This moment is an example of Giardina's common tendency to compound hardships for an over-producing affect; and still, she takes this horror one step further by showing that after he was shot, the coal companies or the complicit sheriff forged Papaw's mark on the documents he refused to sign. These three pages set up the mood and style of the novel by mimicking contemporary American exhaustions by government manipulations and the devaluation of work. At this point in

the novel, the locals are shifted from being independent farmers to dependent coal miners.

The hardships of working in the mines are introduced when Rondal and Talcott are taken in with their father for work. Giardina shows us images of children who are hit with belts and canes by fathers and supervisors to get them to work in a productive manner (21). Next, we are shown how a young and still innocent Rondal Lloyd, who is fascinated by the docile animals in the mine area—he asks his father, “Can I pet one of them mules?”—makes friends with the mine canary (21). In a tender moment in the novel, the young boy begins to carry his bird with him on lunch breaks, and soon, the other boys follow suit with their canaries. However, this moment of cuteness last less than a page and a half before Rondal’s bird is killed fighting another boy’s bird (27). Rondal creates a pyre to memorialize the bird, and in the next paragraph, his and his father’s coworker, Joe Kracj, is crushed to death in a mine accident. ““It happens,”” his father says (28). Deaths come quickly and suddenly in *Storming Heaven*, which keeps readers exhausted from stressful stimuli with such a quick succession that deters emotional fluctuation.

Giardina’s style of creating an exhausting mood by quickly positioning and jumbling affects next to each other is heightened by the structure of the novel’s narration. *Storming Heaven* has four narrators: C. J. Marcum, Rondal Lloyd, Carrie Bishop, and Rosa Angelelli. Throughout the course of the novel, Giardina rarely positions chapters narrated by the different characters next to one another in order to keep the reader in the task of reevaluating and repositioning herself in the narrative. In *Touching Feeling*:

Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick talks about the importance of the aesthetic of “beside” and the way that “*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking” (8). In working through an example, Sedgwick praises “beside” because of its spatial precision, writing that it adds an important “extra alertness to the multisided interactions among people ‘beside’ each other” (9). This quality of “besideness” is a helpful way of understanding the shifting narrators in *Storming Heaven*, and how these shifts heighten readers’ alertness to the breadth of the coal companies’ power over lived experience. By positioning chapters with alternating narrators beside one another, Giardina highlights the interrelatedness of the characters and their shared and collective exhaustions thematically while creating an affect of exhaustion aesthetically. This quality of being beside, and of being individually and collectively exhausted beside one another, creates another possibility for binding political identification. Gillespie argues how “*Storming Heaven* describes the ability of communities divided by race and gender to achieve solidarity, itself an effect of both the agency of individual actors and of the oppressive social conditions of colonialism” (106). The way the novel treats race is realistic for the time period, but still highlights how different racial communities can cohere against a common enemy.¹⁴⁶ The quality of beside helps to compound felt exhaustion into an identity group.

¹⁴⁶ Giardina shows how Rondal Lloyd is raised to despised black people in the camps, but through conversation and mutual identification, he comes to see them as comrades with shared lived experience. Giardina also does not let her white characters feel good about their level of racial acceptance. When Doc Booker—Carrie’s mentor, C. J.’s friend, and one of Rondal’s coconspirators—gets pushed out of Annadel by the gun thugs, he talks to Carrie about how, even though he is respected by them, he still has to live by different expectations (209-210).

Giardina also creates exhaustion through form by piling up a rather substantial body count comprised (not exclusively) of main characters, family members of main characters, and narrators. By the end of the novel proper, two of the narrators are dead. By the end of the afterward, all of the narrators have been removed from their lands and have died—even the Edenic Homeplace which is still Carrie’s home at the end of the novel is taken by the time of the afterward’s setting. However, it is important to note that, while there are many deaths of characters who readers have connected with, Giardina details each death scene with radical, grotesque particularity. Yet, because of the hope and vulnerability the characters have, violent death or tragic loss does not become an expectation. Each one is rather shocking. C.J., the first narrator, is shot when a group of men tries to stop the company guards from forcing striking miners; in a scene that closely mimics the Matewan Massacre, the Baldwins attempt to arrest the miners, and gunfire breaks out, killing some prominent guards. (191) Rosa is driven insane by the deaths of her family, and the novel insinuates that the mine owner keeps her as a sex worker. A striker, Cecil Nunally, was “shot in the back of the head while his wife and children stood by and screamed”; afterward, his body was paraded through the streets (217). Carrie’s father is killed floating timber downriver after his son talks him into selling their trees to the coal companies to build houses (64-65).

