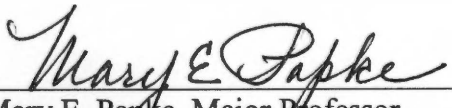


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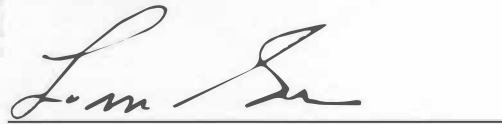
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Brannon Winn Costello entitled "Plantation Airs: Racial Paternalism and the Transformations of Class in Southern Fiction, 1945-1971." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.


Mary E. Papke, Major Professor

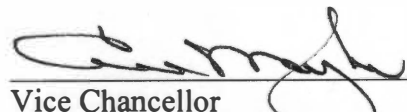
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Acceptance for the Council:


Vice Chancellor
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**PLANTATION AIRS: RACIAL PATERNALISM AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS
OF CLASS IN SOUTHERN FICTION, 1945-1971**

**A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Brannon Winn Costello
August 2004**

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Thesis
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Abstract

Plantation Airs explores a crucial aspect of the complicated intersection of race and class in the post-World War II South. Many factors, such as wealth and family, determine an individual's class—a complicated and highly contested term, especially in the South. However, I argue that one important and often overlooked determinant of class is the performance of attitudes and behaviors associated with a romanticized image of the agrarian, antebellum South, especially racial paternalism. Fred Hobson has argued that Southern literary scholarship has been conspicuously silent about class; my dissertation strives to correct that omission. Drawing from historical scholarship and the class stratification theories of Thorstein Veblen, Max Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu, I establish the ways in which a form of antebellum agrarian values continued to shape the political and social life of the South well into the twentieth century. However, as the texts I consider reveal, the performance of racial paternalism that whites used as a tool to validate their claims to aristocracy or to increase their social mobility became complicated in the wake of the New Deal and World War II. The South experienced widespread social changes, including the growing independence of African Americans and the increasing business and urban orientation of the region. These alterations did not escape the notice of the region's writers, who produced a rich and diverse body of literature that demonstrated a keen awareness of the ways in which these changes disrupted the deeply embedded structures governing the relationship between race and class. In each chapter I examine novels by Zora Neale Hurston (*Seraph on the Suwanee*), Eudora Welty (*Delta Wedding* and *The Ponder Heart*), William Faulkner (*The Mansion*), Ernest J. Gaines (*Of Love and Dust*), and Walker Percy (*The Last Gentleman* and *Love in*

the Ruins) that respond to the collapse of paternalism as a means of determining class. I argue that class was a key issue for these authors; their texts reveal how supposedly essential class identities depend upon a strictly codified set of racial performances and suggest alternate, more equitable models of race and class identity.

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INTRODUCTION
The Problem of Flem Snopes's Hat:
Southern History, Racial Paternalism, and the Transformations of Class

The Mansion (1959), the final novel in William Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, chronicles the last stage of shrewd Flem Snopes's climb from poverty and obscurity in the rural community of Frenchman's Bend to what seems the pinnacle of wealth, prestige, and respectability as a bank president in the town of Jefferson—just before his murder at the hands of kinsman Mink Snopes. Though Flem clearly represents a new profit- and business-centered ethic in a South that Faulkner constructs as largely feudal, he also takes care to exhibit his success in symbols and language associated with an agrarian-oriented Southern aristocracy. Veteran Snopes-watcher V.K. Ratliff describes Flem's new abode, Manfred De Spain's "rejuvenated ancestral home" (137), as "jest a house," and notes that it would have been perfectly acceptable for De Spain or even Colonel Sartoris, since Sartoris "had been born into money and respectability too, and Manfred De Spain had been born into respectability at least even if he had made a heap of the money since" (148). However, Flem knows that since he had to earn the house and the bank presidency, had to "snatch and tear and scrabble both of them outen the hard enduring resisting rock," such an ordinary house would not do for him; instead, his house "would have to be the physical symbol of all them generations of respectability and aristocracy that not only would a been too proud to mishandle other folks' money, but couldn't possibly ever needed to" (148). Flem's new upper-crust status, then, is precarious and requires constant reinforcement, requires a performance that, paradoxically, represents both his skill with a dollar and his indifference to the base world of economics. Therefore, he sets about converting this "jest a house" into a replica

of an antebellum mansion, in the process “tearing off Major de Spain’s front gallery and squaring up the back of the house and building and setting up them colyums to reach all the way from the ground to the second-storey roof” (148). But the house alone does not suffice: Ratliff goes on to point out that Flem only becomes “completely complete...with a Negro cook and a yardboy that could even drive” him to and from work each day. Similar servants, Ratliff mentions, did the same for previous bank presidents. That Flem requires such servants to “complete” him implies that a true Southern aristocrat must maintain a paternalistic relationship of dominance and subservience with African Americans, one also rooted in an idealized version of antebellum society.

However, a slip in ostensibly the most minor and cosmetic aspect of Flem’s performance of his new status becomes a major problem for the residents of Jefferson and prevents them from ever truly accepting him as a true Southern aristocrat, largely because this gaffe indicates his incomplete understanding of the racial performance necessary to authorize the class identity he seeks to attain. Ratliff reveals that when Flem ascended to the bank’s presidency, he relinquished the old cloth cap that he had brought from Frenchman’s Bend in favor of “a black planter’s hat suitable to his new position and avocation” (132). Flem’s move here seems a smart one, calculated to further his re-creation of himself as a classic agrarian aristocrat. However, Ratliff notes that the hat “even after five years still didn’t look like it actively belonged to him” (144). Ratliff here implies that Flem’s new hat fits him so badly because of how he disposed of his old hat, a hat which now rests on the head of a young African American boy. Normally, passing down a bit of old clothing to a needy black child would perfectly exemplify the paternalist ethic that organized relations between aristocratic Southerners and African

Americans. But, according to Ratliff, the “legend [was] he sold it to a Negro boy for ten cents” (132). This transaction proves to be a sticking point in Jefferson’s vision of Flem, and because of it, Ratliff claims that although the house “might a been the solid aristocratic ancestral symbol” that Flem wanted it to be, “it was jest the house that was altered and transmogrified and symbolized: not him” (149). That is, the citizens of Jefferson still see Flem as the same man because his old cap was “not throwed away or even give away, but sold, even if it wasn’t but jest a dime because ten cents is money too around a bank, so that [they] could look at the hat and know that, no matter how little they might a paid for one similar to it, hisn had cost him ten cents less” (149). Though an adept social climber, Flem’s violation of the aristocratic ideal of *noblesse oblige*, his privileging of profit over paternalism, prevents him from ever completely achieving the status he has so long sought.

This relatively small incident in a much larger work—an incident whose implications I will explore in a later chapter—speaks to larger issues not only in *The Mansion* and Faulkner’s work in general but in much other Southern fiction written after World War II. The description of the changing economic structure of the South, its effect on the experience and perception of social class, and the manner in which race functions in the construction of a class structure rooted in a romanticized version of aristocratic, agrarian society recurs, albeit in unique and complex ways, in much Southern literature of the period. I aim to offer a thorough examination of this literature in order to begin to answer the challenge posed by Fred Hobson in *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (1999). Hobson argues that “any honest discussion of contemporary southern life must increasingly lie” at “that treacherous intersection of race

and class” (147). He notes, however, that such an analysis quickly becomes complicated because the issue of class has rarely been “openly and honestly addressed” (134) in Southern literary scholarship, and he believes that this is partially because the South, “despite (or perhaps because of) its reputation for class consciousness, has been populated by individuals somewhat uncertain of, thus insecure about, their own class status” (134). He goes on to observe that in the South, “one’s social class is often defined in part by oneself, and usually to one’s own advantage: if one has family (meaning old family), class means family; if one has money, it means money; if one has education and refinement...it means good taste and proper English. And so forth” (135). I contend that, although Hobson outlines a number of valid determinants of class, one crucial, if not *the* crucial, determinant of membership in the most prestigious strata of the Southern class structure is the performance of certain racial attitudes and behaviors—such as paternalism—that emerge from a romanticized view of antebellum agrarian race relations, a performance that becomes increasingly problematic as the South grows ever more business and urban-oriented.

My dissertation will examine this intersection of race and class in works by Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Ernest J. Gaines, and Walker Percy written from the end of World War II through the major years of the civil rights movement and the early 1970s. I have chosen to focus on this specific period because the widespread social changes sweeping the South in the wake of drastic economic transformation and the increasing independence of African Americans did not escape the notice of the region’s writers, who produced a rich and diverse body of literature that demonstrated a keen awareness of the ways in which these changes complicated the

deeply embedded structures governing the relationship between race and class. I plan to discuss how each text dramatizes and/or criticizes these structures—or even, perhaps, remains complicit with them—and how in many cases the writers attempt to suggest, however vaguely, alternate, non-oppressive models of race and class identity. Of course, even though the texts under consideration largely appeared during the relatively short span of years between 1945 and 1971, the fact that these were such crucial years of change for the South will mean that I must carefully historicize the texts and not assume that social and economic trends in the 1940s will hold true in the 1960s. In this introduction, however, I would like to trace some of the broader historical trends that inform my study.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

My argument for the continuation of Old South racial ideology (or some version of it) has close ties to the larger debate in Southern historiography over how long and to what degree the ideals of the agrarian “plantocracy” influenced an increasingly industrial and urban South and, indeed, what the exact nature of those ideals was. In his still influential and oft-contested *The Mind of the South* (1941), W.J. Cash argued that a distinct set of values characterized both Old South and New, including a propensity to violence, a resistance to change, and the tendency of lower-class whites to identify more strongly with wealthy whites than with the African Americans whose material conditions they often shared. He further asserts that plantation values continued to dominate this industrial society, claiming that “Progress was being accomplished so completely within the framework of the past that the *plantation* remained the single great basic social and

economic pattern of the South—as much in industry as on the land” (205). The equally influential C. Vann Woodward challenged this view in his *Origins of the New South* (1951). Woodward claimed that the influence of middle-class industrialists has dominated the South since Reconstruction, resulting in the rejection of plantation values in favor of a profit-minded bourgeois individualism. He asserts, “Changes of a profound and subtle character in the Southern ethos—in outlook, institutions, and particularly in leadership” took place in the late nineteenth century (140). Of the South’s new leaders, Woodward remarks, “it is a mistake to view them merely as advocates of ‘industrialism’—of which there were several antebellum examples in the South. What is more important, they were preaching laissez-faire capitalism, freed of all traditional restraints, together with a new philosophy and way of life and a new scale of values” (148).

However, as James C. Cobb argues in *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (1999)—and as the example of Flem Snopes’s hat suggests—the very terms of the debate are fundamentally flawed. As Cobb helpfully observes, “[t]he experience of the American South...suggests that rather than a simple, fight to the death, winner-take-all slugfest, the interaction between what we call ‘tradition’ and what we call ‘modernity’ may take on a variety of shapes and yield a variety of outcomes” (192). Drawing on such recent studies as Jonathan M. Wiener’s *Social Origins of the New South* (1978) and Dwight Billings’ *Planters and the Making of the New South* (1979), Cobb asserts that reading Southern history as a polarized conflict between planters and industrialists “overemphasize[s] the social and political distance between” the two groups (5). Discussing transformations in the South’s economic

infrastructure in the first four decades of the twentieth century, Cobb further posits that “so long as industrial-development initiatives posed no threat to white supremacy, labor control, fiscal conservatism, and political stability, the interests of the region’s planters were in no danger of compromise” (16). Moreover, he notes, “Planter influence may have imposed some initial social and political restrictions on the New South development strategy, but for the most part those restrictions were either acceptable or downright appealing to the types of industrialists that were most receptive to the South’s overtures” (23). Planters and industrialists, then, found themselves in a sometimes uneasy but ultimately complementary relationship. Cobb claims as well that “economic decentralization helped to preserve political decentralization and a conservative style of government that served the needs of the industrialist without damaging the interests of the planter” (21). Cobb notes of the Delta planters particularly that “Fancying themselves heirs to an aristocratic antebellum tradition, this cadre of white leaders sought to create through an ironic combination of economic modernization and racial resubjugation a prosperous and politically insulated cotton kingdom where the Delta planter’s longstanding obsession with unfettered wealth and power could be transformed from Old South myth into New South reality” (*Most Southern* 97). And, after all, as Numan Bartley observes, despite the focus on industrialization in the South, “the plantation was the South’s basic economic and social institution and essentially remained so until the 1940s” (138). Indeed, generous government subsidies and the rapid mechanization of agriculture in the years leading up to World War II at least temporarily increased both planters’ wealth and their control over the dwindling, largely African American, agricultural labor force. As Jack Bloom remarks, changes in the South’s economic landscape did not result

in “any significant alteration in the racial practices or social relations, or in the allocation of political power, in the region. The elite that had emerged dominant in the South in the latter part of the nineteenth century continued to exercise political power,” and, moreover, “the racial practices of segregation and the denial of political rights to blacks, upon which the political and economic well-being of this class had rested, remained” (86-87). Thus, despite transformations that seemed sure to unseat the planter elite, some version of the values of the nineteenth-century agrarian South adapted to technological and economic changes and managed not only to survive but to thrive well into the twentieth century—though, as we shall see, in many cases the longer term effects of these changes worked to the planters’ detriment.¹

Of course, in some important senses, what we often consider the familiar values of the Old South emerged from the mind of the New. Though observers as philosophically and chronologically diverse as Cash, Woodward, and Cobb differ over the precise relationship between “agrarian” and “industrial” values in the modern South, they all agree that the mythology of the antebellum plantation exercised a powerful hold on the New South. Perhaps Woodward put it best when he remarked that “One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the ‘Old South’” (154). He further observes that “the most curious aspect of the revolution in values, manners, and

¹ I should note that the collaboration between planters and industrialists that Cobb identifies was not only a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. George Fitzhugh, for instance, argued in pre-Civil War works such as *Sociology for the South* (1854) and *Cannibals All! or Slaves Without Masters* (1857) that the South should welcome industrialization but should preserve the institution of slavery and avoid the capitalist system of free wage labor at all costs. In *Cannibals All!* he claims that “the unrestricted exploitation of so-called free society is more oppressive to the laborer than domestic slavery” (5), and that “Capital, irresponsible capital begets, and ever will beget, the *immedicable vulnus* of so-called Free Society” (202).

institutions that was daily leveling” the South’s unique traits “was the romanticism that accompanied and partially obscured the process. For along with the glittering vision of a ‘metropolitan’ and industrial South to come there developed a cult of archaism, a nostalgic vision of the past” (154). This nostalgia meant that “The fabled Southern aristocracy, long on its last legs, was refurbished, its fancied virtues and vices, airs and attitudes exhumed and admired....Drippings from the plantation legend overflowed upon race and labor relations, public charities, and even the organization of factory villages” (157). In a similar vein, Cash argued that “the notion of aristocracy continued—and, as I may as well say at once, continues to the present—to dominate social relations and aspiration in the narrow sense” (240); further, as Cash remarks, “It is just now in fact that Southerners themselves fully got around to adorning every knoll in the Old South with a great white manor-house, and to populating the land with more black slaves than China has Chinese” (242). Moreover, argues Cash, “if money was necessary to social position, pride in its possession almost invariably translated itself into terms fixed by the aristocratic complex as it had been brought forward from the Old South” (240)—a complex that, I would argue, includes racial paternalism.

Although the writers under consideration here describe and interrogate “paternalism” in various forms and from various perspectives, I should perhaps clarify my general use of the term, one not without lexical baggage.² For this study,

² As Kathleen Brown observes, “patriarchy” and “paternalism,” the terms which historians and sociologists ascribe to elite white men’s exercise of authority over their social inferiors, “are frequently defined imprecisely, if at all, and often assume completely different meanings for scholars investigating the history of different social relations” (322). After tracing the ways in which analysts of different fields use the terms “patriarchy” and “paternalism,” she notes that running through nearly all of their analyses is the sense that “paternalism” is an aspect of a social world “of heightened intimacy and emotion in which the crasser, sharper edges of patriarchy have been smoothed or ‘domesticated,’ and the ‘impersonal’ relations of a class

“paternalism” encompasses a whole range of racialized social practices stemming from a belief that African Americans are fundamentally inferior, even childlike, and, as such, require the almost parental care and protection of well-to-do whites who claim to have their best interests at heart, though they may in fact be ruthlessly exploiting them. Kind-hearted whites might give African American citizens money, clothes, food, shelter, and advice, but, typically, only if their beneficiaries conformed to the proper social roles. According to Eugene Genovese, paternalism lay at the heart of black-white relations on the antebellum plantation: He describes “the relation of master to slave” as “an extension of the relationship of father to perpetual child” (121), and he elsewhere observes that “Not accidentally, and by no means as a petty propaganda device, acts of the Confederate

society have not yet taken hold” (322). Brown argues, however, that historians have missed the crucial fact that “paternalism” and “patriarchy” are not mutually exclusive terms. She notes, for instance, that eighteenth-century Virginia planters, when faced with a crisis precipitated by one of their lessers, be it a woman or a slave, could deploy either intimate, familial, paternalistic methods of social control or harsher, more punishing, patriarchal methods such as corporal punishment. As Brown puts it, “paternalistic styles of authority may have partially masked the cruder side of planter power, but they never fully displaced it” (324). As I hope my discussion of the concept will demonstrate, I am aware that racial paternalism as it was practiced in the American South included a large measure of patriarchal-style punishment; paternalists justified that punishment as a regrettable but necessary aspect of their parental care for the childlike African Americans in their care.

I should also stress that “paternalism” in this study always means “*racial* paternalism” unless otherwise specified. *White* paternalism also existed in the South, of course. As Joel Williamson points out, contemporary observers of the rapidly growing textile industry in the turn-of-the-century South saw the relationship between the nearly all-white mill town and the mill owners as “a direct translation into the realities of the New South of the Old South values of *noblesse oblige*, paternalism, loyalty, and service,” but with poor whites instead of blacks as the recipients of elite benevolence (431). At the time, the popular conception held that the mill represented “the Southern community in harmony with itself and with the real and modern world. Master, trained to care for slaves on the plantations of the Old South, now brought capital and a kindly management to the white workers in the factories of the New” (434). Indeed, many textile managers believed they were effecting “the salvation of the lower class of whites by a patrician leadership” (432), and they “were convinced of their own paternalism. There was a feeling among them that they not only protected their white neighbors and cousins from the threat of black labor, but they also provided them with a life well above the level of bare subsistence” (434). I would not wish to ignore the significance of this white paternalism for the South, and I am particularly interested in the manner in which this system, as Williamson describes it, seems to equate lower-class whites with African Americans and thus complicate the “whiteness” of a poor white, a topic to which I will return in my discussion of Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle* (1993). However, I would argue that, as my readings of individual texts will demonstrate, white paternalism did not do the same social work in creating social class in the South that racial paternalism did.

Congress referred to the obligations of citizens to their black and white families. Not infrequently, planters recorded births and deaths of slaves in their family Bibles” (196). Though emancipation ended chattel slavery, paternalism continued to influence social and labor relations between African Americans and whites after the Civil War. As Numan Bartley has observed, “Emancipation...did not eliminate coercive forms of labor control...[;] recent studies have found that important strands of ideological paternalism continued to influence regional social behavior long after Appomattox and that racial proscription contributed to a rigid social structure” (137). Merle and Earl Black similarly note that “The system of race relations that emerged in the aftermath of emancipation was the closest functional approximation to the outlawed institution of slavery that white southerners could conceive, impose, and sustain” (75). Paternalism comprised a major part of that system, in particular in relations between landlords and their African American tenants. As Jack Bloom puts it, “In the paternalistic relationship, where the black tenant kept his ‘place,’ the white planter took care of him: provided him with medical treatment, kept him out of trouble with the law, gave aid in times of illness, hard economic times, and death in the family, and generally treated him and his family like children who were his wards” (125). William Alexander Percy, Delta planter, lawyer, poet, foe of the Ku Klux Klan, and eulogist for the values of the Southern elite, offers in his 1941 memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* an evocative description of persistent paternalist relations between white and black Southerners:

To live habitually as a superior among inferiors, be the superiority intellectual or economic, is a temptation to dishonesty and hubris, inevitably deteriorating. To live among a people whom, because of their needs, one must in common decency

protect and defend is a sore burden in a world where one's own troubles are about all any life can shoulder....Yet such living is the fate of the white man in the South. (298)

Percy even figures the racial relationship in familial terms that Genovese might recognize, noting that "the black man is our brother, a younger brother, not adult, not disciplined, but tragic, pitiful, and lovable; act as his brother and be patient" (309). Yet his text also reveals the coercive nature of such ostensible affection. For instance, during the legendary flood of 1927, his mother's cook, Minerva, refuses any longer to serve the family breakfast at six in the morning. Faced with this potential loss of the benefits to which he believes himself entitled, Percy confronts the woman—or, as he refers to her, "that saddle-colored mountain of laziness, that iniquitous amorist, that awful genius of the domestic hinterland"—and threatens to deprive her of her "comfortable rooms" in exchange for "a tent that leaks" on the levee and to "bring back that worthless husband of yours so he can beat the hell out of you every night" (261). Percy smugly notes, "The insurrection collapsed" (261). It seems that Percy concerns himself with her welfare only insofar as she concerns herself with his comfort. His actions and statements bear out Jack Kirby's claim that "paternalism is at once a pretext for cruel exploitation and a moral scheme. Most important, and most insidiously, paternalism bound blacks to whites, apprenticed them not only as laborers but also as moral creatures" (16). Bloom casts light on the dark side of paternalism as well: not only did it allow the individual violations such as Percy's badgering of Minerva, but it also meant the white upper class "was able to reach into the black community itself and to shape it, to help determine the goals the black community sought, the means devised to seek those goals, the leadership the black

community had, the kinds of personal options blacks often felt they had, even the view that blacks had of themselves” (120). James Cobb aptly sums it up when he claims of the Mississippi Delta planters that “The best of these planters were guided by conscience, religious beliefs, and their sense of noblesse oblige to treat tenants fairly and sometimes compassionately. Even this better element, however, believed that their ability to maintain their wealth and influence depended on the Delta remaining a region where, by virtue of his skin color alone, any white planter could” run the lives of his black tenants (*Most Southern* 112).

The investigations into Southern life by such observers as John Dollard (*Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 1937) and Gunnar Myrdal (*An American Dilemma*, 1944) indicate that W.A. Percy, though perhaps more poetically inclined than most wealthy Southerners, was not otherwise an aberration, but that a brand of paternalism characterized upper-class whites elsewhere in the South well into the twentieth century. Indeed, in dire economic times, some upper-class whites clung to their paternalist behaviors even at great cost to themselves in order to keep themselves separate from the poor whites. Stark Young, for instance, staunch defender of the values of the Southern elite and author of “Not in Memoriam, but in Defense,” an essay in the Agrarian manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), argued that “a settled connection with the land” and “an innate code of obligations” defined the Southern aristocrat in times past and present (349-50). He offers as an example of this aristocratic character’s modern survival a “poor cousin,” who gave “a third of his day’s salary to a negro for a small service, too proud to be thrifty or to resemble the white trash, whom the negro despised and my cousin’s family had never invited farther than the front steps” (351). Notably, however, both

Dollard and Myrdal recognized that wealthier whites acted more kindly towards African Americans because, unlike their working-class racial peers, they were not in direct economic competition with them. Myrdal, for instance, claimed that “Our hypothesis is similar to the view taken by an older group of Negro writers and by most white writers who have touched this crucial question: that the Negro’s friend—or the one who is least unfriendly—is still rather the upper class of white people, the people with economic and social security who are truly a ‘noncompeting group’” (217). Dollard turned an even more skeptical eye on this supposedly paternal relationship. He recalls that he often recognized “as an upper-class mark, this tolerant, poised affection. But the Negroes have to be the right kind, the ‘old-timy’ ones who draw out this friendliness in the class to which they were once related as slaves” (82). He cogently observes that

By idealizing the old-time Negro type and wishing for its return, the present-day realities of southern life are avoided and it is not necessary to take account of the actual change in Negro status. It is, in addition, part of the worship of the past which includes an idealization of the agricultural labor unit based on slavery, the cheerful ‘darkey,’ the black mammy, and the like. From another standpoint it is a demand that the present-day Negro fit into the old stereotype and accept the limitations to personal maturation and status advancement which were characteristic of ‘old-timy’ Negroes. Doubtless the ideal serves other purposes as well, since it is part of the legendary material of the white caste, promises its solidarity, and bulwarks its superiority. (382)

Grace Elizabeth Hale’s *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (1998) further develops Dollard’s claim. In her study of the ways in which

segregation allowed white Southerners to attempt to maintain a coherent and separate racial and regional identity, Hale argues that the white home, one of the few places in which extensive interactions across racial lines were approved of, served as the primary site of this struggle for coherence. She notes that although “[p]rofound differences existed between the relatively self-sufficient agrarianism of the Old South and the more urban and consumer-oriented society of the new,” white southerners “of the rising middle class” nevertheless “insisted on conflating the plantation household and the post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power...of the plantation-based planter class” (87). She goes on to claim that “making the home a central symbolic site, an echo of an antebellum elite’s plantation-centered world, also helped ground the new middle class’s cultural authority in an indigenous even if romanticized source of power” (93). Hale notes that white Southerners most often deployed the “mammy” figure as a way of forging a connection between present and idealized past: “Mammy embodied the fiction of continuity between the Old South and the new southern world” and “rooted the new southern world within the paternalistic race relations of the antebellum South as well” (101). John Dollard marks this trend as well, noting that the “mammy tradition is frequently thought of as a criterion for upper-class membership; it is a point which whites like to remember and Negroes like to forget” (83). James Cobb offers a similar observation: “One of the most irritating habits of the paternalistic upper-class whites in their dealing with blacks was to invoke the ‘beautiful tradition of the black mammy.’ Younger, educated blacks and members of the black upper class found this stereotype particularly demeaning” (185).

However, the denial of racial realities upon which such a paternalist ethos depends became increasingly difficult as the South felt the effects of the New Deal and World War II. Cobb notes that “fundamental economic and demographic factors” had made “the South of 1930 look so much like the South of 1877” (26), and Bartley claims that, indeed, “far more fundamental changes occurred during the middle years of the twentieth century, with perhaps 1935 to 1945 best qualifying as the latest crucial decade of New South historiography” (138). Certainly, New Deal reforms in the South initially seemed to benefit only the agrarian elite and to strengthen their stranglehold on Southern politics and culture; however, the reforms that increased planter power in the short run had long-term ramifications that, combined with the effects of World War II, worked to create a South in which these same planters found themselves growing superfluous. But certainly, all initial indicators pointed towards increased power for the agrarian elite. Often, for instance, funds meant to help struggling farmers went not to the sharecroppers who most needed them but to local administration boards controlled by the planters, who dispensed aid as they saw fit. As Harvard Sitkoff observes, this policy “left southern blacks at the mercy of those planters, industrialists, union chieftains, and political officeholders who stood to profit the most by continuing to oppress Afro-Americans” (118). Even when the local administrators did choose to grant sharecroppers money, racial beliefs played a large part in how it was distributed. As Gilbert Fite points out, “While all relief payments were small, black farm families received considerably less than their white neighbors. The prevailing attitude throughout the South held that blacks could live on less than whites”; further, withholding cash from African Americans ensured that they would have to rely on planters for work and for other kinds of care

(136). Pete Daniel remarks of the Acreage Adjustment Administration that it “reconfigured the relationship between landlord and tenant, ushering in a shift to wage labor and ultimately to mechanization. The acreage allotment, the amount of a commodity that a farmer could grow, in most programs went to the landowner, and this robbed tenants of any bargaining power” (45). Sitkoff notes that this practice brought not “higher incomes” but instead “greater indigence to the black tenantry” (122). The drive – towards mechanization that gradually gathered force throughout the 1930s did much to sever paternalist bonds in all but name, since, as Fite points out, “It did not make economic sense for many farmers to continue the old labor-intensive system of employing sharecroppers and tenants when cheaper capital would permit them to mechanize and increase their overall efficiency” (153). According to Daniel, “Neither those who left nor their neighbor who stayed behind shared the traditional relations with landlords that had typified southern rural life since the Reconstruction Era” (60).

With the government providing capital and mechanization reducing their reliance on black labor, the agrarian elite seemed poised to maintain their grip on the politics, economy, and culture of the South. However, the increasing assertiveness of African Americans and the transfer of population and therefore political power to the South’s growing cities would soon undermine them. Ironically, these transformations occurred at least partially as a result of the reforms that seemed to grant the planters such autonomy and power. Agricultural laborers suddenly deemed unnecessary by modernizing planters found work in the growing cities of the South. As Bartley notes, “The expansion of northern enterprise into the South and the growth of federal programs supporting southern ‘progress’ contributed to the depopulation of rural areas and the growth of cities

and factories...[;] a growth oriented metropolitan elite replaced a county seat elite committed to social stability” (143). Similarly, Bloom claims that the primary focus of the Southern economy “was now centered in the cities; its main activity was business. The latter no longer was merely an appendage to agriculture but came more and more to shape social life” (87). Bloom contends that a “new elite and a middle class based on the new urban, commercial, and industrial economy developed as an economic, and ultimately as a political, competitor to the agrarian upper class” (2). And Dewey Grantham observes that “the military installations and defense industries of the Second World War quickened the pace of urban growth in the region, as did the increase in mobility and the depopulation of the countryside following the war” (261).

The move to the city proved crucial for the reconstruction of African Americans as individuals striving for full citizenship outside of the degrading paternalist system, and, again, New Deal reforms that at first seemed of only questionable help to blacks, combined with the effects of World War II, paved the way for this reconstruction. As Bartley argues, “The breakdown of the paternal order generated an expansion of individualism...that underlay the civil rights movement” (146). Sitkoff asserts that although most black federal employees worked in “unskilled and semiskilled positions, New Dealers unprecedentedly hired blacks as economists and engineers, as lawyers and librarians, as scientists and office managers” (129), and that, although the New Deal may not have delivered on all of its promises, “the reform spirit of the New Deal helped create a psychological climate in which black southerners and their allies could struggle with expectations of success” (133). The war only encouraged such a belief in the possibility of change; as Bloom observes, the war “opened up jobs for blacks, took them off the

farms, and set them in the cities; it put guns in their hands and trained them to use them; the war exposed blacks to education and to the world and made them more cosmopolitan. As a result, by the war's end blacks were becoming more self-assertive" (128). Orville Burton asserts that the experience of the war "laid the foundation for the change in race relations," since newly assertive "African American veterans helped erode the isolation and parochialism of their rural communities and exhibited an unwillingness to submit to segregation and degradation" (30-31). Moreover, African Americans who abandoned the farms for cities "were concentrated. They created organizations for self help and for change; they began to get educated, and they developed purchasing power. A black middle class could develop in the cities, based on the black working class" (Bloom 68).