The most decadently grotesque descriptions are the double murder of Isom Justice and Albion Freeman, Carrie’s husband. When the two men are on their way to stand trial for the murder of a Baldwin guard they are confronted by more guards waiting in and around the courthouse. Carrie narrates this section:

A wet spray struck my cheek. Albion's arm stiffened beneath my hand and he stumbled and fell. I tried to hold him up by the arm but he fell away so the arm was twisted behind him and I feared I had broken it. Each time I screamed another crimson gash ripped through his chest. ... Isom lay face down beside Albion in a pool of blood. Gladys knelt over him, her face frozen and contorted. ... One of the gunmen, a short man with a long, curled moustache, strolled up. He leaned over, put his gun to the back of Isom's head. Gladys swung the parasol wildly.

"Dont shoot him again! Please dont shoot him again!"

I pulled Gladys toward me so she wouldn't see, and the gunman fired. A piece of skull struck me in the face and opened a cut on my cheek. Gladys screamed and struggled against me. (230)

The imagery in this section is vivid and the body mutilation compounds to a grotesque extent. Carrie's face is sprayed with her husband's blood whose now dead body falls to the ground. As Carrie grabs his lifeless limbs to give support or to try to provide some dignity to his death, she mangles him even more. The men are shot too many times to be necessary. Even more so, the language seems to suggest that the gunmen ardently shoot Albion each time Carrie screams. Giardina describes Isom's wife, Gladys (daughter of already murdered C.J.), as embodied pain ("contorted"). However, these grotesque descriptions continue: the gunmen approach the dead bodies to fire a few more time at close range. At this point, Giardina seems to take some creative license to a decadent extreme as Carrie describes a shard of her friend's skull, propelled by the force of a bullet sent in the opposite direction, flies up with such velocity that it cuts her face. This

grotesquely decadent aesthetic of death and mutilation produces an exhausting experience for readers. The death of Albion, the most religious and moral character in the novel, speaks to the point that good people must be susceptible to harm.

Giardina describes an event of mass murder to convey the exhaustion of the strikers' experience. Near the middle of the novel, Carrie goes for a contemplative walk through the tent colony. When she hears a slow train approaching, she thinks it might be Rondal, returned to organize the strikers after his departure to seek sanctuary in Charleston. Instead, the train is full of "gun thugs" with machine guns firing into the tents. Carrie narrates:

I caught a glimpse of dark metal, and then the boxcar spat fire.

I fell onto my back and hit my head in the gravel. I saw Sam Gore keel and fire his rifle. Then he jerked backwards like a rag doll and lay twisted and still. I tried to scream but the clatter of machine guns was deafening. Bullets ripped open the tents with great tearing sounds; those closest to the tracks collapsed. (222)

Here, Giardina directly juxtaposes hope and potentiality with death and destruction. She details the bodily contortions of a man being shot by a machine gun, showing how the power of the coal companies can reduce his autonomy to that of a "rag doll." Even Carrie is not allowed the power of her voice to scream over the roar of the guns. The destruction of the tents highlights the strikers' vulnerability most of all. They are living in these flimsy makeshift shelters because they took a risk to stand up for the value of their labor. These fragile tents, then, are symbolic of the strikers' vulnerability and the position they have allowed themselves to be put in for the pursuit of a better life.

More importantly, Giardina's ability for continual death to be shocking throughout the novel speaks against an affect easily attributed to southern Appalachian literature that Giardina avoids: resignation. The tent massacre scene emphasizes the delicacy and goodness of vulnerability, and the characters' continuation on their path, in contrast with the withdrawal of Rondal's mother, speaks to the moral necessity of that condition. It keeps characters too busy to mourn and too simulated to become acquiescent. Instead, the novel achieves exhaustion by relying on the hope that there is a possibility for change, and thus keeping the reader *in* the mood for change. In an interview, Giardina talks about her craft, and how she sees it important to be in with the characters. Giardina says, "Everything I have written so far is in the first person ... I do have to get inside that first-person narrator. There is something about that process. It's like assuming an identity" (qtd. in Douglass 386). This work that Giardina puts into the craft of the narrative pays off in the exhaustion that readers feel when reading the novel. That is, the product of Giardina's labor gets transferred to the readers in an act of interpellation.