This combination of increasing African American self-determination and the rise of what Earl and Merle Black call the "entrepreneurial individualist" in business would prove the undoing of the planter elite. According to Bloom, "the positioning of blacks at the bottom of the class structure, circumscribed by law and terror, was necessary for the political power and for the economic well-being of the agrarian elite" (219). In and of themselves, the South's business elite had little interest in altering the foundations of this long-standing tradition. Although, as the Black brothers point out, they "were much less constrained by the traditionalists' desire to preserve established power structures," they remained fundamentally conservative on social issues (29). Yet, if they were no more interested in effecting social change than the planters, they were much more susceptible to the influence of those who were. Bloom notes that "they were economically and socially vulnerable to black pressures in ways that the agrarian elite had never been and could never be" (215). Thus, he asserts, effecting change meant that throughout the

1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, African Americans had to create “sufficient chaos and disorder that blacks could not be ignored; it meant making it more costly to maintain the status quo than to accede to their demands....The civil rights movement succeeded in pitting one section of the Southern elite against the other” (6).

When African Americans refused to accept their allotted place, agrarian power began to fall apart, and the cultural myths that both supported it and emerged from it became harder to maintain. According to Cobb, “The eruption of grassroots civil rights activism made it obvious enough that the remarkable stability of the Delta’s racial hierarchy had less to do with the happiness and satisfaction of Delta blacks than with the historic effectiveness of Delta whites in maintaining, through the appropriate combinations of reward, coercion, and repression, a status quo that fed not only their bank accounts but their delusions of omnipotence as well” (*Most Southern* 232). In the wake of civil rights landmarks such as the *Brown* decision in 1954, some whites traded their paternalism for a stricter insistence on the rules of the color line. Cobb asserts that even in the supposedly planter-dominated Mississippi Delta, home of such paternalists as William Alexander Percy, “violence and economic reprisal” was often the order of the day, tacitly endorsed by the wealthy whites of the area, who “retired to their country clubs and private dining and drinking establishments, where they lamented the black ‘takeover’ of the Delta” (251)—a withdrawal from society that made it easier for them to preserve their memories of simpler racial times intact. Bloom notes that after *Brown*, many wealthy whites in some areas “would no longer make contributions to buy presents for poor black children” (133). The impact of the 1963 *Baker v. Carr* “one-man, one vote” decision which “ruled illegal all districting that gave disproportionate power to the votes of any one district”

further lessened agrarian power and increased agrarian anxieties, since “the agrarian elite had retained its dominance partly by its disproportionate representation in the legislature and the US Congress” (215). To these reforms were added the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, two pieces of legislation that, as Black and Black observe, “established new legal principles that put racially conservative white southerners on the defensive; broadly construed, federal intervention so transformed regional behavior in portions of the outer color line that unreconstructed whites were placed in the reactionary stance of trying to reestablish older patterns of behavior” (125). Importantly, Bloom goes on to argue that the withdrawal of paternalism spurred by these changes ultimately served to undermine accommodationist leaders in the African American community, leaders who had risen to prominence on their ability to wrangle favor from the white leadership, and to pave the way for a new kind of independent black leader that reflected a new set of social goals for the African American community (219).

The civil rights era in the South was not marked, however, by endless onwards and upwards progress for the region generally or for African Americans in particular. True, the war-accelerated change in the economic structure did much to undermine the agrarian elite and created a space for African Americans to assert their political power. However, as Black and Black note, this economic development directly aided whites to a much greater extent than it did blacks: “Fully two-fifths of the region’s black families...were impoverished in 1969. Poverty among black southerners was twice as common as it was among nonsouthern blacks, almost four times as great as the percentage of impoverished white southerners” (132). Further, they point out, “many parts of the small-town and rural South having modest black populations were bypassed by the

leading civil rights organizations, and in the mid-1980s such places could still be characterized by the traditional patterns of black political participation" (120-21). Dewey Grantham notes that the much-ballyhooed ideal of the "Sunbelt South" that emerged in the 1970s disguised that fact that, "despite its extraordinary economic advances and its social and political transformation, the South still lagged behind the rest of the nation in several important respects. The evolution from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial economy created new problems, the most intractable of which was a large, unskilled, poorly educated work force" (279).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The novels I focus on, then, emerge from a critical time for the race and class structure in the South, a time in which radical changes in the racial, economic, and political landscape greatly complicated—but by no means demolished—a system of class formation rooted partially in agrarian racial performances. Of course, the language of "class formation" and "racial performance" naturally raises questions about the theoretical models of race and class that inform my study. The concept of "race" as not a fixed and essential identity but as, in Toni Morrison's words, "contingent and constructed," (19) a historically specific social construct requiring constant re-production and formed in relation not only to other "races" but also to gender and class, has common currency. Defining class is similarly complex, particularly considering that, although I do see a common trend towards defining "class" according to a certain racial performance in all these texts, I will also have to deal with the variety of economic situations in which characters of these works find themselves, as well as what performing "aristocratic" or "paternalistic"

behavior means to the extravagantly wealthy businessman versus what it means to those of more modest means. I will therefore need to develop a system of thinking about class that is suitably adaptable. As Cora Kaplan observes, "The critiques of social class that have flowed from the scholarship inspired by the postwar period have made it conceptually a more slippery object of analysis, its internal relations as unequal and hierarchical as its external ones, its past national and regional variations less easy to assimilate in a single framework, and its horizon open to speculation" (13). Wai Chee Dimock and Michael Gilmore cite a new vision of class as "a relationally derived construct rather than a self-executing entity...involv[ing] an entire spectrum of interdependent terms, whose mutually defining character is progressively obscured as social identities become 'real'--become solid, integral, and perhaps even acquirable--to the point where they appear entirely objective and self-evident" (3).

Thus, given that my project is grounded in the assumption that race and class operate as these "interdependent terms" of which Dimock and Gilmore speak, "mutually defining" one another, I will require a more conceptually flexible system of class analysis than Marx's definition of a "class" as solely characterizing individuals who share a similar relationship to the means of production. Thus, I have borrowed from the class stratification theories of Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen. In *Economy and Society* (1922), Max Weber rejects the Marxian notion that "class" operates as the base from which an entire social and political superstructure emerges; rather, he sees class relations as inextricably bound up with issues such as race and gender. Weber conceives of a "class" as composed of individuals who share a "class situation," defined by an individual's "life chances" or "market possibilities" (45)—that is, the individual's "typical probability" of "procuring goods," "gaining a

position in life,” and “finding inner satisfactions” (302), variables linked not just to the means of production but also to race, gender, and other categorizations. However, societies are not necessarily stratified solely by class but also by “status groups.” He asserts that “a class does not in itself constitute a group. To treat ‘class’ conceptually as being equivalent to ‘group’ leads to distortion” (47). Although “class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions,” status distinctions “normally stand in sharp opposition to” the mere acquisition of wealth and the advancement of “life chances” and “market possibilities” (49). Indeed, “the status order would be threatened at its very root if mere economic acquisition and naked economic power still bearing the stigma of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won them the same or even greater honor as the vested interests claim for themselves” (54). One may have great wealth and still not belong to the particularly exclusive status group to which one aspires; as Weber argues, “status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific *style of life* is expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle” (50). One recalls W.J. Cash’s claim that “if money was necessary to social position, pride in its possession almost invariably translated itself into terms fixed by the aristocratic complex as it had been brought forward from the Old South” (240).

Ultimately, then, for Weber “classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas status groups are stratified according to the principles for their *consumption* of goods as represented by [their] style of life” (54). Obviously, though “status group” and “class” are distinctly different concepts, in actual practice they often overlap, as an individual’s economic resources naturally help determine

and shape the style of life she can perform. As Weber puts it in a later clarification of the relation between class and status,

Status *may* rest on class position of a distinct or ambiguous kind. However, it is not solely determined by it: Money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualifications, although they may lead to them; and the lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it. Conversely, status may influence, if not completely determine, a class position without being identical with it. The class position of an officer, a civil servant, or a student may vary greatly according to their wealth and yet not lead to a different status since upbringing and education create a common style of life. (306)

Weber goes on to note that “Every status society lives by conventions, which regulate the style of life, and hence creates economically irrational consumption patterns” (307). One recalls here the example of Stark Young’s cousin who offered an African American a sum of money that he could not afford to spare in order to maintain an aristocratic style of life. I would add that at times, however, an economic action that brings an individual status honor and conforms to the conventions of a particular style of life and that may seem immediately irrational may prove very rational indeed in the long-term. For instance, in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*, upwardly-mobile Jim Meserve and his wife Arvay clash over extra wood left over from the construction of their new home. Jim pretends that he does not notice his African American employees carting it off, but Arvay protests that the African Americans are stealing, and, moreover, they could use the wood themselves. Jim explains that if he forces them to stop, “Then I wouldn’t be a gentleman no more, Arvay, and that would cost me something. That’s like broken food from the table. The help don’t look for

the ladies and gentlemen to trace up a thing like that. If I act like I don't notice it, I got a lot of willing friends, and nobody will ever steal a thing off this place" (679). Thus, Jim's performance of aristocratic *noblesse* not only reinforces his "gentleman" identity but also affords him an economic advantage in cheap labor from local African Americans.

Weber's consumption-minded theory of stratification recalls the work of Thorstein Veblen. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), a still influential and controversial study of class in fin-de-siecle American society, Veblen, like Weber, argued that wealth was not enough to ensure membership in the upper class but must be displayed conspicuously and, further, that this display must conform to accepted norms. As he puts it, "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (36). Yet not just any evidence will serve: according to the Veblenian axiom, "In order to be reputable, it must be wasteful" (96)—a notion that Jim Meserve clearly understands but that Flem Snopes does not ("not throwed away or even give away, but sold..." says Ratliff of Flem's hat). This waste must take the shape of "conspicuous waste" in the form of "conspicuous leisure" or "conspicuous consumption": "in the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods. Both are methods of demonstrating the possession of wealth, and the two are conventionally accepted as equivalents" (85). Veblen cautions, however, that "it must not be understood that the motive on which the consumer acts in any given case is this principle in its bald, unsophisticated form. Ordinarily his motive is a wish to conform to established usage ...[and] to live up to the accepted norms of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed, as well as in the decorous employment of his time and effort" (115). Veblen takes care to observe that these norms,

which make up the “canon of reputability,” do not span all of human civilization but, rather, derive from “the accepted circumstances, the traditions, and the degree of spiritual maturity of the particular class whose scheme of life it is to regulate” (105); his theory here is roughly analogous to Weber’s “styles of life” concept.

Though Veblen offers a theory of class similar to but perhaps less rigorously and systematically (if assuredly more entertainingly) rendered than Weber’s, I have included him here to complement his German peer because I find his focus on the economy of waste particularly useful for my discussion of Southern paternalism, and he offers other explanatory concepts not present in Weber that I will draw upon in later chapters. For instance, I am particularly interested in his trickle-down theory of social norms. Veblen argues that “In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure to the lowest strata” (84). Thus, “the result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum” (84). Though this aspect of Veblen’s theory has come under heavy critique,³ it does seem to jibe with Cobb’s observation that the proliferation of “aristocratic delusions”

³ As Andrew Trigg observes, many critics have argued that Veblen’s trickle-down approach does not satisfactorily allow for the possibility that consumption patterns may emerge from the bottom of the social hierarchy, and therefore his theory of consumption really only works as a theory of consumption of luxury goods (99). He attempts to resolve the debate by synthesizing Veblen’s critique with that of Pierre Bourdieu. Trigg argues that the tastes of the upper class do trickle to the middle class but that the upper class often appropriate elements of lower-class lifestyles, such as “peasant dishes,” “folk music and sport,” elements often ignored by middle-class individuals attempting to distance themselves from the lower classes (106). Importantly, Trigg’s synthesis answers Veblen’s critics by allowing more flexibility in determining the source of consumption norms, but it leaves the one-way line connecting the upper and middle classes intact.

among middle-class Southerners of the Mississippi Delta sprung from “the absence of a middle-class tradition” which forced “on middle-class whites the obligation of shouldering an aristocratic heritage that was not really their own” (*Most Southern* 176).

Certainly, the work of both Weber and Veblen proved influential for later theorists of American class stratification such as W. Lloyd Warner. In *What Social Class is in America* (1960), Warner proposes a definition of class in which “economic factors are significant and important” but “not sufficient to predict where a particular family or individual will be or to explain completely the phenomenon of social class,” and he goes on to note that “Money must be translated into socially accepted behavior and possessions, and they in turn must be translated into intimate participations with, and acceptance by, members of a superior class” (75). Thus, the theories of Veblen, Weber, and their intellectual descendants form the basis of my analysis of social class in Southern literature, though for clarity’s sake I will borrow Warner’s terminology and call “class” what Weber might call “status.”

Of course, though I began this discussion of class by framing Marxist class analysis and the analyses of such theorists as Weber as strict opposites, Norbert Wiley observes in his introduction to *The Marx-Weber Debate* (1987) that the “two theorists do get quite close and even overlap at a number of methodological, substantive, and perhaps even ideological points,” and their recent ideological descendants overlap even more, as “attention is now being given to areas of compatibility between the two theorists” (8). He notes, for instance, that “there are important similarities between Marx’s notion of a class for itself and Weber’s of status groups. It seems class and status have now become interpenetrating concepts. Instead of being sharply distinct and formed to oppose each other, class (both Marx’s and

Weber's) and status now overlap and shade into each other" (19). As Val Burris points out in the same volume, "contemporary Marxists have drawn heavily upon Weberian concepts in their effort to adapt classical Marxism to the conditions of late twentieth-century capitalism" (67). She cites Erik Olin Wright's discussion of intermediate, contradictory class locations, "especially susceptible to political and ideological forces," as a chief example of this cross-pollination (73), and she notes that in recent writings "contemporary Marxists have accorded a considerable degree of autonomy to nonclass forms of oppression" (75) such as race and gender. Burris concludes, "the difference between contemporary Marxist (or neo-Marxist) theory and Weberian theory has become more a matter of the relative weight accorded to different explanatory concepts than a qualitative difference between distinct modes of explanation" (87). Thus, because of the affinity and overlap identified by Wiley, Burris, and others, I will feel free to borrow from neo-Marxists such as Erik Olin Wright when I feel that their ideas might aid in unpacking what a particular text reveals in terms of class.

III. CRITICAL CONTEXT

Finally, though Hobson rightly asserts that Southern literary critics have often ignored class, it has of course not gone completely unremarked upon. Much of the literary criticism that takes class as its explicit focus deals with the frequently misunderstood and less frequently studied chroniclers of "poor white" or "white trash" Southern life such as Erskine Caldwell, Harry Crews, Larry Brown, and Dorothy Allison, though they do not always address issues of race. Sylvia Jenkins Cook's *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (1976) "attempts to trace both the

attractions and problems for writers, primarily of fiction, who handled the paradoxical poor white stereotype in the 1930s" (xii). The texts she discusses range from canonical works by Faulkner, James Agee, and John Steinbeck to lesser-known novels such as those that emerged from the Gastonia textile strike. Though she does briefly address the ways in which wealthy whites used the threat of African American competition to keep poor whites in line, she focuses more on the evolution of the poor white as a literary figure than on tracing a relationship between class and race. A similar approach characterizes Duane Carr's *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* (1996). Carr also examines how poor white characters figure into the larger themes of literary works, yet he does not bring Cook's knack for nuanced, carefully considered close readings to the task, and he tends to make sweeping generalizations about a writer's body of work based on only a few examples. He says of Welty, for instance, that she sees poor whites as "malevolent simpletons" and that she fears "that these people constitute a definite threat to the established order and to values she holds most dear. This might go a long way toward explaining Welty's often condescending portrayals of her lower-class characters" (123). His chapter on Harry Crews, perhaps the central figure among contemporary chroniclers of the Southern poor white, spans a brief three pages and offers only the conclusion that Crews' "devastating portraits" of poor whites stem from "self-loathing" (137).

Matthew Guinn's *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (2000) stands as a more successful example of recent literary scholarship on class in Southern fiction. Guinn claims that the "aristocratic-agrarian ideal" that forms the basis of the Southern literary renaissance favors the perspective and experiences of relatively

privileged authors such as Faulkner and does not offer a usable framework for lower-class Southern writers (xiii). According to Guinn, "what is described as southern literature has been for decades a near-monolithic revival of southern experiences viewed through the lens of the upper classes" (3). He takes particular aim at the ideal of free will and the possibility of moral choice informing many works of the Southern literary renaissance, arguing that writers such as Dorothy Allison, Crews, and Larry Brown "demonstrate that such free will is a product of class status beyond their own, that to espouse an autonomous existence is to ignore the quality of southern life at its lower socioeconomic levels" (xiv). Though, as with Cook, Guinn does not discuss race at great length, he does offer a commentary on the ways in which Old South racial ideologies inform contemporary African American experiences in the South in his chapter on the work of Randall Kenan's short fiction and novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989).

I will also build upon the insights of Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. Yaeger's wide-angle study of Southern literature and literary criticism takes aim at a number of the field's familiar shibboleths, but I am most interested in her treatment of the ways in which "literature by southern women explores a radically dislocated surface landscape filled with jagged white signifiers and pallid detritus that bespeaks a constant uneasiness about the meaning of whiteness" (20). Her insightful readings of works such as Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* note in particular how the wealthy white women of those texts build their posh lifestyles on the backs of African American servants, a system that threatens to break down when they are forced, sometimes in shocking and violent ways, to view their servants as individuals. Of course, the analyses

discussed above represent only a sampling of the work on race and class in Southern fiction; I will consider other texts that deal only with the work of a particular author in later chapters.

Ultimately, I hope to offer an original and insightful contribution to what I think will become a central debate in Southern literary studies. The novels which I have chosen to focus on for this project are of course not the only Southern novels written from 1945 to 1971 which deal with my topic; however, these novels, I believe, offer the most intriguing and challenging engagements with the relationship between racial paternalism and class. In chapter one, "Paternalism, Progress, and the 'Pet Negro' System: Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*," I examine the ways Hurston's oft-neglected 1948 novel of poor-white culture chronicles the way in which performances of racial paternalism can enable economically deprived white Southerners both to increase their wealth and to construct an image of themselves as noble aristocrats. However, Hurston highlights the negative side of this system by depicting the ways in which racial paternalism unfits African Americans for individual success, blinds whites to the true nature of their African American workers, and, ultimately, forces Southern whites to maintain a constant, sycophantic, sometimes hysterical performance of their aristocratic identities. In chapter two, "Playing Ladies and Imitating Aristocrats: Race, Class, and Money in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and *The Ponder Heart*," I explore the ways in which Welty demonstrates how paternalism helps wealthy southerners see themselves as natural, unconstructed aristocrats by reinventing their (often violently oppressed) African American workers as family members for whom they must benevolently care. I pay particular attention to poor white figures such as overseer Troy Flavin in *Delta Wedding*

and store clerk Bonnie Dee Peacock in *The Ponder Heart* whose more flexible attitudes about race and class threaten to undermine their economically privileged peers' pretensions to an essentialist ideology of class. Chapter three, "Stopping on a Dime: Race, Class, and 'the White Economy of Material Waste' in William Faulkner's *The Mansion*" returns to the analysis of Flem Snopes's climb up Jefferson's social ladder with which I opened this study. I argue that Flem is not the real object of Faulkner's ire; rather, Faulkner criticizes a social system that celebrates paternalistic, conspicuous waste instead of community-centered utility. Ultimately, Faulkner offers an alternative model of community in an interracial congregation of working-class World War II veterans. In chapter four, "Mechanics and Mulattoes: Class, Work, and Race in Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust*," I examine the ways in which Gaines deploys liminal characters—those who are racially ambiguous and those who occupy what Erik Olin Wright calls "contradictory class locations"—in order to break down the rigid race and class stratification upon which a plantation society rooted in racial paternalism requires. Walker Percy also deals with the ways in which racially hybrid characters disrupt the strict racial distinctions necessary for racial paternalism. In chapter five, "'Super-Negroes' and Hybrid Aristocrats: Race and Class in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*," I investigate Percy's treatment of the legacy of racial paternalism in a South in which gleaming suburbs and decrepit plantation manors coexist uneasily. Percy examines how Will Barrett, protagonist of *The Last Gentleman*, seeks to find a way to reconcile his own uniquely hybrid nature with his father's paternalist tradition, and, in *Love in the Ruins*, he elaborates on the peril facing the South if its denizens do not find a way to imagine alternate models of race and class interaction. Finally, in my conclusion, I

speculate about the broader implications of this study for Southern literary scholarship and note a few significant recent works that continue to examine the ways in which the collapse of racial paternalism affects the class hierarchy of the South.

CHAPTER ONE
Paternalism, Progress, and “Pet Negroes”:
Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*

Late in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1948 novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Arvey Henson Meserve, wife of prosperous Florida landowner, farmer, and sometime bootlegger Jim Meserve, returns to her hardscrabble hometown of Sawley to attend her dying mother and to reconnect with the “piney-woods Cracker” roots that she feels her more aristocratic husband does not appreciate or even accept. Arvey quickly finds, however, that the rest of her family does not share her mother’s joy at her homecoming. Her jealous, spiteful, and litigious sister Larraine and brother-in-law Carl resent Arvey’s wealth and material comforts, emblems of success and status which stand in stark contrast to their own misery and squalor. In a particularly telling scene, Larraine and Carl express their bitterness in terms that speak directly to what I see as one of Hurston’s central concerns in this text. When Arvey asks Carl to drive into town and inform the funeral home of her mother’s death, Carl bristles and tells her that she should “let that rich and noblefied husband of yours run into town for you” (857).

We might merely chalk up Carl’s phrasing here—“rich and noblefied”—up to Hurston’s colorful rendering of lower-class rural white dialect.¹ But Hurston, I would argue, has something more complicated in mind. The suffix “-fied” implies that Jim’s nobleness is not an essential, fixed part of his identity, but is, rather, the result of a long

¹ Though I am treating Hurston’s rendering of Larraine and Carl’s dialect as a straightforward attempt to represent a poor white Southern style of speech that did, as Hurston claimed, have much in common with poor *black* Southern styles of speech, Claudia Tate has offered a compelling and intriguing alternative hypothesis. According to Tate, Hurston intentionally put black dialect in the mouths of white characters, a strategy that “carnivalizes the presumption that discernible racial differences are the natural basis of segregation and discrimination” (390).

process of, for lack of a better word, noblefication. Moreover, by framing “rich” and “noblefied” as discrete terms, Carl unconsciously indicates that he sees them as related but not necessarily automatically synonymous; as Max Weber might have it, “rich” might refer to Jim’s class (his market possibilities) and “noble” to his status (his style of life.) Presumably, then, when Jim first arrived in Sawley and married Arvay, he was not noble, or at least not *as* noble as he has become. In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston offers a skillfully drawn portrait and a cutting critique of what that process of noblefication looks like; specifically, she analyzes the ways in which white New Southerners such as Jim Meserve deploy performances of racial paternalism both to increase their wealth and to constitute their elite status along “noble,” aristocratic lines adapted from a romanticized version of the Old South plantation ideal.²

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the immediate post-World War II years during which Hurston worked on *Seraph* were crucial years of change for the racial,

² Of course, this essay is not the first to address issues of class in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. In “From the Suwanee to Egypt, There’s No Place Like Home,” Cynthia Ward discusses the implications of literacy for class formation. Ward does touch on issues of race, as when she claims that Arvay’s “secure place in the ethnic hierarchy—embraced by her in numerous demonstrations of racism—is threatened by Jim’s class position, which has less need for overtly racist classification” (81). I would agree that Jim’s class position is not authorized “overt racism,” at least not in the ways that Arvay demonstrates, but, as I will discuss, it is absolutely bound up with if not *racist*, then *racialized* systems of classification. I would disagree with Ward, then, when she argues that Arvay “initiates an identity based on not a fixed racial or ethnic other but a classed other,” her sister Lorraine (82); clearly, Arvay’s separation from Lorraine is crucial, but she fully manages this separation only through a performance of a class role that requires a “fixed racial other.” Similarly, I would agree with Laura Dubek’s claim in “The Social Geography of Race in Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*” that Hurston exposes “race as a social construct and racism as a system of oppression inextricably linked to the production and perpetuation of an upwardly mobile, morally impoverished white middle class” (344). Moreover, she notes that Jim, “because of his class background...knows the social behaviors and manipulations that make for gender, race, and class power” (350). Yet Dubek often includes very different kinds of racialized practices under the “white power” umbrella and does not explore the class implications of these variations that are the focus of my study. John Lowe, in turn, highlights the importance of class in *Seraph* when he argues that “Hurston wrote her ‘white book’ partly because removing race from her central field of interest made possible a more intense focus on gender but particularly class” (261). I would argue, however, that while class is indeed central, Hurston’s depiction and critique of class in the South is inextricably bound up with her ideas about race.

social, and economic structures in the South. The experience of the war only amplified the reform spirit and desire for self-determination that had been gaining force in the 1930s, partially because of New Deal reforms. As historian David R. Goldfield argues, though many Southern whites “assumed that blacks would resume their subservient places” after the war, that assumption proved quite wrong. According to Goldfield, “Racial etiquette had thrived on the self-reinforcing isolation of the prewar South, but it could not withstand the glare of expanded horizons and consciousnesses. Blacks had shared with whites similar wartime experiences—fighting, working, traveling about, and improving living standards” (45). Goldfield notes that after the war, many African Americans exhibited a refreshed, robust interest in politics and voting rights, and demonstrated an independence that threatened the racial logic of the paternalist system. As historian Orville Burton notes, the experience of the war “laid the foundation for the change in race relations,” since newly assertive “African American veterans helped erode the isolation and parochialism of their rural communities and exhibited an unwillingness to submit to segregation and degradation” (30-31). The rise of the business elite, who had a less firm commitment to traditional racial mores than the still-influential planter class, made it more possible for African Americans to achieve and articulate that independence. To be sure, change did not occur instantly. Though the business elite had fewer commitments to the racial ideologies of the planters, they had no commitment to challenging those ideologies, either. Moreover, Goldfield cites “a rash of racial violence that had erupted in the South since the end of the war as some southern whites, unwilling to participate in the season of hope, sought swiftly to reassert their dominance before contrary ideas motivated returning black GIs” (53). Yet despite such outbreaks of

violence, African Americans could take hope in President Harry Truman's encouraging stance on civil rights. For instance, his President's Committee on Civil Rights issued a controversial report in 1947, the year before *Seraph* hit the shelves, entitled *To Secure These Rights*. The report called for "transforming race relations not only in the South, but in the nation: an antilynching law; the abolition of the poll tax; laws to prevent voter-registration discrimination"; and numerous other reforms (54).

Thus, dramatic alterations in the long stable arena of race relations, particularly the growth of African American independence, would have given Hurston good reason to consider the historical roots and workaday practices of racial paternalism. Moreover, as James Cobb notes, "fundamental economic and demographic factors" made "the South of 1930 look so much like the South of 1877" (26). Since the New Deal reforms of the 1930s and the effect of World War II were the two main forces behind racial and economic changes that would so complicate paternalism, by setting her novel from roughly 1900 to the early 1930s, Hurston is able to offer us a picture of both the grave problems and the seemingly limitless possibilities offered to those Southern whites who adopted the paternalist ethic in a relatively more stable historical moment. Further, she can explain to her contemporaries how central this now threatened system was to a certain way of Southern life.

In order to trace Hurston's interest in and understanding of the ways in which paternalism functioned in the twentieth-century South and to illuminate her critique of paternalism in *Seraph*, I will turn first to her 1943 *American Mercury* essay "The 'Pet Negro' System," Hurston's own unique entry into a discussion the contributors to which at that point already included Stark Young, W.J. Cash, John Dollard, William Alexander

Percy, and others. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these writers, like Hurston and many who would come after, identified racial paternalism as a crucial distinguishing feature of the upper-class white South in the early twentieth century, though each one viewed it through his or her own ideological lens. Hurston's own ideological biases can prove tricky to sort out after a cursory reading of the piece. The introductory editorial blurb bills the essay as addressing "An aspect of the race problem ignored by zealous reformers" (593), a phrase that seems to offer a sly wink to more conservative-minded readers. Yet it becomes clear that, for her part, Hurston wishes to illuminate complexities that she feels have been ignored in the polarized debate between the "zealous reformers" and their reactionary opponents.³ She treats the "pet Negro" system as a piece of Southern tradition as firmly entrenched as Christianity: she informs the reader, "I take my text this morning from the Book of Dixie" (593). Continuing in her mock-Biblical vein, Hurston writes that "every white man shall be allowed to pet himself a Negro. Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same Negro shall be perfect in his sight. Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his Negro to wane" (593). More seriously, Hurston explains that this system serves as evidence of the complicated nature

³ Despite Hurston's growing conservatism, her letters from the 1940s indicate that, while she might not have agreed with the racial ideals of liberal white reformers, she remained an ardent opponent of Jim Crow and a keen observer of racial politics. When journalist Douglas Gilbert quoted Hurston as endorsing segregation, Hurston wrote him a letter in which she insisted that though she described middle-class Southern African Americans as "hold[ing] a sort of prestige in their communities, which they would lose in the North" (477), she did not intend this to mean that "Negroes are better off in the South than in the North" (476). Near the end of the letter she puts her feelings bluntly: "My stand is that the South is wrong, but the North is not guiltless. It is only a matter of opportunity and degree" (477). In a letter to Claude Barnett regarding the interview, Hurston wrote, "I deny categorically that I ever said that Negroes were better off in the South....Neither did I approve of segregation in the South or anywhere else. I said that it was frankly established" (474-75).

of race relations in the South: "It happens that there are more angles to this race-adjustment business than are ever pointed out to the public, white, black or in-between....The actual conditions do not jibe with the fulminations of the so-called spokesmen of the white South, nor with the rhetoric of the champions of the Negro cause, either" (593-94). She also notes that the system "symbolizes a web of feelings and mutual dependencies spun by generations and generations of living together and natural adjustment. It isn't half as pretty as the ideal adjustments of theorizers, but it's a lot more real and durable, and a lot of black folk, I'm afraid, might find it cosy" (594).

The reasons for Hurston's fear are clear. The "pet" system assists certain individual African Americans at the whim and to the benefit of the white patron and "with little thought of the ability of the person promoted" (598). Her fears are much in line with the criticisms of paternalism voiced by observers such as historian Jack Kirby, who reminds us that "paternalism bound blacks to whites, apprenticed them not only as laborers but also as moral creatures" (16). And as Jack Bloom notes, paternalism served as a form of insidious social control, a means by which the white upper class "was able to reach into the black community itself and to shape it, to help determine the goals the black community sought, the means devised to seek those goals, the leadership the black community had, the kinds of personal options blacks often felt they had, even the view that blacks had of themselves" (120).

Yet, Hurston's description of the daily workings of the "pet Negro" system also helps us to understand why African Americans in a time of both *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination might find the system so "cosy": it offered them modest protection and a limited structure for economic gain and social mobility. Hurston illuminates this system

in practice by telling us about Colonel Cary and his pet, John. Though the Colonel is a “Strictly unconstructed Southerner, willing to battle for white supremacy,” he makes exceptions for John. Hurston claims that “He got his general attitude by tradition, and he has no quarrel with it. But he found John truthful and honest, clean, reliable, and a faithful friend. He *likes* John and so considers him as white inside as anyone else” (595). Colonel Cary sees to it that his pet is well cared for: he sends him to college, has him appointed principal of the local African American high school, and even gets his wife a job. Hurston explains, “If John should happen to get arrested for anything except assault and murder upon the person of a white man, or rape, the Colonel is going to stand by him and get him out. It would be a hard-up Negro who would work for a man who couldn’t get his black friends out of jail” (595). Of course, the fact that violation of certain taboos involving whites would cancel the good colonel’s sense of obligation suggests the hollowness of his belief in John’s internal whiteness.