The final element that induces exhaustion is the novel's afterword written by the grown-up son of Carrie Bishop and Rondal Lloyd, Dillion Freeman. The afterword is dated 1987, the publication date of the novel. Gillespie explains how

[b]y introducing a contemporary fictional author at the end of the novel, *Storming Heaven* focuses the reader's attention on the relevance of the novel's historical narrative for the present. Dillion, also a union man, has collected the stories which make up the novel during time down from picket duty. The strike which absorbs

Dillion is the United Mine Workers of American (UMWA) strike in 1984 against A.T. Massey.” (102)

The last sentence of the afterword is, “The companies still own the land” (293). The afterword could be misread as resignation, but aesthetically, Giardina is using the afterword to disrupt the possibility of “rest” being the affect readers are left with. At the end of the novel proper, Carrie returns to her homestead to have her son and care for Rondal until he ultimately dies from the wounds he received in the Battle of Blair Mountain. Without the afterword, this ending gives the novel a mood of loss and defeat, yes, but also of resolution. Like Hoberek’s findings concerning exhaustion and *The Road*, *Storming Heaven* resists typical narrative closure. Ending in resolution would ruin the work of this novel because Giardina wants to create the anticathartic feeling of exhaustion. *Storming Heaven*’s historical moment requires the lasting affect to cause readers to be unsettled, not complacent. The afterword shows how after the action of the novel, the remaining characters are not allowed to rest. Dillon narrates, “My mother, Uncle Ben and Aunt Flora were forced to move, and lived at five different places in Paine and Justice Counties until their deaths” (293). By including the afterword, Giardina uproots the resolution and signals towards a cycle that sends readers back to the beginning to the novel, as if to repeat the experience, as if there is still a hope of agency and an exhausting need of urgency.

Giardina creates this exhaustion aesthetically and thematically in *Storming Heaven* by writing about the topic of labor abuse and by writing in a way that emotionally and physically challenges her readers. Indeed, when reviewers discuss

Storming Heaven they often talk about the feelings it creates. For example, *Los Angeles Times* reviewer and prominent Appalachian writer, Fred Chappell writes, “a reader is likely to come away from ‘Storming Heaven’ in a fury of helpless indignation.” Another reviewer, Robert Olen Butler, says that the novel “portrays a time in the history of [Giardina’s] home state of West Virginia that will make you angry.” This anger, in the late 1980s, is praised as one of the affects of the novel, and could be compelling to future readers as a gateway to feed their addiction to exhaustion. Butler continues:

The workers whose oppressed lives we share in this book are so well drawn that you will get angry enough to wonder if the world isn’t in fact made up of two entirely different species of beings—humans (workers) worth our sympathy and understanding, and monsters in human guise (company owners, managers and those who do their bidding), who are pure embodiments of evil.

That one actually begins to personally feel this dichotomy is a testament to Giardina’s artfulness. It is also a testament to Giardina’s political consciousness. Because she is able to create these feelings of alliance, Giardina gets close to using exhaustion to create clear political commitments by engendering a feeling that lasts and by linking that feeling to political activism so as to make readers feel that they are already a part of a political movement. These reviews confirm how the novel is able to imbue readers with *unsettling* senses—no doubt desirable for disrupting the status quo. Their choices to express themselves in terms of “helpless indignation,” “angry,” and the ability to “personally feel [the human-monster] dichotomy” are a way of working towards an articulation of their exhausting experience. This jumbled set of aesthetic affects, to an

attentive reader, resonates as both bodily and psychic exhaustion from the multiple aesthetic moves that Giardina collects throughout the course of the novel.

However, to treat Butler and his review of the novel fairly, I must clarify that he comes away feeling manipulated and claims that to truly be artful, the work should not be so political. He writes, “Ultimately, our righteous anger at the bad guys turns to a feeling that we’re being manipulated. It seems as if no brave union organizer goes unmurdered, no child goes unstarved, no pregnant woman goes unkicked” (Butler). A scene that this review alludes to occurs after the governor declares martial law, police men are sent to break up the tent colony of striking miners. Giardina writes that the police men and Baldwin guards caught an Italian woman who was pregnant and “threw her on the ground and kicked her repeatedly in the belly” ... “The Italian woman delivered a stillborn baby and died herself the next morning” (207).¹⁴⁷ That Butler feels manipulated is a threat to the potential of exhaustion because it highlights the feeling’s separation from actual personal commitments. There is no temperance or moderation to exhaustion. It is a feeling that works through consuming, and, therefore, unlike other political affects that can often align people in undetected ways, exhaustion calls attention to its own presence. In their article “Emotional Stability and Citizenship Fatigue: The Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Job Stressors,” Xiaoyan Liu and Kun Yu show how emotional exhaustion

¹⁴⁷ A second example occurs when Giardina provides one scene of gun thugs kicking striking families out and, again, uses the image of a pregnant woman; “Scores of company guards fanned out through the two coal camps. They banged on doors of houses with rifle guns trained on the children so their parents wouldn’t fight back. They tossed furniture into the road. People salvaged what they could carry away. A woman named Betty Woolridge, nine months pregnant, laid down on a mattress and give birth beside the road while her neighbor’s dishes were tossed and smashed beside her” (186-197).

can lead to citizenship fatigue. While the context of their study examines work-place environments, their framework seeks to explain how emotional exhaustion can cause people to disengage and weaken identification with a particular organization or goal; they write, “Citizenship fatigue is not only an unfavorable state but also leads to adverse outcomes, such as reduced levels of subsequent citizenship behavior” (Liu and Yu 254). The enervation of an aesthetic and feeling such as exhaustion, then, risks a kind of citizenship fatigue that would be adverse to Giardina’s political goals. By the end of the novel, Giardina wants to readers to feel as if they belong to a political movement, as she uses prolonged exposure to exhaustion to approximate that feeling of belonging. But the effectiveness of this approach relies on the right amount of exhaustion because causing fatigue might weaken any identification readers build to Giardina’s political cohort.

However, while Oder points out that “a few critics have found her descriptions of miners and bosses too melodramatic,” he writes that “Giardina counters by saying she actually tamed down the mine wars and that she aimed to create difficult characters” (70).¹⁴⁸ Giardina’s characterization and use of protagonists that are in some ways repellent does indeed mitigate these feelings of manipulation.¹⁴⁹ Robert M. Coughlin, reviewer for *Appalachian Heritage*, explains his feelings in a different way. He claims

¹⁴⁸ I would also add that Giardina self-consciously avoids the trap of poverty porn by portraying how much better Carrie and Albion’s lives are with a little more money. She writes, “Yes, there was a pride in it now that we were a bit better off. Only those who can afford it take pride in such things, and only when looking back on them” (166).

¹⁴⁹ For example, while Rondal Lloyd is one of the novel’s major protagonists, he is not an all-around “good guy.” Indeed, Giardina writes him to be a Heathcliff-like character (*Wuthering Heights* is Carrie’s favorite book). At one point during his narration he leaves Carrie and thinks, “It pleased me to leave her there alone, even though I knew it hurt her. Maybe because I knew it hurt her” (174).

that the novel leaves readers indebted. He writes, “This book reminds us all of the sacrifices our forebears have made and the sacrifices still demanded to create a more humane country” (62). If exhaustion can transfer obligation, perhaps it has a place as a political and ethical feeling. However, the other reviewer shows how quickly feelings of obligation can quickly turn to feelings of manipulation and fatigue.

Conclusion

Giardina is on to something when she identifies exhaustion as an anticathartic feeling with political potential. Yes, the argument can be made that *Storming Heaven* is flawed because of some overreach in affect to achieve a political purpose, but many of Giardina’s choices also seem necessary when we consider her affective and political goals. Exhaustion, while not the most glamorous affect of the 1980s, is notable because it defines the undercurrents of struggle, tension, anxiety, and general nerviness of the time. Exhaustion as an aesthetic category creates the opportunity to better appreciate literature’s ability to mimic that mood, and play into Americans’ desires to feel *like* active agents. Giving readers the feeling of political agency does not create political action. However, by imbuing readers into the collective political resistance and by making readers feel the effects of the exhausting event, an aesthetics of exhaustion generates the possibility of agency by creating a political space for readers to see themselves in. Once this subjectivity is created, the continuation of exhaustion, and indeed, the subject’s desire to continue her feeling of being exhausted, requires the reader to take up the labor that the text sets in motion.

While exhaustion carries more political possibility than most aesthetic categories of affect, Giardina's use of a decadent aesthetic to create exhaustion seems to work, but it also seems misleading. Readers feel as if they have participated in a political event, but they have not. Using exhaustion as an aesthetic makes Giardina's art innovative, laborious, and inescapable. But, its ability to produce long-lasting commitment-forming affiliation rests on shaky grounds. Indeed, in *The Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum explains that "the guidance given by emotions is sometimes ethically good and sometimes bad. Emotions are only as reliable as the cultural material from which they are made" (xvii). If exhaustion works, it works because it creates a feeling of commitment and obligation. This is not quite the same as having actual commitments. Perhaps those feelings of commitment can turn into acknowledged and accepted commitments, but this is not a given.