Notably, Hurston does not make explicit what benefits Colonel Cary receives from this exercise of *noblesse oblige*, though near the essay’s end she alludes to one benefit to which she will devote much more attention in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Hurston claims, “I am not defending the system, beloved, but trying to explain it. The low-down fact is that it weaves a kind of basic fabric that tends to stabilize relations and give something to work from in adjustments” (597). Indeed, racial paternalism serves exactly this “stabilizing” function in *Seraph*: Despite the gradual social and economic “adjustments” occurring as the New South business ethic gains momentum over the first four decades of the twentieth century, paternalism serves as a stable platform from which

Jim and Arvey Meserve can re-create themselves as wealthy, aristocratic elites. However, as Hurston demonstrates, that re-creation comes with a cost.

Seraph opens at the turn of the twentieth century in Sawley, a poverty-stricken town whose life revolves around the sawmill and the turpentine still. Hurston describes it as a place where “there was ignorance and poverty and the ever-present hookworm. The farms and the scanty flowers in front yards and in tin cans and buckets looked like the people....Work was hard, pleasures few, and malaria and hookworm plentiful” (600). Arvey Henson, the young, white and beautiful daughter of a family of hardscrabble turpentine “Crackers,” finds herself, much to her surprise, being courted by an attention-getting newcomer, Jim Meserve. Jim stands out in this community of poor whites because of his lofty background. His “ancestors had held plantations upon the Alabama River before the War. In that respect, Jim Meserve differed from the rest of the inhabitants of Sawley, who had always been of the poor whites who had scratched out some kind of an existence in the scrub oak and pines, far removed from the ease of the big estates” (604). However, even though Arvey thinks of him as “first-class” and as “no common Cracker boy” (620), Jim’s aristocratic background offers him no immediate material advantages over his hardworking, hungry neighbors. In fact, he has never even known firsthand the luxuries of a posh lifestyle. Hurston informs us that he had not “come among the people of Sawley with anything....The fortunes of the War had wiped Jim’s grandfather clean. His own father had had no chance to even inherit” (604-05).

But according to Hurston, despite Jim’s ill economic fortunes, he “had a flavor about him. He was like a hamstring. He was not meat any longer, but he smelled of what

he had once been associated with” (605).⁴ Note that Hurston does not imply that Jim’s aristocratic legacy is somehow essential to his identity, a fundamental and genetic part of his self waiting to emerge. Jim is “associated” with that history; he does not embody it. Indeed, he seems to disavow any connection with his plantation past: “When my old man was sitting around and reading and taking notes trying to trace up who did what in the Civil War, and my two brothers were posing around waiting for the good old times that they had heard went on before the War to come back again, I shucked out to get in touch with the New South” (782-83). However, we may recall that even a historian such as C. Vann Woodward, whose work focused on the ways in which industrialization changed cultural attitudes in the post-Civil War South, admits that a nostalgic fascination with Old South culture influenced race, labor, and business practices in the New South. As Woodward puts it, “Drippings from the plantation legend overflowed upon race and labor relations, public charities, and even the organization of factory villages” (157). Paul Gaston argues that New Southerners invested heavily in “romantic pictures of the Old South and a cult of the Lost Cause” that offered a vision of the antebellum South as “dominated by a beneficent plantation tradition, sustained by a unique code of honor, and peopled by happy, amusing slaves at one end of the social spectrum and beautiful maidens and chivalric gentlemen at the other—with little in between” (28). Indeed, as Woodward notes, “this idealizing of the past proceeded from the mouths of the most

⁴ This passage does not mark Hurston’s first use of the hamstring metaphor. In her description of Daisy Blunt in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston writes, “Her hair is not what you might call straight. It’s negro hair, but it’s got a kind of white flavor. Like the piece of string out of a ham. It’s not ham at all, but it’s been around ham and got the flavor” (64). Significantly, Hurston uses the metaphor to describe a past association that continues to influence—but not determine—an individual’s identity in regards both to race and to class. This common usage suggests that Hurston sees neither race nor class as essential but, rather, as a construction in which a character’s past race or class situation plays an important but not definitive role.

active propagandists for the New Order. And this with no apparent sense of inconsistency, certainly none of duplicity” (157). Thus, though Jim does not explicitly extol the virtues of plantation life, we should not too quickly assume that his rejection of his family’s obsession with the Old South is complete; indeed, Hurston’s text reveals that the main difference between Jim and his brothers has more to do with motivation than with attitude. While his brothers “pose,” Jim sets out to parlay some of the skills, behaviors, and attitudes gleaned from his “associations” with an idealized version of the Old South into economic gain and aristocratic standing, and to bring back a modern version of the “good old times” for which his brothers pine.

To be sure, Jim’s process of “noblefication” takes him on a long and sometimes strenuous journey, but he balances his own hard work with a paternalistic manipulation of black labor. He finagles a job as a woodsman in a turpentine camp from Arvay’s father, Brock Henson, and before too long rises to the position of overseer, where he strikes up a relationship with African American employee Joe Kelsey, his soon-to-be “pet.” Joe and Jim’s relationship reinforces the stereotype of African Americans as shiftless and immature that enables the “pet Negro” system. Hurston depicts Joe as an underachieving worker who blames his poor performance on “family worries, the slick and tricky way that moonshine likker had a way of slipping up on him, and so on and so forth” (638). When Joe pesters Jim for money, Jim mock-angrily exclaims that it “Looks like that’s all you colored folks live for on this camp, Saturday night.” Joe does not disagree: in fact, he responds with “But if you ever was to be a Negro just *one* Saturday night, you’d never want to be white no more” (639). Thus, Joe garners financial rewards and favor from Jim

by enacting a safe, familiar, “typical” African American role as lazy and concerned largely with pleasure and caprice.

Indeed, for Jim this love of frolic and frivolity far outweighs Joe’s limited skills as a turpentineer, since he rises to become Jim’s “right-hand man around this camp” (653). Jim reflects to himself that Joe has “the best-looking smile that Jim had ever seen on a man. It always lit him right up. It always made Jim feel like playing and joking. Just seeing Joe put Jim into a playful mood...” (637-638). Later in their relationship, when Joe occupies the role of “Uncle Joe,” a guardian, companion, and guitar instructor for Jim and Arvey’s son Kenny, he continues to maintain his favorable position with the Meserves by making them smile. He tells Arvey, “I wouldn’t exactly say that me and work had words, but we’re sort of at variance, you might say” (825), and he entertains them with an at least partially fictitious story of his failed grocery store business. His story keeps Jim and Arvey in stitches, but “Not a grin out of Joe though. He was acting out a drama of misfortune, and he had masked his face to fit the part. Until the curtain fell he was a modern Job, and suffering many things” (824). Hurston’s use of theatrical metaphors here underscores the performative, constructed nature of the black “face” Joe presents to them. And, true to form, his paternalist audience offers him a form of payment for his trouble—in this case, hand-me-down clothes from Jim (827). Joe cannot conceive of success outside of the paternalist framework. Indeed, all he can do with his stake is turn its failure into a comic story to purchase his re-entry into the social and financial economy of paternalism. Though Joe left the Meserve place with big plans and a financial stake that resulted directly from his paternalist relationship with Jim, his long decades as a “pet” seem to have unfit him to succeed independently. The same goes for

his wife Dessie: Hurston tells us that “Dessie had small pleasure in being the mistress of her own home. A word of welcome from Arvey would have brought her and her children back” (706).

Hurston’s description of the service that Joe provides for Jim recalls W.A. Percy’s own nostalgic ruminations in *Lanterns on the Levee* about the ways in which his African American friends tempered his essentially intellectual nature with the knowledge of “gaiety and casualness and inventiveness” (54) and who served as his “only tie with Pan and the Satyrs and all earth creatures who smile sunshine and ask no questions and understand” (296).⁵ Significantly, when Jim tells Arvey about his affection for Joe, Arvey, a “Daughter of the South,” understands: “Joe is your pet, I’ll bound you” (653).

⁵ Both Hurston’s description of Jim and Joe as well as Percy’s characterization of the racial roles necessary to constitute a paternalist relationship recall Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway’s depiction of the relationship between Hurston and one of her early patrons, New York matriarch Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason. According to Hemenway, “Mrs. Mason thought of Zora as an unspoiled child of nature, an impression that the younger woman did little to dispel” (104). Indeed, continues Hemenway, “Louise Thompson, another woman supported by Mrs. Mason for a time, eventually came to feel that the patron was ‘indulging her fantasies of Negroes,’ that she was in fact racist. Her black guests were either primitive, or they were not being themselves” (107). Recent Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd notes that Mason held strongly to the “conviction that black people—if they’d only be their ‘savage’ selves—could save whites from the aridity of civilization. Mason believed in cosmic energies and intuitive powers, and she was sure that ‘primitive’ people...were innately more in tune with these supernatural forces than were whites” (157). Though Hemenway charitably grants Mason the sincerity of her intentions and accepts some of Hurston’s claims that their relationship was sincere, he also notes that “it is hard to believe that Hurston did not recognize Mrs. Mason’s wealth as a key to her future” (108). Together with the analysis of paternalism in “The ‘Pet Negro’ System,” the implication here that Hurston was perhaps performing a racialized role in exchange for economic support suggests that she had a more complex understanding of the working of paternalism than a superficial reading of Jim and Joe’s relationship as characterized by friendship and symbiosis reveals. As Susan Meisenholder notes, “the strategy Hurston adopted to survive in a publishing world controlled by whites and a few black men necessarily became a flexible one, a give and take affair in which she constantly had to weigh what she censored (or submerged) in order to get published and what she could openly express” (7). Moreover, we have good reason to doubt Hurston’s faith in paternalism in the citrus industry specifically. In a piece entitled “The Ocoee Riot” written for the WPA, Hurston describes racial violence and the failure of paternalism to protect even an innocent African American man, July Perry, in Florida’s citrus country. When a mob of angry whites, searching for a black man who had the temerity to attempt to vote, hear that the man has been seen with Perry, they decide to burn his house down and kill him. As Hurston writes, Perry “loaded his high-powered rifle and waited, at the same time unwilling to believe that the white people with whom he had worked and associated so long would permit the irresponsibles from the Winter Garden to harm him or his things” (149).

Hurston's narrative then elaborates in a passage that echoes much of "The 'Pet Negro' System":

Arvay sympathized and understood. Every Southern white man has his pet Negro. His Negro is always fine, honest, faithful to him unto death, and most remarkable. Indeed, no other Negro on earth is fitten to hold him a light, and few white people. He never lies, and in fact can do no wrong. If he happens to do what other people might consider wrong, it is never his Negro's fault. He was pushed and shoved into it by some unworthy varmint. If he kills somebody else, the dead varmint took and run into the pet's knife or bullet and practically committed suicide just to put the pet in wrong, the low-life-ted scoundrel-beast! If the white patron has his way, the pet will never serve a day in jail for it. The utmost of his influence will be invoked to balk the law. Turn go *his* Negro from that jail! (653)

Although both here and in her earlier essay Hurston describes this relationship as characteristic of "Every Southern white man," as though it applied to all men no matter how affluent, she makes it clear in both texts that the white participant in the "pet Negro" system is, in fact, almost always an aristocrat. For instance, we never see Arvay's poor father, Brock Henson, nor any of the other poor white Sawley-ites with a "pet," only "associate" aristocrat Jim Meserve. Moreover, in the example that runs throughout her 1943 essay, the white man is named "Colonel Cary"; "colonel" connotes a very traditional Southern aristocrat. Moreover, in both instances, Hurston describes the white man as someone of power and prestige, someone who can throw his weight around in the public sphere in order to procure advantages for his pet, even to the point of interfering with the (admittedly often rusty) wheels of justice. Evidently, the white patron must be a

powerful man in the community, with moving and shaking abilities that far outstrip those of the average “piney-woods Cracker.” Hurston further develops the class implications of the system in her essay when she notes that “If ever it came to the kind of violent showdown the orators hint at,” the pets and their white patrons would protect each other so that only the “‘poor white trash’ and the ‘stray niggers’” would be caught in the crossfire (596). Thus, less prestigious whites do not have pets; rather, white participants in the system must first attain a certain level of wealth and social status. Indeed, she argues, “Class-consciousness of Negroes is an angle to be reckoned with in the South. They love to be associated with ‘the quality’ and consequently are ashamed to admit that they are working for ‘strainers’” (that is, whites who do not know the appropriate racial codes and aristocratic etiquette) (596). Clearly, Hurston argues that “petting” is a style of life (in the Weberian sense) associated with, and perhaps definitive of, the Southern upper class.

The course of the novel, then, follows Jim’s largely successful attempts to deploy paternalism generally, and the “pet Negro” system specifically, to increase his wealth and to carve out an aristocratic identity for himself, even as it also emphasizes Arvay’s initial discomfort with and eventual embrace of the paternalistic attitudes that enable their new class position. *Seraph* highlights the centrality of an Old South paternalist ideology in the creation of a New South society and economy, but it also subtly underscores the manner in which a reliance on paternalistic performance to create an aristocratic class identity can slavishly commit upper-class whites to an attitude of sycophancy.

Though some critics have claimed that Jim and Joe’s relationship is ultimately symbiotic and genuinely affectionate, in fact Hurston foregrounds its exploitative nature

in Jim and Joe's first scene together.⁶ Under the guise of a "practical joke," Jim creeps "up close to Joe's back and made a sudden howl like an angry bob-cat on the kill. At the same time, he clawed his fingers and stuck them into Joe's broad back" (638). Though the men both find the faux attack funny and shift smoothly into a familiar riff on Joe's love of "likker and women," it is hard to ignore in this striking imagery a true picture of the structure of labor relations between the two men, with Joe the broad-backed worker forced to carry the beclawed, parasitic Jim on his long road to noblefication. That an elaborate system of jokes, stereotypes, social roles, and perhaps even true affection facilitates the working of this structure makes it no less exploitative.⁷

⁶ Delia Konzett claims that Hurston "saw herself as depicting and imagining a New South in which the sociocultural bonds between blacks and whites are staged and thereby acknowledged, leading to a better understanding of the complex relationships between these two races" (134). Moreover, continues Konzett, "Hurston suggests...that this publicly staged and official racialized behavior is only the veneer of a much stronger and deeper bond that [Jim and Joe] acknowledge and confirm in private actions" (140). Similarly, John Lowe argues that Jim has a strong "appreciation for black people and their culture" and that Joe Kelsey and his family "bring laughter, rich folk culture, and a sense of community to Jim and Arvay. Jim, and eventually Arvay as well, find social fulfillment and companionship through their relationship with the Kelseys, especially through verbal joking and dueling and humor-infused gossip and tale-telling" (285-286). While I would agree with Lowe and Konzett that a measure of genuine friendship and camaraderie exists between the Kelseys and the Meserves, any claims that Joe and Jim share a deeper, privately acknowledged understanding must be taken on faith, since their verbal and physical interactions in the text do fit into an insidious paternalist framework that permits, even encourages, affection and exploitation to exist simultaneously. I would argue that the possibility that that friendship will develop into a true, deep understanding is always constrained, and perhaps completely foreclosed, by the complicated nexus of race and class relations the characters inhabit and by the roles which they are expected to perform.

⁷ As Susan Meisenholder has noted, "being Jim's 'pet Negro' does not fundamentally alter Joe's servitude" (96). She further argues that "Even though Jim sees his role as one of benevolent protector of his pet (a role Joe never disputes), the money Joe receives from Jim cuts him off from his roots and finally culturally impoverishes him" (114). Though he does not deal explicitly with class, in *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness* Stephen P. Knadler offers an intriguing reading of this scene and other intimate moments shared by Jim and Joe and Jim and Jeff as highly eroticized, homosocial if not homosexual, and part of Hurston's project to "destabilize the sexual and racial border from within the New South's nationalism by confronting the reader with a similar anxiety about the legibility of the homosexual. As often as the novel scripts the story of Jim and Jeff in terms of southern plantation myths, it as frequently displaces this commonplace view with oppositional forms of white and black homo-masculinity" (174-175).

When Jim and Arvay move to Citrabelle to become citrus farmers, Jim continues this relationship with Joe Kelsey, but he also extends the scope of his *noblesse oblige* to other African Americans in the area in order to learn the tricks of the citrus trade and to facilitate the building of his new home. His initial, uninformed forays into agriculture bear no fruit until he realizes that “since the colored men did all of the manual work, they were the ones who actually knew how things were done,” and so he spends much time around the “jooks and gathering places in Colored Town,” where, in addition to chatting and telling stories, he “stood treats” for the men there in order to get information (666). Jim’s buying of rounds for the bar patrons conforms nicely to the Veblenian ideal of conspicuous consumption; standing treats for a group of African American workers is no doubt conspicuous in announcing Jim’s relative wealth and certainly appears wasteful, though it proves quite efficient in the long run, for it favorably disposes the men to Jim.⁸ Moreover, Jim’s *noblesse* allies him with the men in a way that separates him from poor whites in the area. For instance, he enlists the aid of many African American workers by providing flour, liquor, and shotgun shells—and, significantly, by not asking the purpose of the latter, since “Too many Crackers saved hog-feed by letting their hogs run wild in the woods until just before time to butcher for Jim to want to know too much. If a barbecue was going to be held on his place to get it cleaned up, he knew nothing about where all that meat came from” (672).

⁸ Though *Seraph*’s narrative, focused as it is on Jim and Arvay, depicts the black workers’ favorable disposition towards Jim as more or less sincere and uncomplicated, a telling passage from a Hurston piece specifically about the citrus industry suggests that that friendliness may, of course, be a pose intended to secure their material well-being. Hurston interviews John C. “Seaboard” Hamilton, “reputed to be the fastest orange picker in Florida,” who tells her about the “field foreman” (Jim’s first job in the citrus business): “Sometimes we get mad at him, but we are careful not to *call* him anything” (135).

Jim puts this combination of *noblesse* and conspicuous waste into practice on an even grander scale when he begins to build his house. Arvay, whose unfamiliarity with Jim's paternalistic performances creates tension in their marriage, complains when he ignores the fact that African Americans are "stealing" leftover wood that they themselves could put to good use.⁹ Jim tells her that if he did not allow them to take the wood, "Then I wouldn't be a gentleman no more...and that would cost me something. That's like broken food from the table. The help don't look for ladies and gentlemen to trace up a thing like that. If I act like I don't notice it, I got a lot of willing friends, and nobody will ever steal a thing off this place. I got this house built way under the regular figure anyhow" (672-73). Thus, Jim's paternalism, expressed here through the conspicuous (though putatively covert) waste of lumber, garners him an economic advantage in the form of eager black labor while at the same time confirming his status as an aristocrat, a "gentleman" who dispenses gifts to his "help" in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*. His performance works like a charm: "His crew brought him many compliments....He was a perfect gentleman, and they were only too glad to oblige him. It was the same every way he turned. Negroes whom he had never seen before were saying the same thing" (672).¹⁰ Indeed, Jim's increasing wealth keeps pace with new technologies, and he and son-in-law

⁹ Here, Dubek argues that Arvay's objections reveal "a selfish but also racist attitude: Drawing on the pervasive stereotype of blacks as thieves, Arvay cannot recognize them as unpaid or underpaid workers who desperately need any scrap they can use. Arvay's social position within the racist order not only prevents her from recognizing the labor of people of color, it guarantees that she will profit from such labor" (346). But, in fact this commonplace type of racism that Dubek ascribes to Arvay's position in the "racist order" prevents her from fully attaining the highest class position and from getting the most profit out of black labor.

¹⁰ Although the model of "conspicuous consumption" that I utilize in this study is drawn from the works of Weber and Veblen, Thomas Haddox has noted in "The Logic of Expenditure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" that the work of sociologist Georges Bataille is also an important and influential referent for examining Hurston's treatment of consumption, expenditure, and class mobility.

Hatton Howland soon have African American workers clearing out the dismal swamp behind the Meserve home to make way for a country club and posh housing development: "As Jim had predicted, modern machinery and methods had cleared the swamp in an amazingly short time. Arvay, from her seat on the front porch, watched the gangs of husky black roustabouts rumbling past in truck loads, singing, chanting, laughing as they went to the swamp and moved about in their high boots, and swinging shining axes to rhythm, felling the giant trees" (775-76). In her description of a "horde of black men" (776) carving an expensive estate out of a barren wilderness, Hurston appropriates and updates the Old Southern strivings of another would-be aristocrat, Thomas Sutpen, whose story does not end as happily as Jim Meserve's, for a New South setting. Hurston notes that, once completed, the development "exerted a tremendous effect on Citrabelle and the surrounding community. It came along and stratified the town....Those who belonged moved west" (777). Perhaps Jim's intimate family associations with those who once stood inside of the threshold that Sutpen was barred from crossing grants him a fuller understanding of the racialized codes and practices needed to authorize an aristocratic identity.

But, as the incident of the wood suggests, although Jim's gentlemanly attitude towards waste and race dramatically increases his family's wealth and standing in the community, Arvay cannot initially understand the behaviors and attitudes that her new elite position requires of her. Though Jim tells her he is "scuffling" to place her "higher up"—perhaps on the pedestal of exalted Southern womanhood—Arvay repeatedly lets him down by her reversion to ways, including racial ways, he considers beneath her

(838).¹¹ Her profound sense of class inferiority—reinforced, in part, by the birth of their first child, the deformed, mentally handicapped Earl, who reminds Arvay of her “queer” Uncle Chester and thus, Arvay believes, proves her essential trashiness—expresses itself as a racism that prevents her from fully adopting Jim’s paternalistic ethic.¹² True, she initially enjoys the company of Joe Kelsey and his family and exhibits behaviors consistent with paternalist ideals, even going so far as to refer to their daughter Belinda as “my little girl” (703).¹³ Yet the Kelseys also prove easy targets for Arvay’s displaced

¹¹ Arvay demonstrates her low-class roots in other ways, of course. For instance, Jim flies into a rage when he finds her eating clay to satisfy a pregnancy-induced craving. As John Lowe notes, “Her behavior introduces a class barrier between her and the horrified Jim” (292). Although my essay focuses primarily on the narrative of class mobility and aristocratic becoming that at first divides and then unites Jim and Arvay, there are also important ways in which Jim’s “scuffling” to place Arvay “higher up” on a pedestal are part of a patriarchal attitude towards women that divides them even after their reconciliation, an attitude perhaps equally characteristic of a romanticized version of Old South society. As Ann DuCille notes, “Jim is so caught up in his own manhood—in playing the role of patriarch—that he can neither see nor hear the woman he has married. And Arvay is so thoroughly blinded by her own insecurities that she invariably misreads the obvious and misunderstands the simple to the point that the reader, much sooner perhaps than her husband, loses patience with and sympathy for her myopia” (133). Susan Meisenholder argues that *Seraph* represents Hurston’s “most subversive attack on the values of what she called ‘Anglo-Saxon’ civilization.... [S]he exposes the foundation of that culture as one resting on oppression of white women, exploitation of people of color, and domination of Nature” (95-96). More specifically, “Hurston gives us quite a critical view of life on a pedestal, revealing the specific ways in which love is ‘de prong’ even well-to-do white women get hung on” (96).

¹² As Chuck Jackson notes in his very fine “Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics,” “Earl’s resemblance to ‘queer’ Uncle Chester connects him to a maternal line of bad blood”; thus, he “lets loose a slew of insecurities about [Arvay’s] white trash self” (647). Jackson offers a compelling reading of the ways in which Arvay’s anxieties about class in general and about Earl in particular spring in part from debates about eugenics prevalent in the 1940s. He argues that observers concerned about maintaining the purity (and supremacy) of the white race were much vexed by the problem of “white trash,” whose benighted condition threatened their ideas about what, essentially, a white person *is*. Writes Jackson, “The moment of anthropological eugenics works to signify ‘white trash’ culture as the defiling element of *white America*, polluting not only genetically, but structurally as well. That is, under the eugenic gaze, the cacogenic family blocks biological and intellectual ‘progress’ while simultaneously threatening to taint the purity of racial and economic categories. A normalized white body functions as an icon for the white race, which must keep itself clean, avoid abjection, and, to be blunt, get rid of its shit” (645). Thus, for Jackson, Earl’s death symbolically “purifies” Arvay and enables her to achieve a normative whiteness. I would agree with Jackson, and only note that Earl is *taken* from Arvay, not freely given, and it is the active enactment of paternalistic racial ideals that I find crucial to Arvay’s ascent to the aristocratic throne.

¹³ Ward argues that Arvay’s “adoption” of Belinda is undercut by the way in which Arvay describes Belinda as “my little girl.” According to Ward, “In Arvay’s formulation...the possessive adjective is

frustrations with Jim. When she discovers that Jim and Joe have been running a moonshine business on the side, she takes her anger “out on Joe. He was leading her husband astray, and on top of that, she had a half-grown son, and he too was in danger of being ruined by Joe and his likkery ways” (705). For Arvay, then, in a moment of stress, Joe’s more stereotypical African American traits—his “likkery ways”—become not an opportunity to exercise *noblesse oblige* but to attack him for sullyng the moral purity of her white family. Even when Jim explains that he masterminded the moonshine operation, Arvay “showed her feelings by short-talking Joe everytime that she had occasion to speak to him. There were no more of those pleasant little exchanges of talk. It was a short ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘what’ and no more” (705). Ultimately, the chilly atmosphere drives Joe and his family to leave the Meserves and move to Colored Town.

Even with the Kelseys no longer living on the Meserves’ place, Arvay still obsesses over the class inequalities between herself and Jim. She broadly allegorizes these inequalities as a conflict between the great plantations and the piney woods, a conflict in which African Americans such as Joe Kelsey rank higher in aristocratic estimation than poor whites like herself. She tells Jim, “You come from some big high muck-de-mucks, and we ain’t nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash. Even niggers is better than we is, according to your kind. Joe Kelsey’s word stands higher than mine any old day....You give him more credit for sense than you do me”

proprietary rather than familial” (82). Yet I would argue that this elision of property and family lies at the very heart of the paternalist ethic. After all, as Eugene Genovese notes, “the relation of master to slave” represented “an extension of the relationship of father to perpetual child” (121), and he elsewhere observes that “Not accidentally, and by no means as a petty propaganda device, acts of the Confederate Congress referred to the obligations of citizens to their black and white families. Not infrequently, planters recorded births and deaths of slaves in their family Bibles” (196).

(713). Arvey further reflects that “He was that same James Kenneth Meserve of the great plantations, and looked down on her as the backwoods Cracker, the piney-woods rooter” (716-717). Moreover, “The great river plantations were too powerful for the piney woods” (718). Faced with what she perceives as an inability to stand on an equal class footing with Jim, Arvey, on two separate occasions, attempts to affirm and celebrate her Cracker roots. Importantly, she figures this affirmation as a renunciation of Jim’s model of race relations: “Arvey tossed her head defiantly and rhymed out that she was a Cracker bred and a Cracker born, and when she was dead there’d be a Cracker gone....Let Jim strain with his house and impudent, biggety niggers his ownself” (845).

But Arvey’s attempted affirmations fail. Frustrated with the incomplete understanding she shares with Jim, with his frequent absences and devotion to his new shrimping business, and not least with the increasingly ill-disguised disdain which Jeff Kelsey, Joe’s son and Jim’s new right-hand man, shows her, Arvey imagines herself returning to the simple town of Sawley and its honest, hardworking people: “The corroding poverty of her childhood became a glowing virtue, and a state to be desired....Peace, contentment, and virtue hung like a rainbow over turpentine shacks and shanties” (845). But the reality she encounters destroys her romantic illusions. When she returns to Sawley to attend to her dying mother, she finds her humble but once well-tended childhood home in filthy disarray: “Arvey could hear two things: the rattle of cook-pots in the kitchen, and the squeak and patter of rats in the walls. What was worse, she could smell the strong odor of rat-urine over everything” (849). The rats force her to ponder the kinds of questions that never seem to arise in Citrabelle: “There was a mighty kind of scampering, rustling, pattering and gnawing in the walls and seeming from every

direction around converging on the room....[She] began to consider what she could do to protect her mother's face and hands from mutilation while she was gone" (858). Nor does she find that her family conforms to her ideal of good-hearted country contentment. She discovers that her sister and brother-in-law resent her relatively luxurious lifestyle and have themselves been leeching off her mother. As her mother reveals on her deathbed, Carl and Lorraine have been "Disfurnishing me of the little money you sent me, and piling in here and destroying up the groceries I buy to carry me along from one time to the next one. That's all they's fitten for. Stuff they trashy guts and lay 'round like gators in the sun'" (852). When Carl and Lorraine discover that Mrs. Henson has left her modest estate to Arvay, they sue her. When that fails, they destroy all of Arvay's heirlooms and mementos and abscond with everything of value from the home, including most of the sturdier boards from the back porch.

Realizing that she no longer belongs among the shabby denizens of Sawley, Arvay elects to return to Citrabelle and embrace her husband's lifestyle. Significantly, the way in which she chooses to express her acceptance of this "aristocratic" upper-class life is through racial paternalism. While preparing for her return trip, "She ordered a bag of paper shell pecans as a present for Jeff and Janie. Let them know that she appreciated them too. Maybe Jeff was not snappy for just nothing" (871). But when she encounters Jeff and Janie again, and Jeff refers to them collectively as "us Meserves," his casual evocation of the ostensibly familial relationship that characterizes paternalist relations makes her feel once again "All of the turmoil and uncertainty that [she] had felt before she went away..." (883). She manages, however, to regain "command of herself." Hurston tells us that "Arvay took an attitude that she would have died before adopting

before she went away,” insisting that Jeff and Janie come up to her house so she can show them their present (883). Her paternalist gesture earns the desired response: Jeff tells her she “sure is folks,” and continues, “Just like Mister Jim, ain’t she Janie? And everybody knows that Mister Jim is quality first-class. Knows how to carry hisself, and then how to treat everybody. Miss Arvay’s done come to be just like him....You felt for us and remembered us. Made us feel like we amount to something with you. We feel proud and glad to work around you. You’s quality all the way” (884). Thus, by adopting Jim’s paternalist ethic, Arvay not only receives Jeff and Janie’s endorsement as “first-class” and “quality” but also their eager labor—“We feel proud and glad to work around you.”

It would be tempting, then, to see this as a sort of happy ending, a narrative of upward class mobility, with Arvay as the backwoods Cracker who has become a fine lady and worthy wife of a New South aristocratic husband through learning the ropes of nouveau-plantation racial paternalism. But Hurston, as we might expect, is subtly critical of the costs of Arvay’s transformation. The idealized version of the “pet Negro” system and of racial paternalism in general holds that these structures of race relations promote understanding, harmony, and meaningful relationships between the races, yet Hurston makes it clear that, instead, it imprisons wealthy white elites like Arvay in an attitude of sycophancy. Their confidence in their class position is predicated on maintaining a paternalistic, aristocratic performance that in many ways precludes their sharing themselves with their black “friends.” Indeed, Jim implicitly evokes this constant need to maintain an aristocratic performance when he tells Arvay that he wouldn’t “*be a gentleman no more*”—not that the African Americans would not *consider* him as

gentleman—if he did not allow them to take the excess lumber. Hurston more explicitly underscores the class-determining power of the African American gaze during a scene in which, after Arvey refuses to help Jim wrestle with a poisonous snake, “Jeff gave her a look that halted her where she was. The look forbade her to approach the person of Jim Meserve. It called her unworthy of such an honor and pleasure and privilege by reason of cowardice and treason and *trashiness*...Jeff wanted her to know that she had been judged” (831). As we may recall, in “The ‘Pet Negro’ System” Hurston argued that “Class-consciousness of Negroes is an angle to be reckoned with in the South. They love to be associated with ‘the quality’ and consequently are ashamed to admit that they are working for ‘strainers.’ It is amusing to see a Negro servant chasing the madam or the boss back on his or her pedestal when they behave in an unbecoming manner.” Thus, Jeff, who idolizes Arvey’s aristocratic husband, also polices the boundaries of Jim’s class position to maintain its coherence by preventing anyone unworthy—or “trashy,” a term obviously loaded with class significance—from sullying his master’s good name.