Though exhaustion is what Giardina works the hardest at producing, she does gesture toward other forms of obligation, particularly Christian love. Albion, a "no heller" preacher, often thinks about his choices in terms of the Christian obligation to love others. Before he must report to stand trial, Carrie tries to convince him to return to the Homeplace. Albion responds that he cannot,

"Because the Homeplace aint Heaven, Carrie. Hit's part of the creation and hit's fallen and hit suffers just like we do. And the only way to live on it happy is to loved everything else that's fallen. And ifn I cant love them gun thugs, God wont call me back to the Homeplace, because I'll love all the wrong things about it, I'll

love it because they aint no gun thugs there and because there I can turn my back on all the suffering, and I'll make an idol outen it, and worship it." (227-228)¹⁵⁰

Albion is an underappreciated character, not subtly presented as the boring Edgar Linton to Randal's exciting Heathcliff, whose death occurs only a little past halfway through the novel. And yet his sense of commitment and obligation presents a more secure path for eudaimonia. He does not participate in their political efforts because he feels aggrieved or because he thinks to feel exhausted is a testament to one's virtue. Albion becomes involved in these politics because of a moral obligation to love others and to do the best he can to improve their lived experiences and search for goodness.

¹⁵⁰ In this declaration, Albion provides an implicit rebuke to Bulter's reading of "company owners, managers and those who do their bidding" as "pure embodiments of evil."

Love, an Afterword

“In the course of our work, [Terry] Real and I were struck by the extent to which people know in some sense where they have sealed off love, the deals they have made and the compromises struck, always for good reason but often at enormous cost. The awareness of complicity is so shameful that it often seems easier to justify it than to experience and question what has been sacrificed. To do so means to go back and undo the process of initiation that sanctioned the sacrifice, typically for the sake of relationships and making one’s way in the world. The very language of love and pleasure, like the meaning of the word ‘relationship,’ changes in the course of this initiation, shrouding the loss in confusion and making it difficult for people to speak and listen.”

— Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure* p. 18

“All of Father’s earlier aspirations and ambitions had required him to consider only the risk that might be entailed for himself, but when he uprooted his family in Nashville and took us to Memphis he was morally bound to consider the risks there were for the psyches of five other people, not merely a dependent young wife and a bundle of small children but a wife who was now past forty and four young people who were either adolescents or young adults.”

— Peter Taylor, *A Summons to Memphis* p. 180

The South may be an imagined category and a collective projected fantasy, but, even with this knowledge and perspective, how do we live inside it? What does living inside it do to us, our loved ones, and our relationships? And, once we figure out what it does to us and our relationships, is there any way to stop it or to try to make life better? This dissertation has worked to show how desires for southern exceptionalism influence lived experience. Many of the phenomena I have examined are not exclusive to the South, but particular southern desires and historically situated race, class, and gender norms produce a specific assemblage of power that enables southern structures of feeling to flourish. In this work, I have paid attention to how commitments to southern myths of

exceptionalism and projective fantasies produce real feelings that have real consequences.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted how Jon Smith, ever the productive antagonist, questioned my approach to southern studies by asking how it was any different than those he critiques; how am I not participating in the “southern rage to explain”? This ends up being a tricky question since, presumably, any critical work is doing some form of explaining. However, instead of seeking to discuss southern backgrounds in order to justify southern exceptionalism—why we’re the most aggrieved or why we’re the best suited to theorize about American racism—the chapters here examine southern conditions so that we might better understand them, in order to decrease the desire for exceptionalism or, at least, be able to examine the costs of sustaining this myth. So here, at the end, instead of raging an explanation, I put forth a meditation on loving attentiveness.

Love does not offer a perfect solution. Contrary to romantic ideals, love often fails—particularly when loving another would require contradicting one’s cultural beliefs. However, when understood as an obligation in its own right, it has the potential to compete with other commitments, so disrupting suspended agency and enabling some choice, and perhaps even creativity or playfulness. If southern structures of feeling work to keep things stuck in an anticathartic style, perhaps love can help illuminate some of these tendencies and offer new potential.

Southern structures of feeling work by giving a promise of certainty and protection from embarrassment, surprising loss, or vulnerability. But it comes at the cost

of circumscribing care; the structure gets to determine whom you can care for, how much you can care for them, and the point at which even that care must be curtailed. Like Lance from Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, you can have (or at least simulate) a totalizing structure of being that can be completely comprehended and mastered, but to do so requires giving up affective freedom in interpersonal relationships. Like the Fairchilds, Lance is compelled to hold together his faulty structure of understanding because it provides him with a comforting sense of assurance. Indeed, most of the characters considered in this project, like the patients Carol Gilligan describes in the epigraph above, forfeit love in order to make themselves less vulnerable.

Thinking about love as an obligation attempts to remove the interference of desire-based feelings; no matter how much you might want to remain secure, requirements of loving attentiveness take precedence. Thinking about love as an obligation is a part of many, not mutually exclusive, ethical traditions, including virtue ethics, care ethics, and Christian ethics, which emphasize the need to practice. In Part I of the Second Part of his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas builds on Aristotle's conception of friendship to discuss choosing love and willing love to the other (Q. 26 A. 4. p. 736). For Aquinas, love is the work of willing oneself to choose to love another and willing the good for another. It is not a feeling that can be superseded; instead, like Aristotelian virtues, this attention to willing love requires work to become a virtuous habit. Care ethicist Gilligan also sees the work of love as a practice that requires revision

and creativity.¹⁵¹ Gilligan thinks that love and the vulnerability that it makes possible create opportunities for finding a way out of tragedy; tragedy, she argues through clinical examples and references to *Oedipus Rex*, happens in failures of love because people do not acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and therefore remain blind to oncoming misfortune and too stuck in faulty structures of being to prevent it.¹⁵² Gilligan suggests that vulnerable love is a “means to imagine an escape from tragedy” (19).

The canon of southern literature is full of tragic failures of love, including many of the texts examined here: for example, Sutpen’s failure to love his first son, Randal’s mother’s failure to love Ronald, and the Fairchilds’ failure to love anybody still living. One particularly illustrative text is Peter Taylor’s *A Summons to Memphis* (1986). The novel opens with the narrator being summoned by his two sisters to come home and help stop their father’s second marriage. From this point, Taylor alternates between retrospective and active moments in the Carver family’s tragic cycle wherein characters, especially the sisters, develop thick and quirky personalities as a barrier against mutual identification and trusting relationships. Shortly after this opening scene, Phillip, our narrator and the youngest sibling, recounts the traumatic event that disrupted the presumably happy and fulfilled lives of the family and set them on paths of guarded, unloving relationships: the father and patriarchal head of the family suffered an

¹⁵¹ Gilligan identifies a “rhythm of love” that is a process of “finding and losing and finding again” in a way that is similar to Aristotelian virtues being a practice.¹⁵¹

¹⁵² Gilligan uses Oedipus as a tragic figure whose refusal to be open (and whose parents’ refusal to be open) causes tragedy. She claims that the play “is perhaps the most powerful dramatic rendering of dissociation: the determination at all costs not to see what in another sense one knows” (43).

embarrassing loss at the hands of his close friend and business partner, Lewis Shackleford.¹⁵³ Instead of staying in their home, Nashville, and finding comfort and strength in his other relationships, the father moves the entire family (including servants, who often get disregarded in the narrator's contemplation) to start over in Memphis. When the father suffers this loss, though no fault of his own, in the open and trusting relationship he had with Shackleford, he retreats into the comforting rigidity of southern honor norms.¹⁵⁴ Phillip explains that the move forced his sisters to give up their romantic relationships and move to a city where they would not be given another year to be a debutante, making it less likely they would find new relationships.¹⁵⁵

The father's retreat from relationship and care after his loss has a domino effect on his family. The daughters are harmed by his mandate that they give up their Nashville relationships; before withering away, the mother monitors her children's display of happiness—"If somebody doesn't say something cheerful, I'm going to go and jump in the Mississippi River"—and all of the siblings seem to have no concept of willing love or good for others, nor do any of them have successful relationships (25). The narrator

¹⁵³ Gilligan explains that, "The very openness and vulnerability of relationship ... exposes us to disappointment, betrayal, loss, and trauma" (160).

¹⁵⁴ As if to deny that he might have ever been vulnerable in the first place, Mr. Carver refuses to discuss Mr. Shackleford or any of his losses in Nashville. While it might seem more in line with southern honor to confront or duel with the trespasser, it is also honorable, and perhaps greatly illustrative of class performance, to appear unaffected or unharmed; this also carries with it a sense of American individualism, and the ideal of the self-made man.