In a remarkable scene shortly after the incident of the snake, Hurston makes clear just how constant and inescapable is Jeff’s surveillance of Arvey, his continual evaluation of her suitability for Jim. One afternoon, when Arvey takes a nap on the sleeping porch that Jim has built for her—an area that he intends to serve as a kind of “throne room” that proves she has come “a long, long way from the turpentine woods” (811), she awakens to find

Jeff standing with a ‘lazy boy’ in one of his big brawny hands, the other hand on his hip, and his face pressed against the screen wire, staring at her. His face was pressed so hard against the screening that his nose was flattened, and his lips were

distorted into purple blobs. His eyes were fixed on her and unmoving. Neither did he jump away when he saw her see him....That look was so powerful and intense (843).

Hurston quickly assures us that “Jeff was not longing after her body,” but, rather, that his look “was anger and dislike” (843). This scene stands in marked contrast to Jeff’s later evocation of “us Meserves”; while that phrase suggests solidarity and familial closeness, the manner of his surveillance here stresses the distance between them. Not only does Jeff stand outside of her porch of privilege, but the distortion of his facial features—the “flattened” nose, lips like “purple blobs”—emphasizes his racial otherness by conforming to stereotypical images of primitive African Americans. Hurston even notes that when he turns away, he does so with a “*savage* abruptness” (843, my emphasis).

As these scenes indicate, Arvey lives under a condition of constant surveillance that recalls Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, which induces “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (470). Though Jim is not present to encourage and exhort Arvey to adopt the paternalist behaviors that go along with his aristocratic lifestyle, he still manages to exert his power and express his disapproval through the gaze of Jeff and other African Americans. Indeed, Arvey very much identifies Jeff with Jim’s power and emphasizes his observing function when she notes that although she wants to run “the impudent scoundrel-beast” off the place, Jeff would only “remind her that *Mister* Jim had put him on the place, paid his wages, and gave him his orders.... She couldn’t fire Jeff—nothing of the kind—and Jeff knew it. In his absence, Jim wouldn’t just trust any and everybody on the place” (843).

Further, Hurston construes Arvey's acceptance of the performance of racial paternalism that affirms her upper-class status in a manner very much consistent with Foucault's claim that "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (471). Arvey at least unconsciously realizes that a restored relationship with Jim and the material comforts that that relationship guarantees her depends on Jeff and Janie's evaluation of her conformity to "first-class" mores, and so she carefully considers what sort of face to present to them, what facts she should reveal and conceal. For instance, when she tells them about her mother's funeral, she emphasizes "her mother's casket and the flowers" (884) and "the visits and the meals and other entertainments which the Carys," Sawley's richest family, had furnished, but she leaves out "how Lorraine and Carl had behaved towards her" (883). When Arvey does mention the seamier side of the trip, she does so quickly and only to distance herself from her family and assert her solidarity with Jim: "Arvey did not use many words, but she told them that she had burned the house, and turned her back on what it stood for for good and all. She had found that she did not belong there after all. Without realizing, she had come to prefer Jim's way of handling things" (885). Hurston pointedly notes that when she relates the story to Jim, "she did not leave out the part about Lorraine and Carl" (892). After all, Jim already has first-hand experience with her "trashy" family, and so she cannot hope to downplay her connection to them as she does with Jeff and Janie.

When she travels to the coast with Jeff and Janie to see Jim, who she fears may still reject her, Arvey once again demonstrates her reliance on Jeff and Janie's validation for her class and material well-being in a passage that employs the language of

surveillance. As Arvay approaches Jim, she “saw Jeff and Janie hovering about, obviously waiting for orders. They must be gotten rid of. If Jim turned her down, how could she ever go back to the house in Citrabelle if Jeff and Janie had *witnessed* her downfall?” (890, my emphasis). Thus, their confirmation of her aristocratic identity is implicitly necessary for Arvay to maintain material advantages such as her beautiful house.

Arvay’s much fretted-over downfall never comes. Instead, she wins her way back into Jim’s noble graces partly by demonstrating a paternalistic attitude towards Cup-cake, the African American cook aboard one of Jim’s shrimping boats. A shrimping boat on the high seas may seem an odd, even inappropriate place for Arvay to exercise her newly adopted paternalism, but in certain ways Jim has already brought the paternalistic spirit of the plantation to bear on his shrimping business. True, the shrimping business at first appears to be run as a racially egalitarian meritocracy in which the only thing considered important “was who could go out there and come back with the shrimp” (893); indeed, “White and Negro captains were friendly together and compared notes,” and “some boats had mixed crews” (893). Yet, crucially, though Jim and Alfredo, a “husky Negro,” might both serve as ship’s captains, only Jim and other white men serve as *owners* of those ships. Moreover, when Jim tells Arvay about the lives of the shrimpers as they “ma[k]e the round of the Jooks,” he does so in a way that very much recalls his conversation with Joe Kelsey about the fundamentally pleasure-seeking nature of African Americans who live for Saturday night: “A man had to enjoy himself while he could. The very next trip might be his last. So if they bought likker and love recklessly, what of it? Arvay noted that he relaxed when she agreed that they had a point there. Even though most of them

spent their money right away, and depended on going out there and getting more” (894). Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch, then, to note that the repeated exclamations of “Captain! My Captain....Oh Captain!” from the Mate of Jim’s ship would sound equally appropriate spoken by a field hand to a plantation owner. In any case, Arvey’s paternalistic gesture towards Cup-Cake works perfectly: She effusively praises his cooking, and “a half second later she knew that she had said just the right thing. Jim smiled and opened his eyes wide and looked at her with pleasure. Cup-Cake grinned all over himself” (901). Significantly, Jim’s response, jokingly telling Cup-Cake that he hopes Arvey “don’t take and spoil you too rotten,” puts Cup-Cake in the position of a precocious child and Arvey in the position of an indulgent parent.

Jim’s treatment of his seafaring underlings as just another group of carefree, impulsive laborers who need his paternal care—and Cup-Cake’s apparent confirmation of that need—helps him and Arvey make an ostensibly seamless transition from citrus to shrimp. However, his breezy confidence that the men look up to him the way Joe Kelsey does blinds him to a subtle undercurrent of resentment, and perhaps budding resistance, evident in the shrimpers’ attitudes towards him. On his first voyage in the *Arvey Henson*, Jim asks his mate Stumpy if he fears sailing out with a new captain. Stumpy tells him, “I ain’t scared of a thing but old Bozo” (800). When Jim expresses his puzzlement, Stumpy mock-incredulously informs Jim that he “ain’t no real fisherman until you meet old Bozo and fight him” (800). The Third Man fills Jim in on the details: in order to find Bozo, an intrepid adventurer must return to shore and traverse a fantastical, decidedly un-Floridian landscape, climbing the “Lick-and-Spit Mountains” and following a mythically smelly bird called a “Mollymoe.” The Third Man continues: “Come through that country and

you were right at a big plantation. That was where Bozo lived. Yes sir! Big house and everything. Bozo seemed to have plenty. Rich and well-to-do. All you had to do then was to go right up and knock on the door, and when Bozo opened it, challenge him to a fight. The man who whipped Bozo would be king of the world” (801). The Third Man’s own trek to vanquish Bozo ended abruptly when he caught sight of Bozo’s cat, “as big as a yearling calf to start off with....If his cat was that big and tough I didn’t want to meet that Bozo riding nor walking” (801).

Jim laughs off the tale as part of his “initiation” into the world of fishermen, and it would be easy for the reader to laugh it off as well. Yet, we should not get so caught up in this paternalist’s worldview that we miss the unrest, dissatisfaction, and anger fomenting among the workers. The Bozo story reveals a measure of class consciousness and indeed class resentment that should perhaps make him, ostensibly an astute observer of folk culture, at least a bit uncomfortable. After all, Jim is the scion of a great plantation family who has appropriated a form of plantation logic to make himself, like Bozo, “rich and well-to-do” and to build himself a “big house.” Though the fishermen fear this Jim-like character’s power, they also dream of conquering him by force in order to gain his material wealth and become “king of the world.” Jim’s joking dismissal of the story may indicate that he misses the story’s potentially troubling implications for his own way of life.

A similar myopia characterizes Jim and Arvay’s response to another instance in which the men express their dissatisfaction with their working conditions and class position, an instance which should signal to Jim that things are not as simple as they had seemed in Citrabelle and Sawley. Arvay observes that the fishermen “all cursed out the

owners. Everything that went wrong on a boat was named after the owner. Did the fuel pump on the engine go bad? It was a Toomer, Meserve, or whatever the owner's name was so-and-so of a bastard! It was that way about everything. Arvay found that Jim knew about it, as did the other owners and laughed it off' (893). Certainly, Jim's privilege and prestige allows him to "laugh it off" and insulates him from any real offense. But the gauzy shroud of wealth and power that he wears softens this harsh image like Vaseline on a camera lens, preventing him from perceiving the true nature of the men's demonstration: they impotently vent the anger and frustration that they feel toward their bosses on these inanimate avatars. Indeed, bestowing the owner's name upon every broken piece of machinery implicitly makes the statement that, like a faulty fuel pump, the owner stands in the way of their material gain. Jim characteristically misses this critique: when Arvay worries aloud about the practice, Jim tells her "They don't mean a bit of harm....Cursing the boss out behind his back is a lot of pleasure. I forget that I'm the owner and cuss my ownself out at times" (893-94). Of course, this "forgetting," this ability to move easily between roles, is a privilege only afforded to wealthy elites like Jim—he can slum with the shrimpers, but they cannot own a fleet of shrimp boats.

Ultimately, then, if Hurston holds out any hope for meaningful social action that can undermine the paternalist social order, she does so in her depiction of this nascent class resentment among the shrimpers, this dissatisfaction with Jim's New Old South management style. Their apparent impotence in the face of Jim's insulating power and wealth, however, qualifies this critique. But, as Hurston would have observed in the late 1940s, the seeds of independence evident in this multi-racial coalition of laborers bodes ill for those who rely on the established social order for a stage upon which to perform

their power. True, Arvey learns how to pull herself—or to allow herself to be lifted by African Americans—onto the pedestal that Jim has constructed for her, learns the necessary racial performances that authorize her aristocratic upper-class position and make her a suitable mate for Jim.¹⁴ At the same time, Hurston subtly criticizes the costs of Arvey's transformation. Admittedly, constantly performing paternalism with Jim, no matter how limiting or sycophantic, beats starving in Sawley with Carl and Larraine. But though racial paternalism does enable Arvey and Jim to increase their riches and to advance in status and proves useful even in non-traditional or non-plantation New South labor settings such as citrus growing and shrimping, it also places them firmly and forever on a very public stage and forces them to perform according to very strict rules for a watchful African American audience without whose approval they cannot maintain their wealth and standing—an audience whose approval would be less and less forthcoming in the years to come. Thus, in *Seraph* Hurston offers a sharp critique of the

¹⁴ Though I have described Arvey as subordinated to Jim in her (still relatively privileged) position as a nouveau-plantation matriarch, certain elements of Hurston's final description of the Meserves may initially seem to challenge this reading. In the novel's closing scene, Arvey reflects upon her marriage as Jim sleeps in her arms: "Inside he was nothing but a little boy to take care of, and he hungered for her hovering. Look at him now! Snuggled down and clutching onto her like Kenny when he wore diapers. Arvey felt such a swelling to protect and comfort Jim that tears came up in her eyes. So helpless sleeping there in her arms and trusting himself to her" (919). Arvey sees Jim as "trusting" and childlike, needing her "hovering" mothering. Yet by accepting her role as mother to her entire family, Arvey has also accepted a traditional model of plantation gender relations that may seem to offer her a limited degree of authority but which ultimately constrains her. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that elite antebellum southerners often praised "women's special capacities for gentleness and nurture" and "were wont to view women as especially attuned to moral concerns and as especially suited for the early education of children. Above all, they emphasized women's obligation to manifest piety, purity, chastity, and obedience and to cultivate their special calling for motherhood" (202). Yet the lauded talents of women were often used as proof of essential gender differences that justified the squelching of women's voices when it came to topics outside their limited domestic purview. I would concur with Carol P. Marsh-Lockett's evaluation of this scene in her study of images of motherhood in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Lockett argues that Arvey "consciously conspires in her own oppression when she concludes peacefully that she must love Jim like a 'mother'—which, in this context means self-effacing, unconditional capitulation to sexist dogma and failure to expect any growth on the part of her partner" (102).

ways in which racial performances authorize an aristocratic class identity, and she makes clear for a contemporary white audience in a time of social unrest that the vanishing “stabilizing” force of paternalism for which they may long constrains not only the increasingly independent African Americans but themselves as well.

CHAPTER TWO
Playing Lady and Imitating Aristocrats:
Race, Class, and Money in *Delta Wedding* and *The Ponder Heart*

The central plot of *Delta Wedding* (1946), Eudora Welty's richly textured novel of plantation life in the Mississippi Delta of the 1920s, involves the marriage of Dabney Fairchild, daughter of an aristocratic family of planters, to Troy Flavin, the family's decidedly unaristocratic overseer from the hill country. Troy's position as a geographical and philosophical outsider and as a Fairchild employee complicates the Fairchilds' acceptance of him into their closely guarded ranks. As the wedding date draws near, he remarks to plantation mistress Ellen Fairchild (whose Virginia roots mark her as something of an outsider too) that he has finally discovered the trick to becoming a "Delta person" like the Fairchilds: "By now, I can't tell a bit of difference between me and any Delta people you name. There's nothing easy about the Delta either, but it's just a matter of knowing how to handle your Negroes" (125). Though Ellen protests that "if it was that at first, I believe there's more to it," she proves unable to articulate what exactly constitutes that something more. When Troy presses her for a more exact definition, she tells him vaguely, "The Delta's just like everywhere.... You keep taking things on, and you'll see. Things take a little time..." (125).

Ellen's inability to formulate a specific rejoinder to Troy's characteristically forward remark reveals a fracture in the Fairchilds' sense of their lofty place in Delta society. Though Ellen admits that "at first" their aristocratic status and the economic base that supported that status depended upon coerced African American labor, she and the other Fairchilds believe that they now lead a more refined and cultured life in which African Americans are not "handled" but rather form an integral part of the extended

plantation “family,” a belief that ignores the way in which familial behavior can serve as a coercive tool. Yet she cannot formulate a convincing explanation of what, exactly, makes a “Delta person”—a regional identity that Welty exposes as conflated with aristocratic whiteness—unique from a hill country bumpkin like Troy if *not* a particular relationship to their African American retainers. This concern with the nature of class identities is central both to *Delta Wedding* and to *The Ponder Heart*. In *Delta Wedding* Welty explores the ways that paternalism serves both as a badge of status and as an economic tool and examines the reasons for Ellen’s reluctance to admit this truth. 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. Though Welty seems to offer no compelling method of resistance to the Fairchilds’ system of paternalism in *Delta Wedding*, she returns to this complicated intersection of race, class, and economics in *The Ponder Heart* (1954), a text that offers a more hopeful model for relationships among classes and races.

Shifting historical, racial, and economic trends provided Welty good reason to turn her keen gaze on the complicated intersection between race and class in the Delta. As with Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*, *Delta Wedding* looks backward to a

supposedly more stable historical moment for paternalistic race relations.¹ To be sure, the behaviors and attitudes necessary to “handle your Negroes” were clearer in the 1923 of

¹ Indeed, while I read *Delta Wedding* as an exposure and critique of paternalist values, many reviewers of the time read it—favorably or not—as a nostalgic celebration of the aristocratic Delta lifestyle. Diana Trilling’s review was perhaps the harshest: she claimed that Welty had abandoned the “lower-middle-class milieu” of her earlier fiction in favor of “that part of the Southern scene which is most available to myth and celebrative legend, and, in general, to the narcissistic Southern fantasy” (105). According to Trilling, even when Welty acknowledges the Fairchilds’ faults, she treats them merely “as the inevitable other side of the coin of their aristocratic grace and charm” and therefore beyond criticism (104). As a result, she “gives signs of becoming, instead of the trenchant and objective commentator we hoped she would be, just another if more ingenious dreamer on the Southern past” (105). In his review of the novel, John Crowe Ransom wondered “if *Delta Wedding* may not be one of the last novels in the tradition of the old South” (75). Ransom speculated that, since “the pattern of Southern life as Miss Welty has it is doomed,” Welty may have written the novel because she “was nostalgic for a kind of life that already had passed beyond recognition, and had to go back to it in imagining” (74). Ransom noted, however, that as attractive as the Fairchilds may be, their “handsome sensibility... was at the expense of the shabbiest kind of moral obtuseness,” particularly as regards race (75). By contrast, Albert Devlin accepts the specifically racial elements of the Fairchild myth at face value. As he puts it, “Without apparent design, these black retainers adopt the Fairchild myth of happiness as a personal credo and thus participate eagerly in the preparations for Dabney’s wedding. Their presence at the ceremony affirms that all the black Fairchilds, from Partheny the matriarch to the rudest field hand, possess genuine status in the extended family of Shellmound Plantation” (108). However, Welty resisted readings of *Delta Wedding* as a reverie for the Southern past. In an interview, Linda Kuehl cited John Crowe Ransom’s claim that the novel might stand as “one of the last novels in the tradition of the Old South.” Welty replied, “I revere Mr. Ransom, but his meaning here is not quite clear to me. I wasn’t trying to write a novel of the Old South. I don’t think of myself as writing out of any special tradition, and I’d hesitate to accept that sanction for *Delta Wedding*. I’d hesitate still more today, because the term itself, ‘Old South,’ has a connotation of something unreal and not quite straightforward” (91-92).

Though I hope to show that Welty’s attitude towards the Fairchild way of life was much more critical than Devlin, Trilling, or even Ransom would have it, it would be a mistake to say that Welty’s detailed and sometimes affectionate rendering of the Fairchilds is nothing but an ironic façade. Welty does highlight the Fairchilds’ fatuous obliviousness to the labor that supports their lifestyle, as I will demonstrate, yet at times she portrays the planter family in a genuinely positive light, even when they engage in behavior that we (and she?) might think tainted with paternalism. For instance, in a 1993 interview, Jan Nordby Gretlund asked Welty if it was unusual for plantation mistress Ellen Fairchild to witness African American servant Pinchy’s “coming through”—a phenomenon which Welty has equated with “get[ting] religion” (255). Welty responded, “Not if she liked Pinchy. I guess it was a family feeling toward the people she was looking after. No, I think that would be taken for granted. You’d help them whatever they were going through. It was what they call maternal” (255). I would suggest that for Welty, as for Hurston in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, even if a relationship is exploitative and, further, even if that exploitation is justified in terms of friendship and family, that does not necessarily mean that genuine affection or “family feeling” is impossible—only that such affection is always complicated by realities of race, class, labor, realities which may overwhelm whatever real affection exists. Welty articulates her awareness of the perilously complex relationship between acts of caring and generosity and the social connotations of those acts when she explains to Gretlund that when she was a child, her family often took blankets to their maid in the event of a sudden freeze. Says Welty, “Of course, that’s terribly looked down on. You’re not supposed to be paternal, or that kind of thing, but that was the need of the moment: they were cold. Nobody would do that now, for everybody’s sake. They would think we were looking down on them” (255). Welty acknowledges that her family’s gesture could be considered “paternal,” but she also seems to distinguish between her family’s (apparently) selfless kindness and “paternalism,” which here

the novel's setting than in the 1940s of its composition and publication. Written in the wake of New Deal reforms that set in motion forces that would irrevocably alter Delta life, and with the influence of World War II on the African American population already becoming apparent, *Delta Wedding* reflects anxieties about the naturalness, coherence, and perpetuation of aristocratic identity and traditional ways of life that many elite Deltans felt in the 1940s.² Welty has often noted that she chose not to set her novel in the contemporary 1940s because she wanted to tell a family story that would require the men to be home, and that she chose 1923 in particular because so little happened in the Delta that year. Yet, she has also observed that, despite the absence of wars, floods, or other catastrophes, the Fairchild way of life did not stand outside of history. In an interview with Charles T. Bunting, she described the way of life at Shellmound as "a fragile, temporary thing" (54).³

implies condescension. I would make clear, then, that I am not arguing that Welty criticizes the Fairchilds for helping their servants; an act of kindness or generosity for its own sake is noble and laudable, but one that condescends, that reinforces the social distance between people under the guise of treating them like family, is not.

² A number of Welty scholars have noted the influence of contemporary events in the Delta on *Delta Wedding*. For instance, in *Eudora Welty's Chronicle: A Story of Mississippi Life*, Devlin observes that "The plantation system could still assume the fertility of the Delta, but in the 1930s the growing of cotton was made precarious by a depressed world market, while in the 1940s the planter was asked to meet unusually high wartime standards of production. The mule...[.]the Negro...[.]the landowner...[.]all were forced to readjust their traditional relations when the mechanization of agriculture turned time into a form of money" (92). However, I would argue that this contemporary state of flux for the Delta has a more destabilizing effect on plantation race relations than Devlin claims. Indeed, according to Devlin, "Without apparent design, these black retainers adopt the Fairchild myth of happiness as a personal credo and thus participate eagerly in the preparations for Dabney's wedding. Their presence at the ceremony affirms that all the black Fairchilds, from Partheny the matriarch to the rudest field hand, possess genuine status in the extended family of Shellmound Plantation" (108). My own reading has more in common with Susan V. Donaldson's "Gender and History in *Delta Wedding*." Donaldson has also pointed out that "it was during the decade that Welty wrote *Delta Wedding* that white planters in the Delta like the Fairchilds began to lose their rigid control of the black laboring population" (7), and she rightly claims that "the narrative itself resists and questions the Fairchilds' unexamined sense of entitlement to property and social standing in the Delta" (8).

³ Welty's readers have observed how central this fragility was to her project in *Delta Wedding*. As Albert Devlin notes, "Welty has selected a time and a place that foresee only difficulties for Shellmound and in

Indeed, the changes in Mississippi's racial climate contributed greatly to the fragility of Delta traditions. James Cobb describes the apparently stable Delta of the mid-1930s as a "region where extremes of white affluence and privilege were sustained by equally striking levels of black deprivation and powerlessness" (153). These conditions were the legacy of planters who, Cobb argues, "fanc [ied] themselves heirs to an aristocratic antebellum tradition" and sought to create "a prosperous and politically insulated cotton kingdom where the Delta planter's longstanding obsession with unfettered wealth and power could be transformed from Old South fantasy to New South reality" (97). He further argues that "the ability of the Delta's white minority to subjugate and exploit its black majority depended in large part on a system of caste-based social control that was rigid, pervasive, and self-perpetuating. Only if members of both races played their well-defined caste roles with inerrant consistency and an almost exaggerated vigor could white dominance of such a racially and economically imbalanced society be maintained" (153). Such consistency grew more difficult to ensure as the effects of the New Deal and World War II began to change the face of Delta life. Cobb states that responsibility for caring for impoverished African Americans shifted from aristocratic whites to federal programs, weakening the foundation of paternalism upon which the plantation economy rested. This decreased reliance on wealthy planters encouraged African Americans, especially those of the younger generation, to exercise their independence. Planters in turn found their need for

retrospect reveal the historical vulnerability of the plantation to cultural change" (97). Jan Nordby Gretlund has pointed out that, in fact, 1923 was not quite the calm, quiet year Welty imagined it to be: "In 1922 there had been an overflow of the river, and it had been difficult to retain enough labor for 1923. Blacks by the thousands left the Delta and went north to work in industrial plants. They were anxious to leave, as their circumstances were often those of 'latter-day bondage' with coercion, severe economic deprivation, dietary problems, and a high rate of pellagra, rickets, and death. The uneasy planter-businessmen who saw their black laborers head north tried to restrain them from leaving in many ways, at times by force" (156).

black labor, and thus the need to adhere to the standards of paternalism, somewhat reduced by Acreage Adjustment Administration (AAA) subsidies and increasing mechanization. Cobb notes that although “individual acts of benevolence were by no means uncommon in the Depression-era Delta,” “the region soon presented a prime example of the process whereby planters accepted progressively less responsibility for their tenants” (186). Further, “by reducing their labor needs, the AAA allowed planters to be more choosy about those with whom they contracted and generally made it less crucial for planters to deal honestly and generously with their tenants in order to maintain them” (190). Thus, Cobb continues, “as the 1930s drew to a close...[,] the remarkable stability of the Delta’s caste-based society seemed destined to face some fundamental challenges, especially as New Deal farm programs (soon to be reinforced by a global military conflict) wrought major changes in the economy and demography of the Deepest South” (183).

Delta planters soon discovered, however, that the New Deal had not completely freed them from their reliance on black labor. Cobb reports that “during the 1940s 10 percent of the rural black population left the Delta, creating sporadic labor shortages and raising the prospect of a prolonged labor crisis” (198). The influence of World War II not only contributed to this exodus by drawing African American laborers to better paying jobs in the defense industry, but it also “helped to loosen the economic constraints on laborers who remained in the Delta....[B]ecause of war-induced wage increases, former sharecroppers could now make as much by working only a few days each week as they had once earned for a full week’s work” (198). Historian David R. Goldfield elaborates on the attractive opportunities that wartime industrialization offered to laborers accustomed to a system of debt peonage:

A black sharecropper could leave his mule and plow and earn more money in one week of work in a defense plant than he ever saw at the end of a good crop year. He could enjoy the luxury of choosing a place to live, of paying other people to work for him—dry cleaners, taxi drivers, waitresses, and maintenance personnel. He could exercise choices in how and where to spend his money, assured that a drought or tumbling international markets or capricious landlords would not suddenly end his relative prosperity. Or, if he took up a gun, he could demonstrate his worthiness for first-class citizenship and visibility. And if both he and his nation were fighting to preserve democratic principles, how could his countrymen deny him his due? (32)

This new economic independence did nothing for the Delta's precarious racial détente:

Cobb observes that "irritated planters in desperate need of cotton pickers could hardly endure the sight of blacks driving about the Delta enjoying their new leisure and flaunting their new sense of independence" (198). The 1944 Supreme Court decision in the *Smith v. Allwright* case, which ruled the all-white primary unconstitutional, contributed to the sense of unease for elite whites. As historian Pete Daniel notes, the *Smith v. Allwright* decision gave "blacks the opportunity to participate in the only meaningful ballot in one-party southern states" (*Lost Revolutions* 12). The large population of eligible—if still unregistered and at times violently oppressed—black voters threatened the electoral supremacy of white Deltans and served as yet another signal of the gradual but permanent change in the planter way of life. Thus, in the Delta that Welty visited in the 1930s and 1940s, once settled, familiar traditions governing interactions among races had become objects of contention. Welty's novel explores a time when those traditions could more

easily be taken for granted, but she also exposes the often brutal reality that lay just beneath the shiny veneer of nostalgia.

At first glance, the economic and racial strife that beset Deltans as Welty wrote *Delta Wedding* seems far removed from the privileged, carefree lives of the novel's main characters. The novel follows the Fairchilds as they traverse the expansive plantation grounds of Shellmound, visiting family members and carrying out the various domestic rituals necessary for Dabney's impending nuptials, all the while attended by a coterie of African American servants and ostensibly unconcerned with the grueling agricultural labor that makes such a gala affair possible.⁴ A powerful sense of unity and entitlement characterizes their worldview: "no gap opened between them," writes Welty, and "all the Fairchilds in the Delta looked alike." Moreover, "They were shocked only at disappointment" (16). Their belief in their own centrality leads them to tell "happenings like narrations, chronological and careful, as if the ear of the world listened and wished to know surely" (23). As eldest daughter Shelley Fairchild puts it, "all together we have a wall, we are self-sufficient against people that come up knocking, we are solid to the outside" (110). This sense of privilege and familial coherence has drawn the attention of critics such as Douglas Messerli, who argues that the Fairchilds have almost created "a cosmos peopled by sons and daughters, uncles, aunts, and other relatives who in their similarity of appearance, ideology, and emotional temper repeat one another over and over again, insuring in that repetition—that complete oneness—a sort of immortality for each member of the clan" (108).

⁴ For a good discussion of domestic ritual in *Delta Wedding*, see Ann Romines' study *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, as well as Peggy Whitman Prenshaw's essay "Woman's World, Man's Place: The Fiction of Eudora Welty."

However, nine-year-old Laura McRaven, the Fairchild cousin—and a Delta outsider like Welty herself⁵—whose arrival at Shellmound opens the novel and through whose perspective we get our first look at the Fairchilds, perceives a taint of falseness in their supposed freedom. Although her recently deceased mother had said the Fairchilds “never seemed to change at all” (17), Laura sees that in fact

they changed every moment. The outside did not change but the inside did; an iridescent life was busy within and under each likeness. Laughter at something went over the table; Laura found herself with a picture in her mind of a great bowerlike cage full of tropical birds her father had shown her in a zoo in a city—the sparkle of motion was like a rainbow, while it was the very thing that broke your heart, for the birds that flew were caged all the time and could not fly out. The Fairchilds’ movements were quick and on the instant, and that made you wonder, are they free? Laura was certain they were *compelled*—their favorite word. (18)

Laura further reflects that “maybe...their kissing of not only you but everybody in a room was a kind of spectacle, an outward thing” (18). Thus, even though each Fairchild may

⁵ Welty’s father, Christian, was a native Ohioan who met his future wife, Chestina, while they were both schoolteachers in West Virginia. They moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where Christian Welty eventually became director of the Lamar Life Insurance Company, and where Welty was born in 1909 and would spend the vast majority of her life. Welty’s knowledge of the Delta was based partially on her trips across the state as a publicist for the Works Progress Administration and on her visits with her friend John Robinson’s family. These visits provided important material for the novel; as Welty put it in an interview with Linda Kuehl, “Some family tales and sayings are right in the book, though by now I can’t remember which are true and which are made up” (91). Further, as biographer Ann Waldron notes, John Robinson’s great-great-grandmother, plantation mistress Nancy McDougall Robinson, kept a diary from 1832 to 1870, which Welty drew upon to provide context, detail, and historical background for *Delta Wedding* (154-55). Waldron further observes that Welty “felt she did not know the Delta well enough to write from the viewpoint of a Delta native; thus she used the sensibilities of outsider Laura, a child from Jackson, for a lens” (157).

have a rich and “iridescent” internal life, the Fairchilds must subordinate that life to an outward “aliqueness.” The spectacle of privilege and unity belies the fact that their spectacular performance is “compelled,” is necessary to maintain the illusion of freedom that Laura so quickly sees through. This performance of privilege that paradoxically constrains its elite white performers recalls Arvay Henson’s own paranoid performances of aristocratic behaviors in Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*.⁶

But what compels this frantic performance? Welty offers us a clue at the end of this lively, noisy scene—a clue that ties their performance closely to racial and economic realities. As the family’s activity winds down and they sit “sighing, eating cake, drinking coffee,” Laura realizes “The throb of the compress had never stopped. Laura could feel it now in the handle of her cup, the noiseless vibration that trembles in the best china, was within it” (20). This passage reveals that the Fairchilds’ colorful clamor covers over—though always incompletely and impermanently—the material sources of their privilege, the evidence of the labor that allows them to enjoy their ostensibly carefree lifestyle. As Patricia Yaeger aptly interprets this scene, “What is vibrating in this china is not just the cotton compress, ceaselessly at work binding the just-picked cotton into bales, but the ceaseless vibrations of the pickers and the house servants, a vibration that trembles through the silverware and the best linens and every other expensive item in the house”

⁶ In his early review of the novel, Ransom perceived the Fairchilds’ performative nature: “The Fairchilds have so much self-consciousness along with their naturalness that it is as if they were actors, and their common life the drama they enacted daily. They are brought up to have this sense of themselves, and it affects them with a certain sophistication, and a public responsibility” (73). M.E. Bradford also highlights the performative aspect of Fairchild identity in “Fairchild as Composite Protagonist in Delta Wedding,” though he does not connect that performativity explicitly to issues of race and class. According to Bradford, being a Fairchild requires a certain kind of formal play, and “by continuing to play the game that is Fairchild, all members may sue for readmission and rejoin the hand-holding circle of corporate affection, the self-contained universe where they truly exist” (205).