¹⁵⁵ Phillip claims this "would ultimately have the effect of freezing them in the roles of eternal young ladies" (20).

stays fixed on his father's decision that he identifies as the cause of this change in their family. First he thinks,

Perhaps we were something vestigial—as a family, as a class of people even.

Perhaps it wasn't the move but only my father's insistence that the family should be moved intact, merely an expression of his need to have his wife and children with him, and with himself altogether unchanged, if he were to successfully begin his career over like a young man. (21)

In this description, Phillip understands his father has shifted his orientation to the family; they are no longer active members participating in relationship. Instead, they are merely objects that represent his wholeness. They are a faux display of his ability to remain unharmed in his relationship with Shackelford, as if he cannot bear to think about someone commenting that they must at times travel back to visit a happily married Betsy, reminding him of their displacement and the original harm that caused it.¹⁵⁶ Still meditating on this source of his family's problem, a few pages later Phillip expands on this idea:

But maybe it was only that Father was thinking that he *must* arrive in Memphis with the entire family household intact if he was to make a new go of things. I think possibly he felt that was the only way he could endure this transition. He could only have the strength to start over if he felt he had lost nothing of himself;

¹⁵⁶ I imagine this is why when young Phillip “almost shouted out then in [his] thirteen-year-old-boy innocence that, anyway, we’d all be coming back to Nashville to visit and that Betsy would very soon be coming back to live ... something about the expression in [his] Mother’s hazel eyes ... warned [him] not to say it” (19-20).

if he was certain that all his dependents were still dependents. No one must be allowed to defect or he would feel that he was not entering whole into the life ahead of him. (38)

The father wants to mitigate his vulnerability and one of the ways he does this is by buying deeper into structured feeling and modes of interacting, particularly those related to southern honor. After the betrayal of his friendship, the father struggles to reassemble meaning, and, doing so, chooses a less risky preset of hierarchies. Philip considers how this action leads to unspoken hostile feelings sustained by the family when he thinks: “perhaps that *is* what sustained *him* in the years immediately afterward, sustained him and in some degree destroyed the rest of us [*italics original*]” (38). In his hurry to appear whole and unharmed by his betrayal, the father betrays his other commitments to be loving and attentive to his family. Acknowledging mutual dependence is fundamental to flourishing in loving relationships. Eschewing mutual dependence leads to false narratives of exceptionalism—what one can do or build, or how one can thrive on one’s own. In order to be free to develop new ideas and new modes of being, we must acknowledge the truth that is our mutual dependence, which highlights our obligations to love and attend to one another, but it also provides more choices and freedoms than structures of feeling that prescribe modes of being.

The father’s decision sparks a crisis of connection that permeates the novel. Because they lack commitments to love, characters are unable to resolve conflict, and while the family is economically and socially prosperous, they are incredibly unhappy

and exhibit a lack of trust in interpersonal connections.¹⁵⁷ They tease and test each other constantly, acting as if their family structure is a prison wherein they each get to irritate each other forever. Indeed, it appears that when the father closed off his relationships because of the loss he suffered, the children suffered the loss of their relationships with him, and did the same.

Ultimately, the sisters get their way and prevent their father from marrying. They even go so far as to give up their independence and move in with him because they are so “committed ... to keeping [their] Father in a lone and single state” (151). In order to secure and enjoy their justice, they give up their freedom. However, one character from the House of Carver escapes the tragic plot. Through his introspection and careful and assessment of the relationships in his life, Phillip begins to see the tragic circumstance that has plagued his family for years:

I could think only that indirectly at least it was this Lewis Shackleford who had affected my life so that I would become a man who would find it so difficult to fall in love with a woman that it could only happen once in my life. I felt my narrowness and cowardice about love was all due, inadvertently or otherwise, to my father’s treatment of me and Lewis’s treatment of my father. (192)

¹⁵⁷ Gilligan puts this process of being open or closed in relationships in blunt terms when she tells her patients, “If you are going to be open and in relationship, you are vulnerable. I mean, that’s just it. The only way to stop, not be vulnerable, is to close yourself off. At that point, you’re vulnerable to a whole set of other things. But in terms of the openness, the vulnerability, if you have that, then you can make some choices around it. Otherwise, if you lose that, you have no choice” (68).

Here, Phillip is able to do what tragic characters are never able to do: understand his faults before they crush him. He admits that he has held onto hurts and harms in order to avoid new or surprising losses, but, in so doing, he has given up some of his affective freedoms in a way that makes him “narrow” and keeps him in a “cowardly” position—a position that circumscribes his potential to form new relationships and experiment with intimacy.