(98). The Fairchilds make a great show of ignoring this vibration, of leading a hermetically sealed and self-perpetuating life, isolated from the brute realities of sharecropper sweat and cotton compress. Indeed, Laura recalls that on previous trips she saw the cotton lint that covered “ceilings and lampshades, fresh every morning,” the airborne excess of the cotton economy, as a “present from the fairies,” as though it appeared out of thin air and only for her pleasure. She perceives no relation between this fairy gift and the massive fields around her, and only notes in passing that it causes Vi’let, the black servant charged with cleaning it each day, to “moan” (8). Yaeger reads this lint as part of the “white detritus” that floats through many novels by Southern women and “bespeaks a constant uneasiness about the meaning of whiteness” (20)—perhaps in this case because the moans it elicits from Vi’let reveal the constant black labor needed to maintain their comfort. Dabney Fairchild exhibits impatience when such economic matters impinge upon her romantic conceptions of plantation life: when she recalls the story of her grandfather’s death in a duel over improprieties at a cotton gin, she wonders, “what was the reason death could be part of a question about the crops, for instance?” and affirms her own belief that “all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of life!” (158). But the insistent throb of the compress “within” even so delicate a household treasure as the best china cup reveals that mode of perception as fundamentally flawed and indicates that even the most refined existence rests on an economic base—in this case, one constituted by the labor of African Americans.

Although we might attempt to characterize Laura’s and Dabney’s attitude as juvenile naiveté or to argue that their viewpoint results from their exclusion from a male-dominated economic sphere, in fact the adult Fairchilds of both genders persist in the

attempt to treat their rarified position as separate from the labor going on all around them. For instance, clan patriarch Battle Fairchild so ignores the crass details of cash and accounts that Troy's predecessor, former overseer Mr. Bascom, finds it simple to cheat him. Ellen—a Fairchild by marriage, and so perhaps not fully assimilated into their way of thinking—dreams sometimes about “the location of mistakes in the accounts and the payroll that her husband—not a born business man—had let pass, and discovered how Mr. Bascom had cheated them and stolen so much” (84). Further, when the Fairchilds absolutely must take heed of such petty details as the payroll, they do so in a way that indicates they consider such mundane concerns beneath them. Their aversion to the common physicality of cash money leads them to wash and iron the payroll, much to the more practical Troy's surprise. When he remarks, startled, “Is she ironing *money*?” Ellen tells him matter-of-factly, “Why, that's the payroll....Didn't you know Aunt Mac always washes it?...I get the money from the bank when I drive in, and she hates for them to give anything but new bills to a lady, the way they do nowadays. So she washes it” (126). This revulsion toward old bills, bills handled and folded and sweated on by common whites and African Americans all over the Delta, suggests a fear of contamination by those whose fundamental otherness the Fairchilds depend upon, a fear that exposes the lie at the heart of the Fairchild ideal of plantation race relations as family relations. Further, this literal money laundering serves a function remarkably akin to money laundering in the legal sense: it mystifies and obscures the origins of the money, washing away the physical and figurative evidence of its history of exchange, thus allowing the Fairchilds to imagine themselves as unconnected to the common outside world. This ritual occurs regularly: at the novel's end, Welty informs us that “Aunt Mac, driven by Little Uncle,

had set off to Fairchilds for the payroll, as she had decided to iron it this morning” (299). Thus, Battle’s lack of business acumen makes sense, since he grew up in a family that treated money, in and of itself, as something filthy and contemptible, something that must be changed, purified, converted in order to have worth. Further, Welty suggests that the younger generation of Fairchilds will learn the same pecuniary attitudes as their father and aunts. When they take a jaunt into the nearby town that bears their name, they visit the general store. There, “any member of the Fairchild family in its widest sense, who wanted to, could go into the store, walk behind the counter, reach in and take anything on earth, without having to pay or even specify exactly what he took. It was like the pantry at Shellmound. Anything was all right, since they were kin” (178). No currency changes hands in these transactions; no money begrimes the soft palms of the sons and daughters of Shellmound. The Fairchilds trade on their status, not in cash. Moreover, the store only reassures them of their privilege, since “no matter what any of them could possibly want, it would be sure to be in the store somewhere....One day on the ledge with the hunting caps, India found a perfect china doll head to fit the doll she had dropped the minute before” (178-79).

Thus, the Fairchild indifference to economic matters marks neither age nor gender but class. Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen would have recognized the Fairchild attitude towards money and found it consistent with many of their theories. For them, money itself did not offer an individual or group entrance to the highest social strata. According to Weber, “the status order would be threatened at its very root if mere economic acquisition and naked economic power still bearing the stigma of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won them the same or even greater honor as the vested

interests claim for themselves” (54). As Veblen put it, “In order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (36). Such evidence must conform to a specific mold, says Weber: “status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific *style of life* is expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle” (50). His remarks recall W.J. Cash’s claim that “if money was necessary to social position, pride in its possession almost invariably translated itself into terms fixed by the aristocratic complex as it had been brought forward from the Old South” (240)—a complex in which the Fairchilds are fully invested.

The Fairchilds’ economic idiosyncrasies help us understand why racial paternalism was so important to their way of life. As James Cobb’s work indicates, their wealth, privilege, and power is inconceivable without coerced black labor, but openly acknowledging such a bluntly economic relationship would violate the fundamental tenets of the status order. Indeed, Troy reveals his class origins when, in the discussion about ironing the payroll, “his hand started guiltily toward his money pocket,” a clear reminder both of his financial dependence on the Fairchilds and of the payroll’s physical, immediate reality for him (126). So, not only does paternalism form an integral part of Cash’s “aristocratic complex,” but, by conceiving of their servants, sharecroppers, and wage-hands as extended family members, as children whom they must benevolently guide, the Fairchilds can also imagine their plantation as an autochthonous, organic whole in which economics plays at most an incidental role and over which they rule as natural, unconstructed aristocrats. The acts and attitudes associated with paternalism perform what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic alchemy,” in which “the

relation of domination and exploitation” becomes “enchanted in such a way as to transform it into a domestic relationship of familiarity through a continuous series of acts capable of symbolically transfiguring it through euphemization” (101).

In many ways the Fairchilds exhibit classic paternalist behaviors. Astute Welty scholars such as Jan Nordby Gretlund, John Edward Hardy, Michael Kreyling, and Dan Fabricant have noted the centrality of paternalism to the antebellum plantation ideals that the Fairchilds carry forward into the twentieth century.⁷ We learn early in the novel that Uncle Battle Fairchild intercedes with the law on the behalf of African Americans just like William Alexander Percy or Colonel Cary of Hurston’s “The ‘Pet Negro’ System” did: “When the Negroes clear to Greenwood cut each other up, it was well known that it took Uncle Battle to protect them from the sheriff or prevail on a bad one to come out and surrender” (14). Elsewhere, a scene in which young Fairchild “Roy and a little stray Negro child were eating cold biscuits under Roxie’s foot and feeding a small terrapin on the floor, and were sent out to the back yard” recalls W.A. Percy’s claim that “any white boy who was not reared with little Negro children might just as well not have been born at all” (46). Favorite brother George Fairchild offers the servants who greet him a stringer

⁷ As Jan Nordby Gretlund notes of the Fairchilds in *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*, “Their everyday ways of experiencing and behaving keep alive the family past and with it much of what we consider Old South ways.” He goes on to point out that the Fairchilds treat their black employees “like children who at times will get in trouble and need their employers’ ‘parental’ guidance and protection. Even the old and supposedly wise blacks are treated like children” (169). In “Delta Wedding as Region and Symbol,” John Edward Hardy rightly observes that “It is at the expense of [African Americans] that the Fairchilds can be the ‘gentle swains’...that they are” (87). Michael Kreyling states that “As the novel opens...the blacks make their entrance in a way familiar to a thousand plantation novels and the films later to be based on them: they are arrayed as a roster of willing adjuncts to the lifestyle of the plantation” (*Understanding Eudora Welty* 104). According to Dan Fabricant in “Onions and Hyacinths: Unwrapping the Fairchilds in *Delta Wedding*,” despite the encroachment of the modern world into the Delta, “characteristics of the Old South remain: the wealthy white family is immersed in leisure, attitudes toward blacks are largely paternalistic, cotton is picked by hand and the plantation is seen as the center of the universe” (51).

of just-caught fish, and Troy, stretching his *noblesse* legs, gives Pinchy a decidedly unscrumpitious cake that Dabney has baked for him, encouraging Pinchy to “eat it or give it to the other Negroes. Now Scat!” (136, 197). Further, the childish qualities of carelessness and unreliability unite Fairchild youngsters and African American workers in Ellen’s mind, since she often “dream[s] of things the children and Negroes lost” (84). Ellen affectionately cares for her black charges, as when she checks in on an older servant and Dabney’s former nurse, Partheny, who is having a “spell,” and Little Uncle’s pregnant and ailing wife Sue Ellen. Of course, these missions to care for the servants conveniently serve to help Ellen organize their labor as well. For instance, her trip to Little Uncle’s cabin also provides her an opportunity to “speak in person to Oneida too about helping to dress all the chickens” (85).

Significantly, Ellen’s sometime inability to behave in an appropriately paternalistic manner subtly marks her difference from the natural-born Fairchilds. For instance, she bustles about the house in preparation for the wedding, even though “they said she had no need for hurry with a houseful of Negroes to do the first thing she told them. But she did not wait for them or anybody to wait on her” (24). Interestingly, Laura, watching Ellen’s independent activity, recalls that previous summer when Aunt Tempe had remarked to her cousin India, “your mother....has never learned what is reprehensible and what is not, in the Delta” (25). Laura’s recollection of this comment at a moment when other Fairchilds discuss Ellen’s refusal to rely on her African American servants suggests that that very refusal might be “reprehensible” to the Fairchilds. Roxie, one of the chief house servants, proves sensitive to the ways in which Ellen’s independence occasionally places her outside the Fairchild circle: when Ellen orders her

out of the kitchen to make George and his wife Robbie a cake, Roxie replies, “You loves *them*... You’re fixin’ to ask me to grate you a coconut, not get out,” and Ellen acquiesces (29). Certainly, this incident could serve merely to confirm Roxie’s faith in her superior culinary abilities, but her remark also implies that if Ellen loves the other Fairchilds, she will follow their rules and rituals, will accede to their reliance on black labor and their displays of paternalism. Note that Roxie does not say Ellen will *let* her grate the coconut, but that Ellen will *ask* her to grate the coconut, a small but significant distinction that emphasizes the codified, performative aspects of paternalism.⁸

However, not all the Fairchild employees are as obliging as Roxie; indeed, some are disgruntled, hostile, and outright violent. For the Fairchilds to maintain the idealized conception of themselves as gentle paternalists attended by ranks of affectionate African American workers who accept their rightful place in the social hierarchy and who are bound to the Fairchilds not by economic forces but by love and respect, they must have

⁸ Ellen’s background is something of an enigma. She is from Virginia, a state typically associated with the utmost in Southern aristocratic sophistication. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash argues that although the familiar myth of the Old South was literally a myth for most of the South, in Virginia “there was a genuine, if small aristocracy.” Cash continues, “Here was all that in aftertime was to give color to the legend of the Old South” (5), though he cautions that “even here the matter must not be conceived too rigidly, or as having taken place very extensively. The number of those who had moved the whole way into aristocracy even by the time of the Revolution was small” (8). Though references to Ellen’s Virginia roots evoke, as Cash puts it, “silver and carriages and courtliness and manner” (5), it seems that her family may not have been familiar with such aristocratic accoutrements. Ellen reflects that “She herself...was an anomaly,” partly “for living on a plantation when she was in her original heart, she believed, a town-loving, book-loving young lady of Mitchem Corners. She had belonged to a little choral society of unmarried girls there that she loved” (286). Of course, a Southerner need not live on a plantation to be an aristocrat—one thinks of the highly refined society of Queenborough, Virginia, in Ellen Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life*, for instance—and the citizens of Mitchem Corners do operate in a complicated nexus of social rules, as evidenced by the story of Ellen’s mother, who “had run away to England with a man and stayed for three years before she came back.” When she returned, “she took up her old life and everything in the household went on as before. Like an act of God, passion went unexplained and undenied—just a phenomenon. ‘Mitchem allows one mistake.’ That was the saying old ladies had at Mitchem Corners—a literal business, too” (206). Thus, the enforcers of society at Mitchem Corners make a distinction between an individual’s social, public façade and his/her passions. We might assume, then, that Ellen’s occasional lapses and moments of confusion at Shellmound stem not from her unfamiliarity with aristocracy in general but rather from her unfamiliarity with the Delta’s own specifically rural, agrarian brand of aristocracy.

some means of dealing with those unruly employees whose dissatisfaction with their working conditions threatens to reveal their nature as paid workers, not extended family members. Therefore, the overseer plays a crucial role in the family myth of organic, unconstructed aristocracy. Troy Flavin serves as a buffer between the Fairchilds and the economic world; he takes on disciplinary responsibilities that might threaten the Fairchild myths and thus allows them to maintain belief in their own benevolence. As Michael Kreyling puts it, "Battle Fairchild, who has ceded all practical control of the plantation to Troy, lifts himself to the podium of soft-hearted gentleman on the strong and merciless arm of his overseer" (97). Ann Romines concurs, noting that "As overseer, Troy has the duty of maintaining relationships [of power], so that white landowners will be relieved of the burden of doing so" (614). Indeed, the act of discipline, which acknowledges and legitimizes these disruptions of the paternalist narrative, seems not merely unpleasant but in fact downright traumatic for the refined Fairchilds. When Man-Son, a field hand whose name evokes the paternalist system's view of African Americans as perpetual children, raises his hat in salute to Dabney and wishes her connubial bliss, Dabney nods "sternly" to him and reflects, "How strange—he should be picking cotton" (43). Dabney chides Man-Son for this neglect of his duties: "Man-Son what do you mean? You go get to picking!" However, such forcefulness taxes her: "she trembled all over, having to speak to him in such a way" (46). This disciplinary gesture, restoring a worker to his assigned place on the plantation, causes Dabney great stress. Welty uses strikingly similar language to describe an exchange between Ellen Fairchild and groundskeeper Howard. When Ellen tells him her roses require attention, he grumbles, "I wish there wasn't no such thing as roses....If I had my way, wouldn't be a rose in de world. Catch your shirt and stick you and prick you and

grab you. Got thorns” (298). When Ellen tells him to “hush” and returns to her own gardening, she realizes “to her astonishment she was trembling at Howard’s absurd, meek statement, as at some impudence” (298).

The most striking example of this Fairchild revulsion towards such active engagement with their workers involves a long-ago skirmish between Man-Son, his brother, and favorite son George Fairchild. Dabney recalls this incident as threatening to Fairchild myths of unity and coherence, since it was then that “she had discovered in Uncle George one first point where he differed from the other Fairchilds” (43). One morning, George happened upon a knife fight: “Two of their little Negroes had flown at each other with extraordinary intensity here on the bank of the bayou” (44). George intervenes in the scuffle. He catches the knife in the air, pins both combatants to the ground, and bandages the wounded one. As Dabney remembers it,

The other little Negro sat up all quiet and leaned over and looked at all Uncle George was doing, and in the middle of it his face crumpled—with a loud squall he went with arms straight out to Uncle George, who stopped and let him cry a minute. And then the other little Negro sat up off the ground, the small black pole of his chest striped with the shirt bandage, and climbed up to him too and began to holler, and he knelt low there holding to him the two little black boys who cried together melodiously like singers, and saying, still worriedly, ‘Damn you! Damn you both!’

Then what did he do to them? He asked them their names and let them go. (45)

If the Fairchild lifestyle is one of order and rigidly defined racial and social roles, this scene is its antithesis: violent, chaotic, and transgressive. George’s intervention traumatizes young Dabney, for he has stepped down from his lofty, protected perch both to care for and to

discipline these brawling youths; he thus enacts a performance that combines elements of two separate and even opposed identities—paternalist planter and disciplinarian overseer. As George stands there with “blood on his hands and both legs,” he looks to her “not like a boy close kin to them, but out by himself, like a man who had stepped outside—done something. But it had not been anything Dabney wanted to see him do. She almost ran away” (45). The blood that covers George reveals to Dabney a glimpse both of the violence of plantation labor relations and the humanity of these young boys; moreover, it violates the distance the Fairchilds maintain between their own refined lives and the more messy, abject aspects of their workers’ lives. Not surprisingly, she finds George’s action revolting: “Disgracefully, he had taken two little black devils against his side” (46). Indeed, George seems to have committed the gravest sin a Fairchild could commit: “all the Fairchild in her had screamed at his interfering—at his taking part—*caring* about anything in the world but them” (46).

Further, the gray area that George temporarily enters threatens to engulf Dabney and to erase her aristocratic white privilege: her family prides itself on its insularity and solidarity, and so George’s fatherly embrace of these two bloody, brawling African Americans is painfully disruptive for her, especially when George treats her almost exactly the same way when she screams in protest: “he saw her there in the field, and caught her when she ran at him. He hugged her tight against his chest, where sweat and bayou water pressed her mouth” (45). Dabney’s horror at this scene indicates how ill-prepared she is to accept into her family someone who carries the ideals of paternalism to their logical end. George’s actions equate these black children with Dabney, including them all in the Fairchild circle and thereby placing the coherence of that circle in jeopardy. Moreover,

while their blood covers him, the “sweat and bayou water” that press against Dabney’s mouth threaten to taint her pure, unsullied whiteness with the contaminants of labor, exertion, violence. (Indeed, Welty suggests that a taint of racial otherness lingers upon George still, perhaps the lingering residue of Man-Son’s blood: when Ellen happens upon a napping George, she thinks, “In the darkened room his hair and all looked dark—turbulent and dark, almost Spanish. Spanish! She looked at him tenderly to have thought of such a far-fetched thing, and went out” [65].) George’s intercession even threatens the economic ignorance so prized by the Fairchilds. Note, for instance, that Dabney only knows Man-Son’s name because of his fight: “Dabney had never forgotten which two boys those were, and could tell them from the rest” (45). The fact that in the midst of remembering the fight Dabney thinks to herself that “Man-Son worked for them yet, and was a good Negro” suggests that Dabney realizes a connection between George’s keeping them healthy and the potential future value these two bickering boys might have as field laborers.

Significantly, both George and Dabney treat this event as alien, outside the bounds of Fairchild discourse. George declines to turn this small adventure into a tall tale: Dabney recalls, “he had not even laughed with them all about it afterwards, or told it like a story after supper” (46). Such reticence does not jibe with what we know of the Fairchilds, who tell another story of George’s bravery—saving his mentally handicapped niece Maureen from the oncoming Yellow Dog—over and over again in the text, each time with new details and grander embellishments. George’s reluctance to speak may indicate that these aberrant moments with their African Americans should not form part of the public image of the Fairchilds, the smooth surface they show the world. For her part, Dabney responds by marking George as an aberration in the hegemonic Fairchild fold, excluding him for the sake

of the family's coherence. She minimizes the damage to her sense of self and family by believing that the melee "was...something the other Fairchilds would have passed by and scorned to notice," as indeed George's brother Denis did. Perhaps Dabney's exclusion of George from the Fairchild norm signals her awareness of the need to maintain the stories that keep their family "solid to the outside."⁹

These moments of attention to the labor and lives of their black employees threaten to disrupt the Fairchilds' façade and to reveal the throb of the compress that permeates the refined lifestyle at Shellmound. As Bourdieu might have it, these events threaten to violate the crucial "*taboo of making things explicit*" (96). According to Bourdieu, in highly developed symbolic economies, "To say what it really is, to declare the truth of the exchange, or, as is often said, 'the truth of the price'...is to destroy the exchange" (96). Paternalism mystifies the economic exploitation at the heart of interracial relations at Shellmound, and revealing the truth behind that mystification threatens the Fairchilds' aristocratic status. The Fairchilds have grown so accustomed to the ordered nature of their plantation household and to their servants' easy accession to their way of life that even these slight ruptures in the fixed pattern bring the individual nature of their employees to light and force them to confront the possibility that the ostensibly organic unity of Shellmound may

⁹ In a recent article exploring "the black characters' positions in the white characters' perceptions of their own identities in *Delta Wedding*," Betina Entzminger also offers an analysis of this scene as the moment Dabney acquires "the painful knowledge that her Uncle George has an identity separate from the family group" because "he cares for outsiders whom she considers unworthy" (62). Entzminger argues that Dabney's anxious meeting with Man-Son and the resulting reverie "carries the hint of sexual threat, a threat that is paradoxically linked to the memory of naked men and the hint of awakening desire" (62). She raises an intriguing idea that calls for further elaboration, especially considering the homoerotic undercurrents in the passage, though such elaboration is beyond the scope of this essay. Entzminger's piece offers a number of interesting ideas about the intersections of blackness and white identity generally in *Delta Wedding*; my analysis of both this scene specifically and the racial relations at Shellmound in general differs from hers by focusing particularly on Welty's handling of the complicated intersection of race, class, labor, and economics.

be a sham. Dabney's shock at George's embrace of Man-Son and his brother makes sense when we consider that when not ill, pregnant, or needed for a specific task easily handled with a more "loving" gesture of paternalism, the Fairchilds often seem to take their retainers' labor for granted, to assume that they will do their chores without much need for guidance. As Suzanne Marrs puts it, the congeniality between the Fairchilds and their servants "mask[s] a very deep separation" (96). For example, on one lazy afternoon Laura reflects that "she could hear nothing, except the sounds of Negroes, and the slow ceiling fan turning in the hall, and the submissive panting of the dogs just outside under the banana plants" (69). This construction—"nothing, except the sounds of Negroes..."—implies that the noise of African American work is essentially background noise on par with mechanical contrivances like the fan and submissive creatures like the dogs. Similarly, Laura happens into a room in which George sits "alone now—except, that is, for Vi'let, leaning from a stepladder with one knee on a bookcase, very slowly taking down the velvet curtains" (71). Thus, hard-working Vi'let barely qualifies as person enough to modify George's aloneness. As Yaeger puts it, blacks become merely "atmospheric" for the Fairchilds (104). This dim awareness of laboring blacks extends beyond young Laura. As Vi'let struggles with the dresses for the wedding party, Dabney grabs them up to show the newly arrived Tempe, heedless of Vi'let's cry: "Miss Dab, ain't you 'shamed, you bring my dresses on back here!" (131). In another striking passage, Tempe describes the despoiling of Roxie's domestic efforts as a tragedy—for Ellen. When George comes in with dirty shoes, Tempe exclaims, "Oh, Ellen—did you see how George tracked up your floor? It breaks my heart to see it. After Roxie spent the morning on her knees—now it all has to be done over" (141). Tempe specifically refers

to the floors as *Ellen's*, yet she does not perform the labor that keeps them clean. These floors prove to be a recurring struggle for Roxie: later, after Laura and Roy come in from a trip to the Yazoo river, Roxie "with a cry of sorrow" falls "on her knees behind Laura to take up the water that ran from her heels" (236). And when Little Uncle drives the food to a picnic so the family can feast, Welty describes him as "invisible" to the Fairchilds (315).

Troy cannot afford this carefully maintained obliviousness to the work going on around him. His function at Shellmound is a continuation of the role of the antebellum overseer in the Delta, who, as James Cobb observes, "was expected to care for, supervise, and discipline the slaves, provide for the livestock, keep up the implements, and produce a bountiful crop of corn and grain as well as cotton" (24). True, Battle Fairchild intercedes with whites on the behalf of blacks across the Delta, and Ellen nurses ill and pregnant African Americans on the plantation. However, with the exception of George in the knife-fight scene, Troy is the only character in the novel who uses physical force in his dealings with the Fairchild workers or who intercedes in a skirmish between black laborers. The fact that Mr. Bascom, the previous overseer, gets away with stealing from the family for so long because of Battle's lack of business acumen suggests that the overseer has a greater familiarity with the economic aspects of the plantation as well.

Not surprisingly, though the Fairchilds generally treat Troy with respect and courtesy, they also resent the intrusion of this low-born hill country native into their close ranks. As the incident with George on the bayou suggests, the Fairchilds consider Troy's type of work, though necessary, fundamentally un-Fairchild. Such class-conscious behavior is consistent with Cobb's description of "socially self-conscious planters" of the Old South

who keep “the doors of the big house...[,] for the most part, closed to [the overseer] socially” (24). Indeed, the twentieth-century Fairchilds still have good reason to be self-conscious, since Troy’s marriage to Dabney prompts much speculation from other Deltans: “Troy Flavin was the overseer. The Fairchilds would die, everybody said, if this happened” (38). The Fairchilds find some consolation in the fact that Dabney is not “going out of the Delta, of course” (56), yet they still find Troy threatening. When Aunt Jim Allen remarks that she has “never really *seen* Troy....Not close *to*—you know,” Welty notes that “She did sound actually frightened of Troy” (55). The more irascible Aunt Mac reflects that if she had charge of the family, “She would start by throwing Troy Flavin in the bayou in front of the house and letting the minnows chew him up” (87). Battle Fairchild shares Aunt Mac’s predilection for imagining gory demises for his future son-in-law, and, indeed, for anyone of lower rank who dares marry into his family: when the discussion turns to Robbie Reid Fairchild, George’s estranged wife, Battle declares, “If I weren’t tied down! I’d go find little Upstart Reid myself, and kill her. No, I’d set her and Flavin together and feed ’em to each other” (82). The animalistic implications of Battle’s fantasy come through more explicitly in other descriptions of Troy. For instance, he has “foxy skin” and “a luxuriant, petlike look” (123). Aunt Primrose comments, “I always think of him as part horse—you know, the way he’s grown to that black Isabelle in the fields” (147). Here Primrose renders Troy not just as part horse but also as part black, a suggestion of racial otherness that recurs in other descriptions. Indeed, as overseer, Troy lives in a house closer to the African Americans’ houses than to Shellmound (47). Riding by this house, India sees Troy as “a black wedge in the lighted window,” a metaphor that suggests Troy’s otherness is a “wedge” that divides the Fairchilds; or, perhaps, that Troy is a “wedge”

that separates the Fairchilds from the reality of their African American employees' lives and preserves their ignorance (68). For the Fairchilds, then, to be other than an aristocratic planter is also to be other than human and, perhaps, other than white. Their speech marks humbly born Troy not just as vulgar and crude but also as of a fundamentally different species.¹⁰

However, Shelley witnesses a scene in which Troy "handles his Negroes" that causes her to question the value of such distinctions—though not, ultimately, to reject them. As she strides into Troy's office in "one of the houses none of the girls ever paid attention to," she finds him in the midst of a tense confrontation between some feuding field hands. Two of them have "slashed cheeks," the work of Root M'Hook, who wields what Shelley at first thinks is a knife but soon realizes is an ice pick (257). When Root begins to fling his weapon at Troy, Troy shoots his finger and orders him removed. He then turns to another wounded hand, Big Baby, whose name, like Man-Son's, evokes the

¹⁰ Troy and Robbie Reid Fairchild are both low-class interlopers who threaten the Fairchild status quo; though I focus mainly on Troy, the Fairchilds may be even more concerned with Robbie. As Tempe tells Shelley, "when people marry beneath them, it's the woman that determines what comes. It's the woman that coarsens the man: The man really doesn't do much to the woman, I've observed" (270); as Shelley understands her, "Troy's not as bad for us as Robbie" (271). I would suggest, however, that Tempe and Shelley have little to worry about from Robbie. Though she does often betray her unspeakably parvenu nature, she also at times earnestly desires to relate to George as a Fairchild would rather than forcing him down to her "coarse" level. For instance, in her version of the Yellow Dog story, Robbie reflects that the Fairchild women take pride in the fact that their men will do anything they ask of them. Robbie thinks to herself that even though she "was not that kind of woman" and "she did not want to," nevertheless "she had to ask him for something—life waited for it" (192). She settles upon the right thing to ask for when George stands in the path of the Yellow Dog to wrest Maureen's leg free. Then, "in terror...she had held the Fairchilds' own mask in front of her. She had cried out for him to come back from his danger as a favor to her" (192). Her exclamation when George declines—one which draws hoots of derision from the Fairchilds upon each retelling of the story—is a protest that he has not played by the rules of the game, has not accepted her Fairchild performance: "George Fairchild, you didn't do this for me!" Although, as I have discussed, George's Fairchild identity is ambiguous, it would seem that Robbie does not inspire that ambiguity, does not "coarsen" him. Perhaps she is an exception to Tempe's rule. By contrast, as I will discuss, the fact that Troy—so essentially othered by the Fairchilds—can so easily become a Fairchild is fundamentally threatening to the Fairchild status quo.

paternalist conception of African Americans as perpetual children. When Troy inquires about the nature of his injury, Big Baby tells him in “confessional tones,” “Mr. Troy, *I* got my seat full of buck-shot.” Troy sympathizes, even while he finds the situation amusing—“Troy groaned with him, but laughed between his drawn lips”—as one might find a scuffle between overserious young boys amusing. Troy sets about mending his charge, telling him, “Pull down your clothes, Big Baby, and get over my knee,” a request that underscores Big Baby’s supposed childlike nature by putting him in a position that suggests he is prepared to receive both discipline and care from a loving parent.

This scene strikingly parallels George’s intervention in the bayou knife-fight. Once again, the brawling African Americans have wounded each other with a knife; once again, a white male figure breaks up the fight (if more violently) and tends to the injured, childlike worker with paternal affection. Like that earlier scene, in this one the white male protagonist embodies both “caring,” paternalistic racial attitudes and disciplinary, patriarchal attitudes—two attitudes associated with distinctly different, even opposed, classes and jobs on the plantation—thus throwing into doubt the division of labor management along class lines that enables the Fairchilds to preserve their aristocratic image and status.¹¹ Troy is caught in this paradox, much as George was. African American blood, the evidence of the violence implicit in plantation labor relations, initially forms a barrier to Troy’s full entrance to the Fairchild family, much as being covered with African American blood marked George’s difference from his brothers and sisters: blood pools at the office threshold, and,

¹¹ Danielle Fuller argues compellingly that “By shooting at Root’s shaking hand, Troy commits an act that maintains and marks his position as a white, working-class male within the hierarchy of the plantation” (299). I would argue that Fuller’s assertion is correct as far as it goes but that in this scene Troy behaves not just like an overseer but also like a paternalist; his behavior is influenced not just by his position as Fairchild employee but also as aspiring Fairchild.

suddenly, Shelley “could see the reason why Dabney’s wedding should be prevented. Nobody could marry a man with blood on his door” (258). As Ann Romines puts it, this bloody scene startles Shelley “into a momentary awareness of the economic structure within which she has grown to (near) adulthood” (614). However, perhaps realizing that the wedding has its own momentum, she quickly decides not to reveal this incident for the sake of the family’s coherence. She initially decides, like Dabney before her, to keep this incident a secret. She would “never tell anybody, for what was going to happen was going to happen” (258). As she flees back to the rehearsal—and past the site of Man-Son’s knife-fight—she further ponders issues of class and authenticity:

Running back along the bayou, Shelley could only think in her anger of the convincing performance Troy had given as an overseer, born and bred. Suppose a real Deltan, a planter, were no more real than that. Suppose a real Deltan only imitated another Deltan. Suppose the behavior of all *men* were actually no more than this—imitation of other men. But it had previously occurred to her that Troy was trying to imitate her father. (Suppose her *father* imitated . . . oh, not he!) Then all men could not know any too well what they were doing. (259)

Troy’s performance inspires Shelley to realize the constructed nature of an identity, that of an overseer, she had previously considered natural, “born and bred.” This epiphany leads her to question the nature of other, more privileged types of identity such as “a real Deltan, a planter.” Most importantly, the unfixed, flexible nature of Troy’s performance causes her to doubt further the rigidity of social boundaries and social roles. He simultaneously exhibits the fatherly benevolence of the planter and the violent discipline of the overseer. Like George before him, he steps into a disruptive, liminal space between two

conflicting class identities. If one individual can move between two such supposedly different and indeed opposed identities, then no identity is pure, natural, unconstructed.

Though we might read her thoughts on her father—"oh, not he!"—as an attempt to preserve Fairchild identity as somehow unimitative, unperformed, I would argue that we may better read it as a brief internal exclamation of despair as the momentum of her logic leads her to question even this most cherished identity.¹²

¹² Romines and Donaldson each offer convincing readings of this passage, though with different emphases than mine. In her essay "Gender and History in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*," in which she asserts that the project of *Delta Wedding* is "not just as an ironic portrayal of a society on the verge of drastic historical change but something very like a feminist interrogation of history and historical perspective" (3), Donaldson argues that this scene reveals that "to see white male authority as only a performance, a role assumed in imitation of men who, in turn, imitate others, raises profound questions about the assumed differences between masculinity and femininity, and ultimately about the boundaries between historical agent and historical background and between the public and the private sphere" (11). My own interpretation of this scene has much in common with Donaldson's and differs mainly in that I wish to emphasize the scene's implications for Welty's treatment of class rather than gender or history. In her compelling "Reading the Cakes: *Delta Wedding* and the Texts of Southern Women's Culture," Ann Romines has also argued that because of this scene, "Shelley can no longer believe in the fundamental fixity or the benignity of the plantation order" (614). Although she also sees Troy transgressing certain boundaries of identity, she initially renders that transgression in terms not of class but of gender: Troy's ministrations for Big Baby make him appear "as a grotesque imitation of a child's caretaker and cook, roles that—in this book—belong entirely to women" (614). I would note, however, that George also appears in the caretaker role in this novel; moreover, though Romines focuses on the culinary significance of the ice pick to connect Troy to the female cooks of the novel, I would argue that Welty's pointed comparison of the ice pick to a knife at the beginning of the passage forges a stronger link between Troy and George than between Troy and Roxie, Partheny, and other cooks. Betina Entzminger offers a specifically race-conscious reading of this scene. She rightly asks, "Is Troy, the lowly overseer whose job it is to associate closely with the black field hands so the land owners will not have to do so, a real white man? Or is he somehow tainted, whether physically or metaphysically, with black blood?" (61). However, though her questions implicitly raise the subject of class and labor, my reading differs from hers in that I see the black blood not merely as representing racial otherness but also as representing the violence and physicality implicit in plantation labor relations, a crucial aspect of life at Shellmound of which the Fairchilds strive to remain willfully ignorant in order to preserve their class position. Entzminger reads Shelley's anxiety over the performative nature of "real" Deltans primarily in terms of race, not class: she takes "Shelley's use of the word 'real' to mean, at least in part, 'white,'" and, continuing, points out that "for Shelley and most other people of her time and region, a black man from the Delta could never be a Deltan, but only a colored man. His black blood was believed to make him genetically unfit for the leadership and gentlemanly behavior required of a Deltan" (61). Entzminger is certainly correct that an African American man could never be a "real Deltan," but she does not explore the ways in which a "real Deltan" is not only a racial but also a class identity. I would argue that Shelley is most affronted by Troy's crossing of class lines she believes are natural and essential, though of course the crossing of these class boundaries both here and in George's bayou scene is often rendered in terms of racial otherness.

Shelley's new awareness of the performative nature of class and other identities leaves her in an ambivalent position.¹³ She realizes that class distinctions and social relations are slippery and malleable but realizes also that her family's status rests on a firm belief in rigid class differences. According to Romines, Shelley keeps her knowledge as "a potent secret beneath the fragile surface of the surviving plantation fiction" (615). However, she does not entirely keep the implications of this knowledge to herself. When she returns to the wedding hall, she objects to the way in which the wedding ceremony formally affirms Troy's class otherness: "Mama, I think it's so tacky the way Troy comes in from the side door....It's like somebody just walks in the house from the fields and marries Dabney" (270). Now that Shelley has seen the falseness of the class distinctions so central to life at Shellmound, she sees no reason for her family to continue in their attempts to mark him as an outsider. However, I would hesitate to read Shelley's remark uncritically as evidence of a burgeoning progressive class ideology. After all, her main objection seems to be that this reminder of Troy's humble origins is "tacky," that it interferes with the wedding's otherwise refined, aristocratic atmosphere. Her concern lies more with keeping her family "solid to the outside" at this public event than with

¹³ In her reading of this scene, Ann Romines pays particular attention to Shelley's rumination that "Women, she was glad to think, did know a *little* better—though everything they knew they would have to keep to themselves...oh, forever!" (259). As Romines notes, this thought represents a retreat into gender essentialism (615); the realization that such supposedly stable identities such as "planter" and "overseer" are inauthentic and constructed forces Shelley to fall back on the belief that women, at least, do not participate in this cycle of performance. However, though Shelley may endorse an essentialist conception of gender here, we should not too quickly assume that Welty does as well. As Romines points out, *Delta Wedding* "does not advocate an essentialist construction of 'woman's culture'" (616). I would note that the phrase "she was glad to think" that interrupts Shelley's assertion that women know better implies that this belief may be merely a pleasant, necessary fiction that allows her to maintain some sense of herself, some anchor in this sea of imitation and performance. After all, we have already seen Aunt Tempe criticize Ellen Fairchild for behaving in a "reprehensible" manner unbefitting a Delta woman, and we have seen Roxie convince Ellen to conform to her family's ways, so it seems that women are not free from this cycle of imitation.

challenging the myths that sustain that solidity, and she certainly does not question the oppression of the African Americans whose labor and lives support those myths.

Shelley's minor protest, in any case, counts for little. The wedding goes off as planned: "Troy came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney" (279). Even the flowers make him seem out of place: "His hair flamed. Had no one thought that American Beauty would clash with that carrot hair? Had no one thought of that?" (279). Thus, even if we read Shelley's objection as an act of resistance, however qualified and compromised, against her family's ideology, Welty does not offer us much hope that her act will have any real, lasting ramifications. In *Delta Wedding*, then, Welty explores the complicated logic of class, race, and paternalism, exposing the ways in which paternalism—whether demonstrated directly by the Fairchilds or delegated to the subordinate overseer—obscures the sometimes violent, bloody nature of plantation labor relations and allows the aristocratic family to preserve a sense of itself as part of a natural, organic extended family with African Americans as perpetual, contented children. Though she makes clear that these supposedly natural identities actually result from an elaborate, intricate set of performances, she offers little in the way of strategies for resistance to this social order; in this novel, those whose prestige might be threatened by those critical moments when class differences blur or even collapse can afford to ignore them. Welty does, however, demonstrate for her contemporary audience that nostalgia for a supposedly more stable time for race relations, a time when everyone knew their places, is fundamentally wrongheaded. She reveals that even in the most tranquil and stable year of the Delta's recent history, the

ostensibly stable racial and social hierarchies of the Delta existed in a state of flux and were only precariously, sometimes violently, maintained.

If in *Delta Wedding* Welty suggests that Southern aristocrats require a deliberate blindness to the economic underpinnings of their elite status, a willful ignorance of the (usually African American) labor that enables their privileged lifestyle, she makes that suggestion even more explicit in *The Ponder Heart* (1954), a short novel that again investigates the complicated intersection between racial paternalism, economics, and class. Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1953 and issued in novel form the following year, *The Ponder Heart* chronicles the waning days of the Ponders, a prominent aristocratic family from the small town of Clay, Mississippi. Edna Earle Ponder, the story's narrator and sole proprietor of Clay's Beulah Hotel, recounts to a road-weary traveler the twisted and darkly comic tale of her crackpot paternalist Uncle Daniel's marriage to, and eventual murder of, the decidedly low-class Bonnie Dee Peacock. Edna Earle's narrative reveals a profound anxiety about her family's class position, their relationship to their African American servants, especially longtime cook Narciss, and how public discussion about the sources and uses of their wealth might affect their standing in the community—and everyone else's.

The Ponders occupy a lofty but complicated place at the pinnacle of Clay's social hierarchy. As Welty put it in an interview, they stand "right at the top" (Wheatley 131). Their prestige and influence make them famous throughout the surrounding area. According to Edna Earle, "people not knowing the Ponders but knowing *of* them are just about everywhere you'd look" (86). As one might expect of a prominent family in mid-

twentieth-century Mississippi, they own an opulent home on a large cotton farm worked by African Americans and managed on a day-to-day basis by a poor white family. But the Ponders are also on the decline: Edna Earle and Daniel are the last of the line, and after his trial for Bonnie Dee's murder, Daniel abandons their country home, symbol of their prestige, to live in the Beulah Hotel with Edna Earle. The now dilapidated hotel symbolizes their loss of status. According to Edna Earle, "It was Grandma's by inheritance, and used to be perfectly beautiful before it lost its paint, and the sign and the trees blew down in front" (13). Further, Grandpa Ponder used to let someone else run the hotel for him; he thus reaped the profits of this business without having to deal with it directly and avoided contact with the "wrong element" who zip through town on the new highway (13). Now, however, Edna Earle has taken the reins—after Daniel gives the hotel to her as a gift—and thus participates in the plebian world of commerce. Of course, Edna Earle runs the hotel with aristocratic aplomb, focusing mainly on "looking pretty" for the guests and keeping them entertained while her African American servants do the actual labor. Indeed, even the one time we see her directly engaged with any mercantile endeavor takes place in a framework of paternalism and charity: she runs a rummage sale for African Americans, with the proceeds going to missionaries in Africa (21).

But if Edna Earle occupies a gray area between the aristocracy and the petit bourgeoisie, Daniel occupies a more easily identified position. As Ted Ownby has observed, perennially white-suited Daniel "is almost a parody of Will Percy's ideal paternalist, who secures the affection of people he meets by giving his money away" (146). In a time of social change, Daniel is, in Rachel V. Weiner's memorable phrase, "a still-bright figurehead on an otherwise crumbling wall" (265). Like the Fairchilds, Daniel

acknowledges no relation between his status and the money that enables it. According to Edna Earle, “Uncle Daniel was used to purely being rich, not having money” (50).

Indeed, Daniel has never worked a day in his life; as he reminds the court at his trial, “I’m rich as Croesus” (132). Daniel understands his aristocratic status as a pure state of being, not something created or constructed. What little cash money he does have—a three-dollar weekly allowance from the bank—he generally distributes to children as soon as he gets it (50). Indeed, he gives away all kinds of things, and to all kinds of people. Edna Earle runs through a lengthy but not at all comprehensive list of his divestments:

a string of hams, a fine suit of clothes, a white-face heifer calf, two trips to Memphis, pair of fantail pigeons, fine Shetland pony (loves children), brooder and incubator, good nanny goat, bad billy, cypress cistern, field of white Dutch clover, two iron wheels and some laying pullets (they were together), cow pasture during drouth (he has everlasting springs), innumerable fresh eggs, a pick-up truck—even his own cemetery lot, but they wouldn’t accept it. And I’m not counting this week. (8)

One could even argue that Daniel’s unbridled generosity leads to his wife’s death, since Bonnie Dee suffocates as she presses her face into a pillow to escape the tickling that Daniel gives her despite her protests (140). Daniel’s *largesse* thus goes well beyond the conventional bounds of racial paternalism; he does not just give worn-out shirts to needy African Americans but also gives banana ice cream cones to dancing girls at the fair, and so on—he even gave Edna Earle the Beulah Inn. However, the text suggests that giving to downtrodden African Americans does perhaps uniquely satisfy him. Indeed, Edna Earle only singles out one adult individual to whom Daniel gives consistently, an African

American man named Big John who, Edna Earle informs us, “worked for us out there since time was....Always wore the same hat and shoes and overalls, and couldn’t sign his name if life depended” (89). Big John’s profound material deprivation provides a perfect complement to Daniel’s openhanded ways: according to Edna Earle, “I expect he’s been robbed a hundred times, among the Negroes, but he’ll always ask you for money any time he sees you. Of course he and Daniel get along *fine*” (90). She continues: Uncle Daniel “always did like him—because of the money he could deposit on him” (91). Thus, Big John’s persistent neediness provides Daniel with ample opportunity to demonstrate his paternalist ways.

Such paternalist behavior befits a man like Daniel Ponder, who sits “right at the top” of Clay’s society; and, as in *Delta Wedding*, African American labor makes that lofty ranking possible. Daniel, and, during most of their marriage, Bonnie Dee, live in the Ponders’ enormous home on a large farm. Edna Earle itemizes their assets when she imagines how easily Daniel must have impressed Bonnie Dee with tales of his grandiose lifestyle: “Home on the hilltop! Great big car! Negroes galore! Homegrown bacon and eggs and ham and fried grits and potato cakes and honey and molasses for breakfast every morning to start off with—you know, you don’t have to have all the brilliance in the world to sound grand, or *be* grand either. It’s a gift” (30). The “Negroes galore” enable many of the other luxuries Edna Earle mentions. According to her, “If you know what you want done, you can just ask in the morning for how many Negroes you want that day, and Uncle Daniel hollers them in for you out of the fields, and they come just like for Grandpa” (54). Thus, the Ponders have an almost magical abundance of African American labor at their disposal. Moreover, as Eugene Genovese would have expected, the Ponders have

maintained the Old Southern tradition of treating some of their black employees as inextricably entwined with the white family. According to Genovese, “Not accidentally, and by no means as a petty propaganda device, acts of the Confederate Congress referred to the obligations of citizens to their black and white families. Not infrequently, planters recorded births and deaths of slaves in their family Bibles” (196). The Ponders would find such attitudes familiar: for instance, we know that the Ponders’ cook, Narciss, cared for Uncle Daniel as a child (98), and that she was essentially adopted into the family by Grandma Ponder. Edna Earle describes her as “a Negro we’d had her whole life long, older by far than I was. Grandma raised her from a child and brought her in out of the field to the kitchen and taught her everything she knew” (32).

But such close bonds do not relieve the Ponders of their stereotypical conceptions of African Americans. Edna Earle sees Narciss and other blacks as immature and shiftless. She tells her listener, “They don’t know anything, but you can try telling them and see what happens” (54), and notes even of faithful Narciss, “You can’t trust a one of them” (30). Moreover, Edna Earle exhibits some of the same condescension towards her African American workers at the hotel that characterized the Fairchilds’ attitudes towards Vi’let, Roxie, and other Shellmound servants. When describing the rigors of innkeeping, Edna Earle rhetorically asks, “Could *you* hope to account for twelve bedrooms, two bathrooms, two staircases, five porches, lobby, dining room, pantry and kitchen, every day of your life, and still be out here looking pretty when they come in? And two Negroes? And that plant?” (10). With the placement of the “two Negroes” in that laundry list—between such decorative priorities as “looking pretty” and a plant—Welty not only signals the relatively low priority that Edna Earle gives her two African American laborers but also suggests that

they serve the same “atmospheric” role that Patricia Yaeger saw blacks fulfilling in *Delta Wedding*.

As a poor white, Bonnie Dee Peacock shares neither the Ponders’ paternalistic attitudes about African Americans nor their indifference to money, and her inability—or refusal—to toe the Ponder line on those crucial issues threatens to expose the myths that enable the Ponders’ aristocratic standing. Edna Earle sees low-class Bonnie Dee as a danger to her family, much as the Fairchilds saw Troy, and, also like the Fairchilds, she adheres to an essentialist ideology of class. For instance, when she visits the Peacock home in nearby Polk, she notes a cluster of stately, impressive tombstones in a nearby cemetery and reflects, “It may be that the Peacocks at one time used to amount for something (there *are* worthwhile Peacocks, Miss Lutie Powell has vouched for it to Eva Sistrunk), but you’ll have a hard time making me believe they’re around us. I believe they have always been just about what they are now” (79). Since she herself has never laid eyes on a “worthwhile” Peacock, Edna Earle can continue to believe that their degraded condition is essential and eternal, much as she sees the grandeur of the Ponders as a “gift,” not something earned through skill, effort, or cunning (30). Animal metaphors pervade Edna Earle’s descriptions of Bonnie Dee, evidence that she perceives her as of a fundamentally different species than the Ponders. She observes that Bonnie Dee “didn’t know how to smile. *Yawned* all the time, like cats do” (42). Edna Earle connects this feline imagery directly to Bonnie Dee’s class position when she notes “Bonnie Dee, with her origins, could turn and spit like a cat” (49). A hint of racial otherness creeps into Edna Earle’s animalistic picture of Bonnie Dee as well: “I could tell by her little coon eyes, she was shallow as they come” (35).

Bonnie Dee's financial philosophies differ from the Ponders' as well. While Uncle Daniel thinks of himself as "purely rich" and Edna Earle handles money only long enough to pass it to the missionaries, Bonnie Dee works at the local Woolworth's. Such a position suits her, since, according to Edna Earle, "all she knew how to do was make change" (30). Edna Earle later reminds us of Bonnie Dee's pecuniary aptitude and her own lack thereof: "Bonnie Dee could make change, and Bonnie Dee could cut hair. If you ask me can I do either, the answer is no" (41-42). Of course, we should not trust Edna Earle without question: she has already admitted making change at the rummage sale, however altruistic her motives may be. Regardless of its truth, her claim emphasizes the significance of the relationship between economic practices and class position. As some critics have rightly noted, consumerism characterizes Bonnie Dee's attitude towards money; while the Ponders concern themselves with the symbolic value of their wealth, Bonnie Dee focuses on translating that wealth into material things.¹⁴ She clips the coupons out of her magazines to

¹⁴ As Ted Ownby puts it in *American Dreams in Mississippi*, Bonnie Dee "asserts herself by becoming a spender" (149). He further claims, "For Welty...no ultimate judgment awaits characters who buy new goods to define and enjoy themselves. Even if they offer no ultimate solutions or redemptions, goods allow significant forms of freedom" (148). Julia Eichelberger argues that "Edna Earle regards Bonnie Dee as a kind of consumer glutton with poor taste. Yet Welty's narrative suggests that electricity, a washing machine, and a telephone are only unimportant to someone who already has a cadre of servants to wash their clothes, carry fuel, and run to town to deliver messages and summon doctors" (17). She continues, "For people besides the Ponders who can't order people around, the things Bonnie Dee acquires are means of greater self-determination" (17-18).

My interpretation follows Ownby's and Eichelberger's in reading Bonnie Dee as a consumerist; however, no one has yet extended the scope of Bonnie Dee's consumerism to her attitude towards marriage or discussed the ways consumerism disrupts the class hierarchy of Clay. I should stress that although Bonnie Dee's attitude towards money seems consistent with Veblen's ideal of conspicuous consumption—she keeps her purchases on the front porch for all to see, after all—Veblen also argues that conspicuous consumption *alone* is not enough to propel an individual into the upper classes. Rather, that consumption must conform to a society's accepted norms. As Veblen cautions, "it must not be understood that the motive on which the consumer acts in any given case is this principle in its bald, unsophisticated form. Ordinarily his motive is a wish to conform to established usage ...[and] to live up to the accepted norms of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed, as well as in the decorous employment of his time and effort" (115). Veblen takes care to observe that these norms, which make up the "canon of reputability," do not span all of human civilization but, rather, derive from "the accepted circumstances, the traditions, and the

send off for various household items and appliances. As Edna Earle puts it, “Think of something to wear. Bonnie Dee had it” (67). She gets the house electrified—connecting it to the town of Clay in a way Grandpa Ponder would have abhorred—and even buys a washing machine, though, as Edna Earle notes, she kept it “on the front porch, just like any Peacock would do” (68).

Bonnie Dee’s un-aristocratic attitudes towards race and money make her transition into the Ponder home difficult; her refusal simply to assimilate into their aristocratic framework and accept their ways disrupts the Ponder lifestyle and challenges Edna Earle’s essentialist ideas about class. Initially, ignorance about aristocratic racial mores lies at the heart of Bonnie Dee’s discomfort in her marriage and contributes to her decision to leave Daniel after five years and six months. According to Edna Earle, Daniel “carried that child out there and set her down in a big house with a lot of rooms and corners, with Negroes to wait on her, and she wasn’t used to a bit of it. She wasn’t used to keeping house at all except by fits and starts, much less telling Negroes what to do” (48). Despite Edna Earle’s grim appraisal of her aristocratic capabilities, Bonnie Dee turns out to be a quick study. When she

degree of spiritual maturity of the particular class whose scheme of life it is to regulate” (105). Clay’s consumption patterns are based on a paternalist model, in which merely spending money is not enough to earn the respect of one’s peers; rather, one must engage in a form of conspicuous waste that proves one’s adherence to certain romanticized versions of antebellum attitudes towards African Americans.

In addition to this important regional distinction, we should keep in mind that the very nature of consumption in American economics and culture had undergone significant changes between Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Welty’s *The Ponder Heart*. As David Potter observes in his classic study *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, by the post-World War II years the American economy was so abundant that the focus shifted from production to consumption, an alteration that may be seen in the growth of the advertising industry between the 1890s and 1950s. According to Potter, “the most critical point in the functioning of society shifts from production to consumption, and, as it does so, the culture must be reoriented to convert the producer’s culture into a consumer’s culture” (173). Thus, while extravagant consumption may have been a privilege for Veblen’s elite, it gradually became a way of life for Americans of many classes and income levels; the importance of exhibiting the consumption in proper, community-sanctioned ways would therefore become crucial to establishing an individual’s membership in a prestigious social class.

returns, she kicks Daniel out of his ancestral home and lives there alone with Narciss; moreover, she proves newly adept at paternalist performance. For instance, she gives Narciss her old clothes when she tires of them. Says Edna Earle, “we saw Narciss in Bonnie Dee’s pink voile dress she got married in, parading through Sistrunk’s Grocery with a store-bought watermelon wrapped in her arms. Narciss said sure she was dressed up....As for Miss Bonnie Dee, her new clothes were gorgeous, and she hoped for some of those too some day, when they got holes”.(67). Such a paternalist gesture ostensibly represents her conformity to aristocratic racial customs and her understanding of the role of properly displayed conspicuous waste. She also masters the ability to “tell Negroes what to do”: during her testimony, Narciss reports that Bonnie Dee ordered her to drag an old parlor sofa away from the windows during a lightning storm—with Bonnie Dee still sitting on it (96). Narciss irons her expensive apricot dress, “all dem little pleats,” and her first thought on seeing her deceased body is of “all dem little pleats to do over” (98).

Yet Edna Earle still resists accepting Bonnie Dee despite these exercises of paternalistic racial behavior. In a significant locution, she describes Bonnie Dee’s newfound aristocratic manner as a game, a form of play. As Edna Earle puts it, “Bonnie Dee was out yonder dressing up and playing lady with Narciss” (69). Indeed, though she adopts paternalistic performances with aplomb, Bonnie Dee does not commit to them completely. As W.J. Cash might put it, she refuses to accede fully to the terms of the “aristocratic complex” brought forward from the Old South into the New. In some cases, she demonstrates an intimacy with Narciss that violates even the liberal allowances of the “pet” relationship. For instance, Narciss reports that in violent thunderstorms, “Us hides together under Miss Edna Earle’s bed....Another thing we does together, Mr. DeYancey, I

occasionally plays jacks with her” (99-100). Indeed, this friendship has deep roots. When Bonnie Dee leaves Uncle Daniel, Narciss discovers her un-addressed farewell note, which reads, “Have left out. Good-by and good luck, your friend, Miss Bonnie Dee Peacock Ponder” (47). As Edna Earle observes, “we don’t even know which one of them it was *to*” (47). Her note thus symbolically equates her wealthy husband and her impoverished cook, a collapse of social differences unacceptable to the Ponders. Further, the fact that she left it on the kitchen table implies that she intended it for Narciss and considers her a friend.

Thus, though she means it as a slight, I propose we consider seriously the implications of Edna Earle’s assertion that Bonnie Dee is only “playing” lady. The idea that she is “playing” at being an elite Southern aristocrat, trying it on to see how it fits, using the role when useful and pleasant but discarding it when not, is consistent with the consumerist ideology that leads her to fill the already overstuffed house with new appliances ordered from the Memphis newspaper. Significantly, she agrees to marry Daniel only “on trial” (40). That is, Bonnie Dee accepts the marriage on a trial basis, much as she might buy a set of encyclopedias or a commemorative plate from the Franklin Mint “on trial,” with the option of returning it if she is not satisfied. And, indeed, she *does* return it: as Edna Earle puts it, “So the marriage trial...went on for five years and six months, and Bonnie Dee, if you please, decided No” (48). We know that Bonnie Dee is accustomed to buying things on a trial basis because when Edna Earle stays with Daniel on Ponder Hill to comfort him, she sees that Bonnie Dee’s magazines are full of “holes she’d left where she’d sent off for all kinds of things—you know, wherever they showed the postman smiling in the ad” (55). These purchases include perfume samples, a free piano lesson, and, most significantly, “a set of Balzac to examine ten days free of charge”; but, Edna Earle notes, she sent it back:

“she must have decided against it—I looked everywhere” (56). Further, when Bonnie Dee does decide to commit to the marriage, she responds not to Daniel’s heartfelt apologies or a romantic serenade but to a newspaper advertisement—and one that promises a better deal. Edna Earle and Daniel run “a three-day ad in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*” (57). Edna Earle includes a poem in the ad promising that “all is forgiven,” and, perhaps more importantly, “retroactive allowance will be given” (59). This claim has particular significance because Edna Earle has belatedly realized that Daniel inadvertently contributed to his marital strife by never giving Bonnie Dee any money. According to Edna Earle, “I don’t think it ever occurred to him, to give anything to Bonnie Dee. Because he *had* her. (When she said ‘trial,’ that didn’t mean anything to Uncle Daniel that would alarm him. The only kind of trials he knew about were the ones across the street from the Beulah, in the Courthouse—he was fond of those)” (49).¹⁵

In the same way that her tendency to clip coupons out of magazines leaves “holes in the stories all the way through” (56), Bonnie Dee’s consumerist ideology pokes holes in the narratives that sustain the Ponders. By exposing aristocratic white ladyhood as a commodity that she can easily buy, return, and indeed haggle over, Bonnie Dee also exposes the myths of natural, essential class positions that Edna Earle clings to in this time of social change. For instance, the awareness of money as a tool that individuals use to specific ends that this change-making upstart brings to the Ponder family leads Daniel to attempt to purchase his

¹⁵ Though Edna Earle comments that she does not “believe for a minute” that Bonnie Dee saw the ad—she thinks “somebody with bright eyes, who did, went and told her” (59)—it seems unlikely that an avid ad-watcher like Bonnie Dee could have missed it, especially as it runs over the course of three days. Edna Earle even seems to contradict this statement later when she informs us that Bonnie Dee has begun to subscribe to the *Commercial Appeal*: “With her name in it that one time, she tried a whole year of it, and here it came, packed with those big, black ads” (67).

acquittal when he can no longer count on his reputation to protect him. The terms of Bonnie Dee's return to the Ponder fold include twenty-five dollars in cash per week, which Daniel and Edna Earle deliver to her each Saturday (71). Perhaps this weekly transaction, this repetition of paying money to ensure his marriage remains more or less intact, gives Daniel the idea to bribe the entire town to avoid a guilty verdict. On the day of his trial, Daniel withdraws all his money from the bank—despite a long-standing order that bank tellers should “never, never, never let Uncle Daniel get his hands on cash” (147). When it seems that the prosecutor has Daniel on the verge of confessing his misdeeds, Daniel begins handing the money out to everyone in the courtroom—Sistrunks, Peacocks, Sampsons, and so on, regardless of class. Rachel Weiner offers one explanation of why Daniel's massive handout causes such problems and why Grandpa Ponder went to such lengths to keep him away from his cash. According to Weiner, for Grandpa Ponder “money has place neither among material possessions nor among the landed inheritances which determine family place. It represents the world of no-nonsense law that exists on paper among strangers” (267). I would extend her analysis a step further. As Weiner's statement implies, money is no respecter of persons; Grandpa Ponder worked hard to create a life in which Daniel could be “purely rich,” trading on his reputation and prestigious name, but anyone can use money, not just, as Weiner rightly argues, strangers, but also individuals from any class.¹⁶ Daniel suffers the fate the Fairchilds worked so hard to avoid: this exposure of the crass, material money that enables the Ponders' lofty social rank further disrupts any claim to essentialist

¹⁶ Weiner's essay briefly discusses the ways in which a move to a cash economy threatens families like the Ponders; she addresses the legal ramifications of the cash economy and the way that it threatens to “corrupt” Grandpa Ponder's easy life by letting in an outside world full of strangers; however, I am more interested in the way that the cash economy serves to undermine essentialist claims to aristocratic class positions.

aristocracy they might have, since it inspires a vocal and public debate about the sources of their wealth. Florette Sistrunk fires the opening salvo, arguing that “the Ponders as I’ve always been told did not burn their cotton when Sherman came, and maybe this is their judgment” (147). Edna Earle clarifies, but does not help their case much: “The Ponders did not make their money that way....Ours was pine trees and ’way after Sherman, and you know it.” Another Sistrunk points out, however, that “‘Twas the same Yankees you sold it to!” The chaos inspired by this redistribution of wealth and the conversation about it spreads all across Clay, resulting in a muddled social hierarchy. As Edna Earle puts it, “The worst thing you can give away is money....You and them are both done for then, somehow; you can’t go on after it, and still be you and them” (149). Indeed, “that money has come between the Ponders and everyone else in town. There it still is, on their hands” (155). Even the Peppers, the tenant family who maintain the farm at Ponder Hill, “don’t have a notion...where they stand. Who does?” (155). Indeed, Edna Earle’s desperate desire to maintain even the faintest vestiges of their status—and to help Daniel maintain his illusions of being “purely rich”—comes through clearly in the novel’s closing passage. Edna Earle warns her guest that Daniel “may try to give you something—may think he’s got something to give” (156). Her qualifier indicates that Daniel can no longer afford the generosity that assured him of his position. Nevertheless, she begs a favor of her guest: “Make out like you accept it. Tell him thank you” (156). Even if she must face the reality of their new position, she may still enlist the aid of others to preserve Daniel’s belief in his own aristocracy.