In his article, “Iris Murdoch and the Power of Love,” Anil Gomes explains Murdoch’s philosophy by summarizing her point about her scene between a mother-in-law (M) who does not love or like her daughter-in-law (D). However, M, as Murdoch writes, wills herself to look lovingly on D. Gomes summarizes what happens when we will ourselves to love: “To attend to something is to look at it lovingly, to look at it justly. It is only by lovingly attending to things that we see them as they really are,” and even more so, “When we attend to another, we look at them lovingly, and come to see what is required of us. Attention is our way of latching onto a moral realm that is there anyway.” Affect theory helps us attend better. Structures of feeling work to divide and segment people, often in ways that go unrecognized by those whose feelings are being structured. Being committed to attending to people lovingly requires much of the kind of attentiveness that the study of affect requires, if we are to see things as they really are, and how those things came to be that way. Murdoch’s M investigates her own non-loving commitments that might be impeding her ability to love D. Murdoch writes that “the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her [italics

original] ” (17). And being capable of this enables M to tell herself: ““I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I am be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again’” (Murdoch 17). In this way, M, and Phillip, take Gilligan’s clinical advice “to go back and undo the process of initiation that sanctioned the sacrifice, typically for the sake of relationships and making one’s way in the world” (18). M recognizes her underlying commitments to conventionality and sees the way that this disables her affective freedom. By willing themselves to look lovingly, M and Phillip interrupt the cycle and recognize their own faults before tragedy befalls them.

Often, southern characters are more comfortable resting on narratives of southern exceptionalism that provoke feelings of indignation or melancholia rather than to risk deconstructing that meaning to clear a path for new truths embedded in mutual dependency. While Rosa Coldfield is content to be full of static and indignant rage instead of questioning the meaning of her losses and experiences, Phillip offers another path. He considers the pain of his past and whether that pain is really worth the prized position of defining the way he makes meaning in life. Phillip’s recognizes the tragic elements at play here. Instead of becoming enamored of his family’s southern-accented grand narrative of pain, loss, and honor, as Quentin does, Phillip refuses to develop his identity around it. At first, he comes to the conclusion that he must forget about the pain his father caused him: “It was a hopeless situation for him, and one simply had to forget all that” (180). However, his girlfriend, Holly, makes him question this perspective, arguing that he cannot forget; instead, he needs to accept. And yet, this very well-written novel leaves readers feeling dissatisfaction, which is undoubtedly related to Phillip’s own

dissatisfaction with his conclusion. Indeed, love runs the risk of the offender never seeing the error of his ways, and it disrupts desires for justice that we so desperately crave. Holly's and Phillip's general direction of looking lovingly on their fathers' dilemmas gets closer to a care-based morality. What this novel, not so gracefully, shows is the dissatisfaction people often feel when shifting from justice-based ethics, which examines the situation as one in which only one party has the possibility of laying claim to being right, to care-based ethics, which seeks to remove the conflict instead of the erroneous individual.

Taylor's awkward ending does not quite articulate this final move; indeed, it's likely that Taylor was not thinking in these terms. However, Phillip's trajectory seems to be taking him in this direction, and the ultimate feelings of dissatisfaction at the end may be the result of forfeiting the satisfaction that accompanies justice—even though justice is rarely distributed adequately.¹⁵⁸ While the father committed an injustice by not considering the needs of his family, assessing personal relationships through a justice-based morality is perhaps not the best option because its solutions are more focused on damaging the guilty, which in this case, is still a person with whom Phillip and his sisters are in relationship. Affect theory is often used to think about justice, and rarely used to think about ethics. But, there are new possibilities in thinking about attending to affect with a sense of a care-based morality.¹⁵⁹ Giving loving attention to people's affective

¹⁵⁸ See Wai Chee Dimock's *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy*.

¹⁵⁹ In *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, Martha Nussbaum, whose own brand of virtue ethics is at times strikingly similar to care ethics, argues that we ought leave justice to the law so that we do not become obsessed with justice ourselves. She writes, "the law permits us to care about wrongs done to friends and family

states and structures of feeling has the potential to see the ways in which our intimacies with others might be changed with the creative compromises and solutions of a care-based morality and further away from unproductive desires such as vengeance and feelings of embattlement. But, this requires one to give up wanting to feel embattled. As this dissertation shows, Phillip is in very limited company.

members, without spending our lives consumed with angry emotions and projects of retribution” (4).

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