Perhaps most damaging to the Ponders, this ambiguity about social “standing” extends into the realm of race relations. The consumerist-informed, flexible attitude toward race and class that Bonnie Dee brings to Ponder Hill—riding the sofa Narciss moves one

minute, hiding under the bed with her the next—inspires Narciss to revolt, however subtly and ineffectually, and demonstrates the hollowness of paternalist claims to know their charges intimately. Indeed, Edna Earle’s narration offers hints that she does not know Narciss as well as she thinks she does. Though Narciss does show considerable and apparently genuine affection to Uncle Daniel in her testimony, she also reminds the court of the distance between herself and the native Ponders. Although defense attorney DeYancey Clanahan conforms to the paternalist model when he describes Edna Earle and Daniel to Narciss as “Your best friends on earth,” Narciss herself offers an alternate view (99). When prosecutor Dorris Gladney asks why she remained under the bed during the storm when she heard the Ponders at her front door, Narciss explains, “If white folks and ball of fire both tryin’ git in you all’s house, you best let *dem* mind who comin’ in first” (102). Thus, while the white man sees Daniel and Edna Earle as her “best friends,” Narciss lumps them in with “white folks” and puts them on par with the destructive and unpredictable fireball she so fears. Edna Earle’s ignorance about her cook’s personal preferences and talents further underlines how little she knows Narciss. For instance, when Narciss first arrives in the family Studebaker to announce Daniel and Bonnie Dee’s surprise nuptials, Edna Earle comments, “I never in my life knew she knew how to drive” (31). Moreover, although Narciss clearly enjoys driving and spending time with Bonnie Dee, Edna Earle sees her only as a cook. According to her, “They had that grand Narciss—had her and never appreciated her” (42). Indeed, when she moves back to Ponder Hill, she observes that Narciss “had a black smear across all her aprons, that the steering wheel made on her stomach;” but Edna Earle remedies that: “I made her get back to the stove” (54). Grandma Ponder brought Narciss into the family as a child and taught her how to cook; for Edna Earle, Narciss has

not developed, changed, or grown more complicated since that moment in her youth. As her name suggests, Narciss serves merely as a vehicle for the Ponders' vanity; they see in her their idealized conception of themselves.

By contrast, Narciss misses Bonnie Dee in a way that suggests she considered her a true friend, or at least truer than the Ponders: "She claims she's lonesome in town," even though she lives in the Beulah Hotel with Daniel, Edna Earle, and whatever visitors happen by. Though I do not wish to overstate the degree or depth of the friendship between Bonnie Dee and Narciss—after all, Narciss does a great deal of labor at Ponder Hill—the fact remains that we see a greater degree of intimacy between her and Narciss than between Narciss and Edna Earle, for instance.¹⁷ Moreover, at the trial, Narciss refuses to provide an alibi for Daniel. As Edna Earle says, "She just washed her hands of us. You can't trust them for a single minute" (103). Most importantly, her time with Bonnie Dee has made her singularly unfit for the one role for which Grandma Ponder trained her: cooking. According to Edna Earle, Narciss could cook well, "if she just would. But Narciss don't cook good anymore. I hate to tell you—her rice won't stand apart. She don't cook any better than Ada or Ada's sister" (155). When their longtime retainer refuses to play her role in the paternalist performance, the Ponders cannot "stand apart" from the denizens of Clay. Although Narciss' revolt does not amount to much—some bland rice and a turn on the witness stand that does not affect the trial's outcome—we may catch in her relationship with Bonnie Dee glimmers of Welty's vision for a more equitable relationship between African

¹⁷ In "Welty's Philosophy of Friendship: Meanings Treasured in *The Ponder Heart*," Sharon Deykin Baris also reads Narciss' dissatisfaction at the novel's end as a form of resistance (58). I agree with Baris; my reading differs from hers primarily in that I see Narciss's resistance as having a specific origin in her relationship with Bonnie Dee.

Americans and whites, a relationship outside the rigidly circumscribed boundaries of paternalism, a relationship in which social identities are not fixed but flexible. When asked in an interview for her thoughts on politics, Welty praised the advances of the civil rights era and criticized those who opposed racial equality as desiring “an idiotic return to something that was not any good in the first place” (114). Most significantly, she further commented, “I do feel that private relationships between blacks and whites have always been the steadying thing” (114).¹⁸ In *The Ponder Heart*, however, she has created a story in which personal relationships between black and white do not steady an oppressive paternalist social order but disrupt it, with hopeful results.

Should we assume, then, that Welty prefers Bonnie Dee’s consumerism to the Ponders’ paternalism? Perhaps not; I would argue that Welty does not celebrate Bonnie Dee’s urge to buy and spend in and of itself. After all, none of her many purchases seems to do her much good; in fact, when she succumbs to the lure of Edna Earle’s ad and “buys” back her marriage even when she knew it was a bad deal, she seals her doom. However, perhaps Welty intends for us to take from Bonnie Dee an attitude of irreverence to long-standing Southern class hierarchies, an attitude informed by an awareness of the economic underpinnings of Southern society that offers the possibility of freedom from hidebound social and racial customs by making claims for essential, natural class positions impossible and opening the avenues of genuine communication among races and classes. In both *Delta*

¹⁸ Peggy Whitman Prenshaw has written eloquently about the role of “private relationships” in Welty’s political ideology in “Welty’s Transformations of the Public, Private, and the Political” in the volume *Eudora Welty and Politics*. As Prenshaw puts it, “Welty shows unmistakably that what she regards as the politics of substance and courage, politics that is truly public, civil, and communal, is the human connection between freely operating individuals who confront issues that directly affect their lives. The domain where such connection occurs for Welty the writer, and also, I think, for Welty the human being, is typically personal, private, and interior” (46). Other essays in the same volume by Noel Polk, Suzanne Marrs, and Daniele Pitavy-Souques take up the same issue.

Wedding and *The Ponder Heart*, Welty describes racial paternalism as a tool whereby wealthy white Southerners simultaneously organize the black labor that supports their posh lifestyles and obscure the true nature of that labor so that their aristocratic positions appear essential and inevitable. But, Welty suggests, by exposing the mythical nature of their pretensions to aristocracy—their dependence on violently coerced black labor, for instance, or a poor white woman's ability to try on and take off elite ladyhood like a dress—we can demystify and delegitimize the racist, elitist systems that support them and explore the possibility of creating new, more equitable, and more humane ways of interacting.

CHAPTER THREE
Stopping on a Dime: Race, Class, and “the White Economy of Material Waste”
in William Faulkner’s *The Mansion*

In 1940, William Faulkner offered a eulogy for Caroline Barr, his family’s longtime African American retainer.¹ In his eulogy, Faulkner credited Barr, to whom he referred as “a fount of authority over my conduct,” with teaching him many valuable lessons, including “to refrain from waste” (117). Such simple advice may seem only commonsensical, yet readers familiar with Faulkner’s late-career literary production—not only *The Town* and *The Mansion*, the final Snopes novels, but also a wealth of speeches, essays, and public and private letters—may perceive that Faulkner’s emphasis on this bit of practical wisdom presages his late 1950s preoccupation with the role waste plays in the intersections of race, class, and economics. Indeed, in *The Mansion*, Faulkner probes this complicated relationship in order to understand more thoroughly the ills of a Southern class system based on acquisitive, competitive individualism and to offer an alternative model of race and class relations based on communal need.²

¹ As Theresa Towner notes, “many contemporary critics” find in the manner and content of Faulkner’s speech evidence that, “even upon the death of a woman so important to him and his family,” Faulkner could not react with genuine emotion but, rather, clung to “his plantation-owner pose,” pressing the complicated and individual Barr into the decidedly uncomplicated mold of the “black mammy” (124). Towner cites, in particular, essays by Judith Sensibar and Minrose Gwin. Towner reads the Barr eulogy in the context of Faulkner’s other public statements on race in order to critique easy dismissals of Faulkner as a racist whose “go-slowist” ideology merely masked his true desire to maintain the Southern status quo. Towner rightly finds the issue more complicated than that: she argues that “the question ‘Was Faulkner a racist?’ is not only unanswerable but also a kind of hermeneutic red herring” (121).

² Faulkner scholarship, like Southern literary scholarship in general, has been largely silent on the issue of class, with a few notable exceptions. I will discuss many relevant examples in the body of the essay and in other notes, but I would like to review briefly three of the most significant class- and economics-based interventions here. Myra Jehlen offers one of the earliest attempts to think of Faulkner’s work in terms of class in her *Class and Character in Faulkner’s South* (1976). Jehlen argues that “it is his strong awareness of class that animates Yoknapatawpha County” (10), and that his novels often deal “with maintaining, resenting, or refurbishing a social situation which is first of all class defined and only then regional or racial” (10). I would argue, however, that we cannot so easily separate class and race, and that Faulkner’s fiction is invested in the project of showing the ways in which they mutually determine one another.

A 1956 essay entitled "On Fear: Deep South in Labor: Mississippi" suggests

Faulkner's shifting emphasis in his treatment of race towards the end of his career.

Claims Faulkner, "it is our southern white man's shame that in our present economy the Negro must not have economic equality; our double shame that we fear that giving him

A more recent examination of Faulkner's treatment of class is Kevin Railey's *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the Production of William Faulkner* (1999). Railey sees Faulkner's work as grappling with a central tension between the paternalism of the Old South and the liberalism of the New; Railey defines paternalism broadly: paternalists believe in "a social order that is stable, hierarchical, consciously elitist, and therefore fundamentally antithetical to liberalism. A paternalist assumes an inherent inequality of men; some are born to rule, others to obey" (7). Further, he argues that when Faulkner "was born paternalism had already become mostly a residual ideology, liberalism was well on its way to rising to dominance, and populism was in the process of being co-opted by the forces of liberalism and progressivism" (28). Out of this complicated ideological soup, Faulkner emerged with a complicated ideology combining tenets of liberalism and paternalism, says Railey: Faulkner accepted "certain tenets of liberal ideology, namedly reward based on merit and the content of one's achievement," while at the same time he held "fast to a belief in the possibility of a naturally ordered society whose most powerful figures are men who are, in theory, naturally better and more superior than others" (43). Ultimately, according to Railey, "Faulkner can never, it seems, break from a deep allegiance to paternalism and the social stratification it requires; from this perspective his social vision remains deeply conservative" (45).

Railey offers a compelling vision of Faulkner's relationship to art, history, and ideology, and I find his readings of earlier novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* compelling. However, I would suggest that, perhaps paradoxically for such a historically minded study, Railey too often treats Faulkner as historically static, as though his ideas about the issues concerning him in the late 1920s were the same in the late 1950s. This elision of late Faulkner and early is most clear in his chapter on the Snopes trilogy, in which he discusses the trilogy as a whole without accounting for the nineteen-year span between the publication of the trilogy's first volume and its last. Such treatment of the Snopes trilogy is common in Faulkner studies and not unique to Railey; and indeed, there are good reasons for reading the trilogy as a unified whole. However, the years between *The Hamlet* and *The Mansion* are crucial in Southern history, and include such major historical events as the United States' entrance into World War II, the *Brown* decision, and the Emmett Till murder. So, while I agree that we may read *The Mansion* as part of a project criticizing "an aristocracy of wealth that engenders a repressive and exploitative system concerned with business and profit," I would resist Railey's assertion that it upholds Faulkner's "belief that if power in a society is not preempted by a benevolent paternal class of rulers, dispensing largesse according to the moral deserts of the individual, then society will always fall victim to Snopesism" (148). Thus, although I will demonstrate that Faulkner does indeed place his hope in a group of benevolent individuals, I will also argue that by the late 1950s he has come to see the ideal constitution for such a group as in fact radically opposed the ideal of "natural aristocracy" that Railey sees Faulkner as endorsing.

Most recently, Erik Dussere has offered a reading of Faulkner intended to "examine the ideological apparatus by which the South has disavowed the economic logic of its antebellum social systems" (64). However, Dussere's study, which considers *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *Intruder in the Dust*, is more concerned with Southern economic practices mainly as a metaphor for Southern social practices; he argues that Faulkner's attempt "to describe history as a reservoir of sin inevitably depends on some notion of debt, and there for some hope for the possibility of repayment: sin, crime, guilt—all are ways of understanding the world in economic terms, in the language of debt" (66). By contrast, my study is more interested in the relationship between the symbolic and the literal meanings of Southern economic practices.

more social equality will jeopardize his present economic status; our triple shame that even then, to justify our stand, we must becloud the issue with the bugaboo of miscegenation” (105). The casual dismissal of miscegenation as a “bugaboo” may initially seem surprising to readers accustomed to viewing Faulkner’s entire body of work through the lens of his ostensible “Major Phase”; after all, miscegenation lies at the heart of three of the works typically considered among his greatest—*Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. Even if we question Edouard Glissant’s claim that “Creolization is the very thing that offends Faulkner: *mestissage* and miscegenation, plus their unforeseeable consequences” (83)—if it surely repulsed many of his characters, it less clearly repulsed the author—we must still acknowledge that in the 1930s and 1940s Faulkner accorded the concept more attention than any mere “bugaboo” would warrant. And, though Faulkner’s concern with the relationship between race, labor, and economics was certainly evident in those earlier works, as Richard Godden has ably pointed out, rarely did he articulate that concern so baldly as in this essay.³

For Faulkner, waste—or the lack of it—lay at the heart of his analysis of the reasons why white southerners feared economic competition from African Americans. In

³ In *Fictions of Labor*, Godden reads Faulkner’s work of the 1930s, primarily *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* as texts which grapple with “founding and ramifying anxieties about the legacy of violently maintained labor relations” (2) as Southern planters experience a “dramatic transformation...from lords of bound labor to payers of a wage” (1). Godden further argues that Faulkner’s work of this period is about “how a revolution at the center of the southern economy releases from the forms of life that have made that economy typifying contradictions whose resolution takes shape as narrative options and stylistic habits that are, quite literally, forced out of a historically determined and pervasive structure of feeling” (3). Though my study is less concerned with narrative practice than is Godden’s, the transition of Southern aristocrats from slave owners to employers is of course central to the collapse of paternalism that is central to my project; I would argue that this transition, combined with the New Deal, World War II, and the Civil Rights movement, produced anxieties about class and labor not just for the planters but also for an entire social structure rooted in idealized versions of the Southern past which lasted well beyond the 1930s.

“On Fear, Deep South in Labor, 1956,” he argues that though the African American farmer has been free a scant ninety years, now

he can own his land and farm it with inferior stock and worn-out tools and gear—equipment which any white man would starve with—and raise children and feed and clothe them and send them to what schools are available and even now and then send them North where they can have equal scholastic opportunity, and end his life holding his head up because he owes no man, with even enough over to pay for his coffin and his funeral. That’s what the white man in the South is afraid of: that the Negro, who has done so much with no chance, might do so much more with an equal one that he might take the white man’s economy away from him, the Negro now the banker or the merchant of the planter and the white man the share-cropper or the tenant. (96)

Thus, Faulkner locates the white fear of African American economic competition in the impressive and wholly necessary efficiency of African Americans, workers who, because of their subjugation, cannot afford to waste a breath, much less a dollar. As he succinctly puts it in his notorious interview with Russell Howe, “the Negro won’t come out on top because of anything to do with the race but because he has always gotten by without scope—when they are given scope they use it fully. The Negro is trained to do more than a white man can with the same limitations” (264). Similar sentiments appear in *The Mansion*. Faulkner’s omniscient narrator explains that, before his political career, populist demagogue Clarence Snopes and his gang beat up African Americans out of fear: “they were afraid of that alien race....not because it was black but because they—the white man—had taught the black one how to threaten *the white economy of material*

waste, when the white man compelled the black man to learn how to do more with less and worse if the black man wanted to survive in the white economy—less and worse of tools to farm and work with, less of luxury to be content with, less of waste to keep alive with” (599, my emphasis). Of course, a similar attitude often validated oppressive economic practices. As Gilbert Fite points out, when local administrators controlled the distribution of New Deal relief payments, “black farm families received considerably less than their white neighbors. The prevailing attitude throughout the South held that blacks could live on less than whites”; withholding cash from African Americans maintained the paternalistic bond by ensuring that they would have to rely on planters for work and for other kinds of care (136). However, I would argue that Faulkner perceives African American efficiency not as an excuse for further subjugation but as a possible model for a reform in an economic and social system he finds corrupt.

In this context, Caroline Barr’s simple admonition “to refrain from waste” takes on added resonance. Not just homespun wisdom, her advice, rather, evokes a type of African American economic practice fundamentally different from, and indeed subversive of, a white economic system based on “material waste,” a system in which the participants’ frantic economic activity means they end up with a houseful of unnecessary consumer goods all paid for on the installment plan (644). Elsewhere in *The Mansion*, Charles “Chick” Mallison elaborates on the nature of this white economy. Discussing Jefferson’s resistance to the efforts of a pair of immigrant Communist organizers, Chick argues that

among us white male Jeffersons there was one concert of unanimity, no less strong and even louder at the bottom, extending from the operators of Saturday

curb-side peanut- and popcorn-vending machines, through the side-street and back-alley grocers, up to the department store owners and automobile and gasoline agencies, against everybody they called communists now...[,] any and everybody who seemed even to question our native-born Jefferson right to raise or dig or find anything as cheaply as cajolery or trickery or threat or force could do it, and then sell it as dear as the necessity or ignorance or timidity of the buyer would stand. (523)

In this sense Faulkner's treatment of exchange in *The Mansion* recalls John T. Matthews analysis of trade in *The Hamlet* as "a game that yields pleasure, makes statements, and fabricates meaning" (170). Similarly, Mauri Skinfill argues that *The Hamlet* "announces the advent of a social order determined extensively by a market economy: a system of exchange in which profit rather than use determines value" (154). However, in *The Mansion* Faulkner is clearer about the racial and class aspects of that meaning. Chick renders the competitive nature of free-market capitalism not simply as American but as fundamentally white, male, and Southern; he implicitly portrays economic competition not just as a means of material gain but of certifying one's proper identity and one's place in the social hierarchy. Indeed, Chick describes the Finnish communists, who refuse to participate in this system, as non-white and fundamentally other: one is a "troglodyte," and both are "already well advanced outside the Jefferson *pale*" (523, my emphasis). The non-white Reds share their association of racial otherness with Meadowfill, a poor sawmill retiree who scrimps and saves and whose thriftiness leads him "to haggle in the small dingy back- and side-street stores which catered mostly to Negroes, for wilted and damaged leftover of food which even Negroes would have scorned" (626). The narrator

later describes him as “too stingy or too perverse” to “stray” his “scraggly” orchard; the association of “stinginess” with “perversity” again makes clear that refusal to participate in economic competition marks one as other, perhaps even subhuman. But while white Jeffersonians treat the economic sphere as a proving ground for their race, class, and gender identity, African Americans cannot afford to waste effort or item: they must become masters of efficiency, wresting every last erg of use from impoverished land and worn-out tools.

To understand better how waste might serve so vital a function in a competitive market economy, I turn to Thorstein Veblen. White Jeffersonians participate in conspicuous consumption, and, indeed, in what we might call conspicuous commerce. Their competitive exchanges create a social field in which each individual white male may define his position relative to other white males. Veblen clarifies the relation between “material waste” and this competitive activity when he argues that “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (36). Yet not just any evidence will serve. According to Veblen, “In order to be reputable, it must be wasteful” (96). Further, this waste must conform to “established usage” (115). In the early twentieth-century South, such “established usage” conformed to a romanticized antebellum ideal: as W.J. Cash puts it, “if money was necessary to social position, pride in its possession almost invariably translated itself into terms fixed by the aristocratic complex as it had been brought forward from the Old South” (240).

This attention to the centrality of waste to status is not unique to Faulkner or *The Mansion*, of course. The performance of paternalism necessary to authorize an

aristocratic class identity in the South requires conspicuous waste. Recall, for instance, Hurston's New South paternalist Jim Meserve: when his low-class wife Arvay objects that the black laborers working on their new home steal leftover wood, he chides her, saying that if he objected to their petty pilfering, "Then I wouldn't be a gentleman no more...and that would cost me something. That's like broken food from the table. The help don't look for ladies and gentlemen to trace up a thing like that" (672-73). Rather than re-using their old clothes, the Meserves pass them along to their black retainer, Joe Kelsey, and his family, much as Welty's occasional aristocrat, Bonnie Dee Peacock, hands her clothes down to Narciss, the Ponders' longtime servant. Edna Earle informs us that she once saw Narciss "in Bonnie Dee's pink voile dress she got married in...Narciss said sure she was dressed up....As for Miss Bonnie Dee, her new clothes were gorgeous, and she hoped for some of those too some day, when they got holes" (67). Bonnie Dee's conspicuous waste of so precious an artifact as her wedding dress at once signals her wealth as well as her indifference to matters financial. Agrarian writer Stark Young even suggests that the appearance of wastefulness is crucial, even—or perhaps especially—when the waster cannot afford the expected generosity: he tells of a "poor cousin" who, "too proud to be thrifty or to resemble the white trash, whom the negro despised and my cousin's family had never invited farther than the front steps," offers an African American "a third of his day's salary...for a small service" (351). Thus, if "material waste," according to Chick Mallison, drives the white economy, then these wasteful gestures of paternalism represent the pinnacle of achievement in the economic arena: they simultaneously signify financial superiority and disinterest in the process of "cajolery," "trickery," "threat," and "force" that characterizes the economic struggles of lesser men. Moreover, wasteful

paternalism reinforces the racial difference between African Americans and whites; African American southerners are disqualified from competition in the economic arena by dint of the favors they receive—though, as Faulkner’s Charles Mallison notes, the skills they learn by having to make do with less means they threaten the very system itself.

Flem Snopes’s rise from poverty in the community of Frenchman’s Bend to what seems the pinnacle of wealth, prestige, and respectability as a Jefferson bank president illuminates the importance of paternalistic waste to the construction of class in *The Mansion*. Though the citizens of Jefferson clearly consider Flem to represent a new profit- and business-centered ethic in a South that they find alien and other, Flem takes care to exhibit his success in symbols and language associated with an agrarian-oriented Southern aristocracy.⁴ Veteran Snopes-watcher V.K. Ratliff describes Flem’s new abode, Manfred De Spain’s “rejuvenated ancestral home” (458), as “jest a house,” and notes that it would have been perfectly acceptable for De Spain or even Colonel Sartoris, since Sartoris “had been born into money and respectability too, and Manfred De Spain had been born into respectability at least even if he had made a heap of the money since” (469). However, Flem knows that since he had to earn the house and the bank presidency, had to “snatch and tear and scrabble both of them outen the hard enduring resisting rock,” such an ordinary house would not do for him; instead, he must use his house to connect

⁴ Corrine Dale has also noted the way in which Flem blurs the boundaries between Old South and new; she compares Flem and Thomas Sutpen, arguing that both men “self-consciously imitate the paternalistic Southern gentleman, accruing the necessary domestic symbols—mansion, wife, and family” (323). Further, “Both serve to acknowledge the financial basis of Southern paternalism and to suggest the kinship of Old South planter and New South businessman” (323). Though Dale goes on to talk about how “Sutpen and Snopes fail because they apply financial ethics to family relationships” (325), my reading is more concerned with the racial and class aspects of paternalism.

himself to the fabled planter class and its aristocratic values. His home “would have to be the physical symbol of all them generations of respectability and aristocracy that not only would a been too proud to mishandle other folks’ money, but couldn’t possibly ever needed to” (469). According to Ratliff, Flem’s depositors must be able to lie down “undisturbed at night with their money that immaculate, that impeccable, that immune” (470). Ratliff’s narrative suggests that the denizens of Jefferson expect their aristocrats to have transcended economic concerns so that they would never need to “mishandle” the bank’s deposits. As Ted Ownby puts it, Flem “intends the mansion and its columns to earn the trust of people who have good reason not to trust him” (143). Ratliff’s description of Harvard- and Heidelberg-educated lawyer Gavin Stevens’ relationship to economics offers a comic picture of the aristocrat’s proper relationship to economics. Discussing Gavin’s involvement in the matter of Linda Snopes’s inheritance, Ratliff describes his prestigious friend as “not only in the middle of that entire monetary and sepulchrial crisis but all around every part of it too, like one of them frantic water bugs skating and rushing immune and unwettable on top of a stagnant pond” (463). Thus, though economic matters immerse Gavin, he nevertheless remains “unwettable”; like others in the upper ranks of Southern society, he may be *involved* with money, but he is never *determined* by it—at least ostensibly. The fact that his “unwettable” status requires “frantic...skating and rushing” suggests the complicated performance required to maintain that arid state. In fact, the “skating and rushing” prove to be too much effort for Gavin, finally; in his mania to get the better of Flem, he mortgages his Cadillac convertible, strips it down, and refuses to make the payments in order to force Flem to repossess a defunct shell of a car. Noel Polk aptly describes Gavin’s scheme as “fourth-

rate lowgrade childish penny-ante chiseling and gouging” (“Idealism in *The Mansion*” 116).⁵

Thus, Flem’s new upper-crust status is precarious and requires constant reinforcement, requires a performance that, paradoxically, represents both his skill with a dollar and his indifference to the base world of economics. Therefore, he sets about converting this “jest a house” into a replica of an antebellum mansion, in the process “tearing off Major de Spain’s front gallery and squaring up the back of the house and building and setting up them colyums to reach all the way from the ground to the second-storey roof” (469-70). But the house alone does not suffice: Ratliff goes on to point out that Flem only becomes “completely complete...with a Negro cook and a yardboy that could even drive” him to and from work each day. Similar servants, Ratliff mentions, did the same for previous bank presidents. That Flem requires such servants to “complete” him implies that a true Southern aristocrat must maintain a paternalistic relationship of dominance and subservience with African Americans, one also rooted in an idealized version of antebellum society.

However, a slip in Flem’s performance of his new status becomes a major problem for the residents of Jefferson and prevents them from ever truly accepting him as a true Southern aristocrat, largely because this gaffe indicates his incomplete understanding of the racial performance necessary to authorize the class identity he seeks to attain. Ratliff reveals that when Flem ascended to the bank’s presidency, he

⁵ Further, as Noel Polk points out, Gavin’s righteous fulminations about the immorality of Flem’s greed are fundamentally hypocritical. Gavin marries Melisandre Backus, an old sweetheart and the widow of a New Orleans mobster. Polk notes, “It is an irony worth noting, then, that the highminded idealistic Stevens, the self-proclaimed foremost opponent of ‘Snopesism,’ lives out his days as the direct beneficiary of Hariss’ ill-gotten gains” (“Idealism in *The Mansion* 116).

relinquished the old cloth cap that he had brought from Frenchman's Bend in favor of "a black planter's hat suitable to his new position and avocation" (453). Flem's move here seems smart, calculated to further his re-creation of himself as a classic agrarian aristocrat. Indeed, Flem repeats the actions of the unassailably aristocratic Colonel Sartoris: Ratliff recalls "the time when that first president, Colonel Sartoris, had come the four miles between his ancestral symbol and his bank in a surrey and matched pair drove by a Negro coachman in a linen duster and one of the Colonel's old plug hats" (471-72). The exchange does earn Flem some notoriety: even his eventual murderer, kinsman and Parchman inmate Mink Snopes, has heard about the hat (700). However, Ratliff argues that the hat "even after five years still didn't look like it actively belonged to him" (465). Ratliff here implies that Flem's new hat fits him so badly because of how he disposed of his old hat, a hat which now rests on the head of a young African American boy. Normally, passing down a bit of old clothing to a needy black child would perfectly exemplify the paternalist ethic that organized relations between aristocratic Southerners and African Americans. But, according to Ratliff, the "legend [was] he sold it to a Negro boy for ten cents" (452). This transaction proves to be a sticking point in Jefferson's vision of Flem, and because of it, Ratliff claims that although the house "might a been the solid aristocratic ancestral symbol" that Flem wanted it to be, "it was jest the house that was altered and transmogrified and symbolised: not him" (470). That is, the citizens of Jefferson still see Flem as the same man because his old cap was "not throwed away or even give away, but sold, even if it wasn't but jest a dime because ten cents is money too around a bank, so that [they] could look at the hat and know that, no matter how little they might a paid for one similar to it, hisn had cost him ten cents less" (470). Though an

adept social climber, Flem's privileging of naked profit over the sophisticated waste of paternalism prevents him from ever completely achieving the status he has so long sought.

Or does it? In Ratliff's version of the story, the dime, regardless of its minute size, seems to form an impregnable physical barrier to Flem's social ascent. Ratliff treats the transaction as strictly mercantile and decidedly non-paternalist—the boy gets a hat, Flem gets a dime. However, Montgomery Ward Snopes offers a slightly but crucially different version of the story that challenges the foundation upon which Jefferson bases its disdain for Flem. According to M.W., Flem “sold it to a nigger boy for a dime *that he took out in work*” (390, my emphasis). If we take his testimony seriously, then Ratliff has omitted a crucial fact; he lets the reader believe that Flem engaged in a goods-for-cash transaction when the exchange may, in fact, have conformed much more closely to the paternalist ideal which Flem seeks to emulate. If a dime does not literally change hands, then Flem's trade is decidedly less *gauche*, and Flem's customers would have reason to continue believing that their banker still keeps their money “immaculate” and has little interest in plundering their accounts. Thus, Jefferson's refusal to allow Flem to be “altered and transmogrified” into an aristocrat has less to do with Flem's failure to adhere to the proper social conventions and more to do with Ratliff's manipulation of the story. We have reason to believe that Ratliff exerts considerable influence over the way in which the town perceives its upstart banker: according to Ratliff, Flem's addition of a small, bare, wooden footrest to his otherwise upscale mansion mantelpiece was initially known only to Flem's African American yardman but became “a Jefferson legend after he mentioned it to me and him (likely) and me both happened to mention it in turn to some

of our close intimates: a part of the Snopes legend and another Flem Snopes monument” (479). Ratliff’s parenthetical qualification—“(likely)” —suggests that he may in fact be the sole disseminator of this tale. Thus, the fact that the longtime Snopes-watcher chooses the particular detail of the hat as the point of attack in his campaign against Flem’s impending respectability indicates the significance of paternalistic performance to elite status; if Ratliff can deprive Flem of his claims to paternalistic waste, then all the fancy columns and African American servants will avail him little.

Ratliff is Faulkner’s most seductive and dangerous narrator; we want to trust him. His folksy, aw-shucks “wisdom” is a refreshing change from Gavin Stevens’ pompous gasbagery. And certainly, in his routing of the duplicitous politician Clarence Snopes, he performs a valuable service for Yoknapatawpha County and for the state of Mississippi. However, as Richard Godden says of Ratliff in *The Hamlet*, “Ratliff’s perception of Flem needs to be recognized as partial, interested and class based. Despite posing as Flem’s arch-rival, and seeming to exist as his antithesis...Ratliff shares much with Flem, not least that both quit rented fields for versions of the store” (“Earthing *The Hamlet*” 87).

Godden’s insight holds true for the Ratliff of *The Mansion* as well. I would argue that Ratliff projects his own perceived inferiorities onto the story of Flem’s ten-cent hat. Ratliff chastises Flem for not suitably adhering to the ideal of material waste, yet he has trouble adhering to that ideal himself. When he and Gavin journey to New York to visit Linda Snopes and Barton Kohl in Greenwich Village, Gavin takes him to an exclusive designer necktie store run by Russian designer Myra Allanovna, where Ratliff orders two ties before he inquires as to the price. His discovery that they cost seventy-five dollars

apiece puts him in a fiscal quandary. Though we might at first think that wearing an expensive tie would constitute the conspicuous waste so prized in Jefferson, we should remember that, as Veblen points out, conspicuous waste must conform to accepted social norms, and there is nothing especially paternalistic or antebellum about Ratliff's purchase. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that going to Greenwich Village and buying pricey designer neckties from a Russian haberdasher is the very antithesis of the romanticized antebellum ideal that reigns in Yoknapatawpha. Nor would such a purchase further his reputation as a smart trader and shrewd businessman, his position in the game of competitive commerce. Ratliff haltingly articulates these concerns: "I sells sewing machines in Mississippi. I cant have it knowed back there that I paid seventy-five dollars a piece for neckties" (489). Yet as a merchant, Ratliff feels obliged to fulfill his contract: he attempts to pay for the ties but refuses to take them home; nor can he accept them as a gift. Myra Allanovna's next proffered solution horrifies Ratliff and startles him into revealing that the obsession with physical money that he ascribes to Flem truly belongs to him. She snaps open her cigarette lighter and prepares to burn the money that he has laid on the counter, but Ratliff quickly intervenes, placing his hands on the cash, and saying, with diction that indicates a kind of primal panic, "Wait! Wait!...Not burn money" (490). When Myra presses him for a reason, his first response is merely tautological: "Because it's money" (490). Ratliff's halting explanation does little to ameliorate this naked expression of affection: "Somebody somewhere at some time went to—went through—I mean, money stands for too much hurt and grief somewhere to somebody that jest the money wasn't never worth—I mean, that ain't what I mean..." Of course, it is Ratliff whose money is threatened; it does not seem unreasonable, then, to imagine that this

“somebody” is him, that, because of the effort it has taken him to succeed in business, money has for him become overdetermined as a symbol of his own escape from poverty.

Mauri Skinfill contends that *The Hamlet* argues against “the desperate fetishization of money produced by the demands of underclass subsistence living, demands already determined by the operations of a market economy” (168). Richard Moreland sees Ratliff as the primary vehicle for that critique; according to Moreland, the salesman’s tales (again in *The Hamlet*) caution Yoknapatawpha’s citizens that they “must not accept uncritically and humorlessly New South capitalism’s fetishized ‘cash money’ as the arbiter of social exchange” (142). But the Ratliff of *The Mansion* perpetuates that fetishization and more. While the Fairchilds of *Delta Wedding* strive to erase the traces of history from their money, Ratliff values money precisely because he sees it as the symbol of his history. Allanovna confirms as much: she responds to Ratliff’s semi-coherent rationale by saying, “I know exactly what you mean. Only the gauche, the illiterate, the frightened and the pastless destroy money.” Of course, she was perfectly willing to destroy money moments before, so she may only intend her remark to comfort Ratliff and offer him a vision of himself as noble instead of cash-crazy. Regardless, though her comment may gesture towards a critique of those who waste, Ratliff is not capable of articulating or enacting that critique. He offers no viable alternative, because, though he does not conform to the economy of material waste, he upholds its ideals by projecting his own money-fetish onto Flem.

If Ratliff can provide no useful alternative, then we might logically turn next to Yoknapatawpha’s African American community; after all, Faulkner describes their

economic practices as opposed to the “white economy of material waste.”⁶ But for Faulkner, the post-World War II economic boom has resulted in an expansion of wealth and consumerism such that even the impoverished African American underclass can participate in the mainstream economy, an economy which he continues to identify as fundamentally flawed. Charles Mallison reflects that with the new prosperity comes an alteration in the social fabric of Yoknapatawpha: he believes that “all the domestic knights-errant liberal reformers would be out of work now, with even the little heretofore lost places like Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, fertilised to overflowing not only with ex-soldiers’ blood money but with the two or three or four dollars per hour which had been forced on the other ex-riveters and –bricklayers and –machinists...so fast that they hadn’t even had time to spend it” (644). Charles notes that even the two

⁶ I should also note here that some critics have seen Linda Snopes Kohl, Communist Party member and Flem’s legal, though not biological, daughter, as a resistant figure. Certainly, Linda’s flight from Jefferson to New York City, marriage to Jewish sculptor Barton Kohl, and participation in the Spanish Civil War (participation which renders her deaf when an exploding shell bursts her eardrums) would prepare us for such a reading. Keith Louise Fulton has argued that Linda represents an “alternative vision of America” because she “walks out of the mansion and closes the door on the American dream of a patriarchal dynasty after achieving what no other female or male character in Faulkner’s fiction achieves, an act of justice that settles her conflicts with the past and empowers her move into the future” (425). Further, Hee Kang asserts that “her participation in the war and her being a Communist and later a teacher of black children demonstrates her political radicalness; and her job as a riveter in an airplane factory proves her economic independence. Such experiences allow her to shape her feminine consciousness that will collapse men’s belief system” (26). Certainly, Faulkner does present Linda’s communism sympathetically, and I would agree that, initially, we may read her as a hopeful character. However, such hopeful readings of Linda quickly become complicated. For instance, though her attempt to educate Yoknapatawpha’s African American children is obviously laudable, her plan for doing so is somewhat problematic. She intends to “establish a kind of competitive weekly test, the winners, who would be the top students for that week in each class, to spend the following week in a kind of academy she would establish, with white teachers, details to be settled later but for temporary they would use the sitting-room in her father’s house for a sort of general precept” (531-32). Thus, Linda plans to reward merit with separation from other members of the African American community in favor of education in the very heart of the symbol of patriarchy and paternalism, a plan that indicates she perhaps has not fully shaken the influence of a corrupt form of Southern society. Even if we are inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt, we cannot avoid considering that, in addition to conspiring to kill Flem—an only questionably (if that) justifiable action—she ends the novel not with a gesture of solidarity with the poor and marginalized but with the wealthiest consumers: she drives away in a brand-new British Jaguar.

symbolically non-white Finn Communists, whom one might expect to oppose the expansion of individualistic capitalism, have become “capitalists and bull-market investors simply because they had not acquired any private place large enough to put that much money down while they turned their backs on it” (644). Most importantly, the African Americans now have “an installment-plan automobile and radio and refrigerator full of canned beer down-paid with the blood money which at least drew no color line in every unwired unscreened plumbingless cabin” (644). The language here echoes a prominent African American leader’s earlier explanation to Gavin that “We both buy the same installment-plan automobiles to burn up the same gasoline in, and the same radios to listen to the same music and the same iceboxes to keep the same beer in, but that’s all” (532). Thus, though this increased wealth seems a positive advance, it is still an advance within a system that Faulkner sees as problematic, if not downright corrupt. African Americans’ halting entrance into mainstream economic practices—though it remains both rigidly circumscribed by Southern whites—is also an entrance into an economy of consumption and waste; instead of re-writing the economic master narrative, they have let it re-write them. Thus, Yoknapatawpha’s African Americans no longer enact the alternative, subversive economic practices that they did before the war.

I would argue that, although neither Ratliff nor Mississippi’s African Americans can provide an alternate model of economic, race, and class relations, then we may find one by following the unlikely figure of Mink Snopes. Faulkner uses Mink’s journey from Parchman to Jefferson to explore one potential manifestation for a subversive, alternative paradigm of community economic practices made possible in the wake of drastic transformations wrought by World War II. First, though, let me make clear that I do not

intend to offer a reading which sees Mink's journey from hardscrabble tenant farm to Flem's mansion, the scene of his crime, as a redemptive quest for himself or for Jefferson. Critics such as Joseph Urgo, Noel Polk, and Theresa Towner have done much to complicate readings of the Snopes trilogy which posit Flem as a fundamental evil who must be heroically exterminated.⁷ So, while I agree with Polk and others that we must not too simply read Mink as a hero who rids the world of Flem's pervasive evil, I would contend that Faulkner uses his travels in order to present an alternative method of organizing class and economic relations—an alternative that Mink, obsessed with petty revenge, misses.

Murderous Mink Snopes may seem a far-fetched suggestion for a source for a critique of the dominant economic and social systems in Yoknapatawpha County; throughout *The Mansion*, Faulkner characterizes him as so overwhelmed by economic pressures that he converts nearly all knowledge into economic terms, even knowledge about himself. When he hitches a ride to Memphis upon his release from prison, he surreptitiously enlists the driver's aid to determine his age: "He thought *Money*. He said:

⁷ Polk argues compellingly that "Flem is not the completely dishonest, evil person he has been depicted by most critics" ("Faulkner and Respectability" 120); as he notes elsewhere, Flem's experience of "that nomadic life of sharecropper poverty and insecurity" goes a long way to explain "why middle-class emotional and financial security should be so attractive to him" ("Idealism in *The Mansion*" 115). With that in mind, "If violence, if murder, is the only way we can deal effectively with Snopesism, if the world has to depend on the likes of Mink Snopes to save it, then we are in sorry shape indeed" ("Idealism in *The Mansion* 125). As Joseph Urgo claims in *Faulkner's Apocrypha*, "Snopesism" is not demonic; rather, "to be a 'Snopes' is to refuse class typification and identification as 'fate,' to refuse subordinate status based on class position, and to say no (or nope) to class stigma and class-based determinism in general" (153). Frances Louisa Nichol rightly argues that "Flem Snopes is not a 'force' or 'power' but merely one man adapting vestiges of the Old South's ability to manipulate the truth" (493), though I disagree with her ultimate conclusion that Mink "achieves heroic dimensions...[because he] displays a moral responsibility toward himself" (505). Most recently Matthew Lessig has argued that while the "New Critics see Agrarians found in Faulkner's Snopes clan an embodiment of the social forces they felt were menacing the traditional Southern order," neither they nor their like-minded successors "questioned the historical or ideological implications of burdening poor-white tenant farmers with the responsibility for the mechanization of the South" (80).

‘If you had twenty-five dollars and found thirty-eight more, how much would you have?’” When the driver does the math for him, he thinks “*Sixty-three... So that’s how old I am*” (428). Perhaps this tendency towards an economic epistemology of age results naturally from a life spent, with the exception of his years in prison, on the losing end of the competitive system of “cajolery or trickery or threat or force” by which Yoknapatawpha’s white male citizens determine their relative worth. Indeed, his persistent obsession with money starkly contrasts with Ratliff’s image of Gavin Stevens as “unwettable” by the swamp of financial affairs.

Further, Mink’s impoverished economic condition threatens even his whiteness. He resents the African Americans who work for Jack Houston because Houston’s paternalism provides them with more material comfort than Mink can provide for himself. Mink obsesses over the fact that Houston’s servant has “a better house to live in than the one he..., a white man with a wife and two daughters, lived in” (339) and wears “warmer clothing than any he and his family possessed” (341); indeed, he curses “the Negro for his black skin inside warmer garment’s than his, a white man’s” (341). Mink particularly perceives his whiteness as precarious and unstable when in the presence of the wealthier and undoubtedly white Houston, who treats all those beneath him as fundamentally other: when he goes to Varner’s store, “Houston ordered whoever was on the front porch to step inside and fetch him out whatever it was he had come for like they were Negroes” (337). Mink finds this interpellation into racial otherness difficult to resist: when he goes to visit Houston to retrieve his cow, he can only confirm his whiteness in the presence of Houston’s African American servant: Mink reflects that he does not need “to fawn and cringe yet because only the Negro with his hayfork would be

in the lot now, the rich man himself in the house" (342); instead of having to "fawn and cringe," a phrase Faulkner repeats a few lines later, Mink can speak to Houston's servant "level and white-man" (342). Houston's presence, however, forces Mink into a performance of subservience that aligns him with stereotypical representations of "fawning and cringing" African Americans. Indeed, Mink's and Houston's interaction with the servant mark their class differences clearly: Mink tells his rich foe, "I don't listen to niggers: I tell them" (344); because his state of deprivation puts him on a lower level than even this African American servant, Mink cannot afford any gesture that would acknowledge social equality with him. Houston, on the other hand, whose class position makes his whiteness unassailable, can listen to his servant's advice without fear.

Mink has had little success, then, in the economic competition by which Yoknapatawphans confirm their whiteness. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that when he is sentenced to Parchman for killing Houston, he perceives his incarceration as a reprieve from that cutthroat system:

He could drag dust up and down cotton middles from year in to year out and if nothing whatever sprang up behind him, it would make no difference to him. No more now to go to a commissary store every Saturday morning to battle with the landlord for every gram of the cheap bad meat and meal and molasses and the tumbler of snuff which was his and his wife's one spendthrift orgy. No more to battle with the landlord for every niggard sack of fertilizer, then gather the poor crop which suffered from that niggard lack and still have to battle the landlord for his niggard insufficient share of it. All he had to do was just to keep moving.... At first he was ashamed, in shame and terror lest the others find that he felt this way;

until one day he knew (he could not have said how) that all the others felt like this; that, given time enough, Parchman brought them all to this. (414-15)

But this freedom from economic concerns is brief: "Parchman just changed the way a man looked at what he saw after he got in Parchman. It didn't change what he brought with him" (415). When his sentence is up, he receives "a pair of shoes, a shirt, overalls and jumper and a hat, all brand new, and a ten-dollar bill and the three dollars and eighty-five cents which were still left from the forty dollars Flem had sent him eighteen years ago" (424); thus, Mink is simultaneously released from a literal prison and returned to an economic one.

His first thought indicates that his longstanding obsessions with killing Flem and with needing money have not weakened during his long imprisonment: he immediately reflects that "It would probably take all of the thirteen dollars and eighty-five cents to buy a pistol even in a Memphis pawn shop" (425). Moreover, Mink quickly learns that he still lacks skill at competing in the economic arena. Even his shock at how inflation has driven up the price of bread and sardines cannot keep him from nearly blowing all his money in a pathetically small-scale spending spree: when he sees a case of soft drinks, "something terrible happened inside his mouth and throat—a leap, a spring of thin liquid like fire or the myriad stinging of ants all the way down to his stomach; with a kind of incredulous terror, even while he was saying *No! No! That will cost at least a quarter, too*, his voice was saying aloud: 'I reckon I'll have one of them'" (564). His near impotence in the economic arena threatens both his mission and his manhood. Mink thinks, "If the bottles had been a dollar apiece, there was a definite limit beyond which temptation, or at least his lack of will power, could no longer harm him. But at only a

quarter apiece, until he could reach Memphis and actually have the pistol in his hand, there was no foreseeable point within the twelve remaining dollars where he would have peace; already, before he was even outside the store, he was saying *Be a man, Be a man. You got to be a man, you got too much to do, too much to resk*" (566). Though he manages to resist this temptation, the storekeeper also short-changes him (by a dime, in fact), a result which perhaps indicates the ways in which Mink's desire to consume has gotten in the way of his success in the economic sphere, has blinded him to "cajolery and trickery."

Curiously, given Mink's apparent impotence in the economic arena, Gavin's plan to dissuade him from killing Flem fails, even though it is intended to exploit just this weakness. When Linda Snopes arranges to have Mink pardoned and released two years before he completes his sentence, she and Gavin decide to pay him two hundred and fifty dollars upon his release, with the same amount to follow every three months, as long as he leaves Mississippi and never returns. According to Ratliff, everyone (except Linda, of course) believes this plan will work because no prison should "contain nobody eccentric and antisocial enough to behave like he considered anything like free-will choice to even belong in the same breath with two hundred and fifty active dollars give him free for nothing so he never even had to say Much obliged for them" (675). But although Mink's refusal of the money constitutes a surprising display of willpower, it also conforms to the rules of the game that the wealthier Gavin and Linda have established: accepting the money means that he would have to leave Mississippi and never seek his revenge on Flem; he refuses the money so that he can stay. Thus, though Mink's decision resists the blunt economic determinism that nearly everyone assumes motivates him, it does so in a

way that indicates he has not realized that the rules of the system he is caught in are not neutral but in fact serve the interests of the wealthiest and most powerful; but ultimately, by refusing the money and pursuing the quest, Mink tacitly accepts the economic system imposed on him from above.

However, although Mink cannot conceive of an ideal of class and economics outside of the prevailing Yoknapatawpha norm, he does encounter, on his journey to Jefferson, a community that has organized itself around a fundamentally different model—a model that does not validate and reward waste, a community in which paternalism is unknown. Faulkner signals Mink's entrance into this alternate system when, after realizing he will need more money to buy a pistol, he finds a job performing the profoundly un-wasteful task of sorting scrap wood from collapsed house, "a jumble of beams, joists, window- and door-frames and even still-intact sections of siding" (569); his new employer, the Reverend Goodyhay, means to build a church with the salvaged materials. Mink begins to realize how this church differs from others when he sees their interim sanctuary: "an unpainted box of a building which somebody somewhere back before the thirty-eight years in the penitentiary recognised, remembered. *It's a nigger schoolhouse*, he thought" (579). Goodyhay has reclaimed this once-abandoned edifice for his unique congregation, a racially integrated group of working-class World War II veterans and their families. Mink pays particular attention to "two oldish couples, man and wife of course, farmers obviously, without doubt tenant farmers come up from the mortgaged bank- or syndicate-owned cotton plantation from which the son had been drafted three or four or five years ago to make that far from home that sacrifice" (583). Significantly, the group remains deliberately unstratified even by military rank: Mink

“sense[s] that identity, similarity among them even beyond the garments they wore—more battle jackets, green army slickers, one barracks cap still showing where the officer’s badge had been removed” (579). When Mink spots a black woman in the congregation and professes surprise that they accept African Americans as well as whites, one of Goodyhay’s parishioners explains to him, “Her son had it too just like she was a white woman, even if they didn’t put his name on the same side of the monument with the others” (579). Mink later watches as “the white people on the bench ma[ke] way for the Negro woman to sit down beside the young white woman and put her arm around her” (579).

This striking, moving vision of an integrated worship community founded on the common experience of loss and a renewed commitment to the democratic values for which the United States entered World War II is central to Faulkner’s critique of the prevailing systems of race, class, and economics in post-war Mississippi. Noel Polk has argued that while much Southern literature registered curiously little of the war’s effects on the South, Faulkner, by contrast, “reacted profoundly to it while it was in progress and at its end hit the ground running fully prepared as a citizen to insist that his fellow white Southerners adapt to inevitability even if not to morality, and was willing to instruct them in how to do so” (“Faulkner and World War II” 132). Further, Polk states that “More than any of his novels, *The Mansion* records the War’s impact on the day-to-day life of North Mississippi. It’s a kaleidoscopic record of Mississippi’s full participation in the war and of the sweeping social changes brought about as soldiers, black and white, return home. In Faulkner’s accounting, Mississippi is in all ways intimately implicated in the War’s meanings” (138). Although Polk does not deal specifically with it, Reverend Goodyhay’s

congregation is clearly one central aspect of that “kaleidoscopic record.” In “Fighting for What We Didn’t Have: How Mississippi’s Black Veterans Remember World War II,” Neil R. McMillen discusses the results of his interviews conducted with some of the 85,000 African American Mississippians who served in World War II. According to McMillen, “Combat allowed a shared American experience, one not circumscribed by race” (101); this experience “touched lives of Mississippi’s black service men and women in ways their white oppressors both feared and underestimated” (95). Ultimately, McMillen concludes, though the histories he collected were diverse and idiosyncratic, in general they suggest that “patriotic service at home and abroad provided new perspectives on ancient white wrongs and ultimate black possibilities. The war helped shape an emerging racial consciousness...It underscored the moral contradictions of a nation that professed human rights and practiced white supremacy....And the war also fostered the development of a larger societal framework within which successful struggle for human rights might be waged” (110). McMillen notes that one hopeful—albeit problematically so—aspect of the military experience was the way in which it offered a space for white and black Americans to form friendships, though in many cases those friendships did not survive the trip home (99-100). In Goodyhay’s congregation, then, Faulkner presents for us an idealized version of an alternative model of interracial community that could develop after World War II, a community characterized not by hate and fear but by a recognition of equality and common humanity.⁸

⁸ Goodyhay’s church may not be Faulkner’s first attempt to describe such a community. Barbara and Wesley Morris note that in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Chick, Aleck Sander, and Miss Habersham represent “an alternative community consisting of blacks, women, and children; it is a community of minorities, marginalized on the threshold of the dominant community of adult, white men” (224). I would

One of Mink's fellow scrap-wood sorters, a man named Dad, tells Mink that he does not believe that such a community can long survive: he argues that those who have not come around to this new way of thinking

ain't going to put up with no such as this. The rest of the folks that already had to put up with that damn war for four-five years now and want to forget about it.

That've already gone to all that five years of trouble and expense to get shut of it, only just when they are about to get settled back down again, be damned if here ain't a passel of free-loading government-subsidised exdrafted sons of bitches acting like whatever caused the war not only actually happened but was still going on, and was going to keep on going on until somebody did something about it....

trying to bring Jesus Christ back alive in the middle of 1946. (575)

Thus, Dad's cynical remarks make it clear that Goodyhay's congregation threatens to disrupt the status quo by forcing the citizens of Jefferson to acknowledge the gap between their religious and political ideals and their social practices.

Most significantly for this study, however, Faulkner also depicts this community as enacting an alternative model of economic practice as well. Historian Jack Bloom has noted that the struggle for civil rights hinged largely on African Americans becoming increasingly savvy in the economic arena, gaining purchasing power and learning to deploy it in a strategic manner to split the business and planter classes. According to Bloom, "it was primarily middle-class blacks, who were financially independent of whites, who led the assault and who were able to make use of its victories" (219). But as we have

suggest that *The Mansion* advances the depiction of community in the earlier novel by focusing in particular on the community's alternative economic practices.

seen, for Faulkner such success is always highly qualified, for it means adhering to a fundamentally corrupt economic system, one based on “cajolery,” “trickery,” “threat,” and “force,” one in which use value and the common good are at best secondary to the constant jostling for individual position on the social ladder. In contrast, he offers Goodyhay’s church, whose congregants share economic resources in a manner reminiscent of the early Christian church. When Goodyhay tells his flock that Mink needs nine dollars to get home, one man, who has recently won thirty-four dollars in a crap game (in a manner somewhat less reminiscent of the early Christian church), volunteers to donate his winnings, and another volunteers to drive him to Memphis. With no concern for racial boundaries or class distinctions, no worry for how their economic expenditures will affect their whiteness, their maleness, or their Southernness, this group enacts an economic practice based on mutual need and mutual sacrifice. Their economic system does not reward waste and acquisitive individualism; instead, it rewards the careful use of resources and affirms the bonds that tie individuals together. I would argue that here we may see Faulkner’s vision for a radically countercultural interracial community that could stand in opposition to the grasping, vicious, isolating nature of contemporary consumer culture.

Initially, it may seem unlikely that Faulkner would locate his critique in such a community. After all, as Noel Polk puts it, Faulkner’s “public statements were filled with the rhetoric of individuality that was based in Jeffersonian localist thought. He was very much at home with the Southerners’ rhetoric of resistance to rampant industrialism, technology, consumerism, urban conformity, any form of mass activity, and he hated the idea of federal intervention in local affairs” (“Faulkner and World War II” 137). Further,

Theresa Towner has argued that “In the rhetoric of his public appearances...Faulkner returns repeatedly to his view that political and social action are primarily individual efforts that face uncertain futures, or doom itself when turned over to a group of representatives for expression and action” (126). Some of that individualist rhetoric is a natural product of his Jeffersonian individualism, though Faulkner also likely understood how much suspicion he could garner by speaking out in favor of collective action in the hysterical McCarthy era. Significantly, we should remember that, according to Jack Matthews, “Faulkner’s texts almost invariably possess more complex, nuanced, and critical thinking about social and historical problems than Faulkner ever displayed in public remarks” (“Faulkner and Proletarian Literature” 175). Most importantly, as Polk notes, “if *The Mansion* is a narrative of social and political change in Mississippi during and after the War, it is even more significantly a record of the evolution of Faulkner’s political sensibilities” (“Faulkner and World War II” 140). Thus, I would argue that in Goodyhay’s church we may see Faulkner’s attempt—and a graceful rather than a clumsy attempt at that—to describe a meaningful, effective model of communal action, one in which individuals may act together politically, economically, and personally without losing their individuality. Goodyhay’s sermon clearly affirms the crucial value of individual effort, but it also suggests that such effort must take place in the context of a community. Further, Goodyhay asserts that he wants his congregation to crusade actively for their “salvation,” and, though he refers explicitly to a religious salvation, I would suggest that we can also see in his sermon a vision of a community that actively crusades for social justice, that does not wait for it to be granted by benevolent superiors. According to Goodyhay, “Anybody that think all he’s got to do is sit on his stern and

have salvation come down on him like a cloudburst or something, don't belong in here. You got to get up on your feet and hunt it down until you can get a-hold of it and then hold it, even fighting off if you have to. And if you can't find, then by God make it. Make a salvation. He will pass and then earn the right to grab it and hold on and fight off too if you have to but anyway hold it, hell and high water be damned" (581); he then goes on to tell the tale of waking up on a battlefield, believing that he was dead. There, Goodyhay believes, God appears to him in military dress and, calling him the "Top Soldier," orders him to "Fall in"—but not before he also picks up, over his protests, the unconscious body of "the damned little bastard that had gone chicken at the wrong time, like they always do, turned the wheel a-loose and tried to duck and caused the whole damn mess" (583). This ideal of the strongest "top soldier" helping the weakest and most cowardly animates the political and economic practices of his congregation and starkly contrasts with the individualism of the "white economy of material waste."

True, the church's generosity does ultimately allow Mink to purchase the weapon with which he murders Flem, though perhaps if Mink had either eyes to see or ears to hear he would have been dissuaded from his quest. Mink, however, cannot see past his obsession with his cousin to the hope embodied in the congregation; Faulkner describes him as "not only unreconciled but irreconcilable" (583). He does kill Flem, and, ultimately, ends up dying alone, absorbed back into the earth he so long struggled against and into the very anonymity and conformity which Faulkner abhorred: Mink passes into a world where he is "all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy so wouldn't nobody even know or even care who was which any more, himself among them, equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, *anonymous with all of them*" (721,

my emphasis). Although one could argue that Mink's rubbing skeletal elbows with "Helen and the bishops, the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful and graceless seraphim" (721) is a decided step up, perhaps even a reward, I would suggest that Faulkner's real point here is to stress how ultimately meaningless social hierarchies seem when even these glorified figures become "inextricable" from Mink Snopes.⁹ When we consider the image of Flem sitting alone in his new mansion, chewing air with the image of Mink being reclaimed by the earth and losing his self among the other corpses scattered there, we see that Faulkner uses these men to represent not divergent ideologies but a single critique: they represent the failure of the Southern white mind to imagine an ideal of community, a model for society, organized around an ideal other than materialistic individualism and concern for social status.

In a 1957 letter to the *New York Times*, written while the tensions over high school integration in Little Rock were at their peak, Faulkner pleaded with his fellow citizens: "what is important and necessary and urgent (urgent: we are reaching the point now where we haven't time anymore) is that we federate together, show a common unified front not for dull peace and amity, but for survival as a people and a nation" (230). I would suggest that Faulkner proposed one possible pattern for such a federation in Goodyhay's church. *The Mansion*, then, stands as a rebuke to a Southern social structure that rewards those most skillful in the game of "cajolery" or "trickery" or

⁹ In his reading of this passage, Kevin Railey chooses to emphasize the hierarchical nature of the afterlife Faulkner describes here. Railey argues that Faulkner rewards Mink in death because of "his recognition of other values besides those of money as well as his recognition of the natural ties and responsibilities between people." Most importantly for Railey, Mink "reveal[s] his acceptance of the proper social structure. This acceptance involves Mink's realization of his place within the overall scheme of society" (163). Thus, for Railey, Faulkner celebrates Mink to the degree that he recognizes his own essential downtroddenness—an interpretation of Faulkner's late career ideology that I argue strongly against in this piece.

“threat” or “force,” a game in which racial paternalism is celebrated not only because of its inherent wastefulness but also because of the way in which it keeps African Americans out of the game and thus protects the boundaries of white identity. Ultimately, Faulkner calls for a new model of community in which the commitment of individuals to one another is not merely metaphorical or rhetorical but fundamentally political and economic. He suggests that if Southerners refuse to abandon their wasteful social and economic system and create a new one that ignores race and class divisions in favor of community need, then emptiness and injustice are the only alternatives.

CHAPTER FOUR
**Mechanics and Mulattoes: Class, Work,
and Race in Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust***

In Ernest J. Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* (1967), narrator Jim Kelly relates a tale of race and class tensions on a post-World War II Louisiana plantation. The central conflict involves the struggle among Marshall Hebert, a wealthy planter, Sidney Bonbon, his Cajun overseer, and Marcus Payne, a poor young African American man. Hebert has bonded Marcus out of jail to kill Bonbon, who has violated the boundaries of his appointed role by blackmailing the planter, stealing from him, and falling in love with an African American laborer. In one of the novel's crucial scenes, Marcus demonstrates his disdain for the traditional boundaries on the plantation. When Hebert enters his home after conferring with Marcus in the yard, Marcus simply follows. Bishop, a longtime servant to the Hebert family, tells narrator Jim Kelly with horror, "He just pushed his foot in there....The house his great grand-parents built. The house slavery built. He pushed his foot in that door" (215). Jim does not fail to grasp the significance of Bishop's dismay: "Bishop wanted me to understand that any black person who would stick his foot in a door that slavery built would do almost anything" (216).

Marcus's transgression quickly calls to mind other famous doorway confrontations in Southern literature, most notably Ab Snopes's rug-ruining march in "Barn Burning," Thomas Sutpen's threshold rejection in *Absalom, Absalom!* and, less renowned but perhaps just as significant, overseer Troy Flavin's entrance to his wedding to Dabney Fairchild via the side door that leads to the fields in Welty's *Delta Wedding*.¹

¹ For a further discussion of Faulkner's influence on Gaines in general and *Of Love and Dust* in particular, see "Bloodlines and Patriarchs: *Of Love and Dust* and Its Revisions of Faulkner" by David Lionel Smith.

Like those earlier works, *Of Love and Dust* takes up the issue of the boundaries and borders that divide groups and individuals in the rural South. Gaines explores the ways in which racial paternalism divides white and black laborers into rigidly stratified and opposing communities, as well as the ways in which breaking out of the paternalist system requires violating the boundaries of those communities. Further, he examines the possible new models of interracial political action made possible in the wake of paternalism's collapse.

Gaines' novel is set in 1948, and although Hebert's plantation has begun to feel the combined effects of the New Deal and World War II, in many ways the life of the plantation remains unchanged. Planters, Cajuns, and poor African American sharecroppers coexist uneasily and, for the most part, separately. According to Jim, "The plantation (or what was left of the plantation now) had all its crop far back in the field. The front land was for the sharecroppers. The Cajuns had the front-est and best land, and the colored people (those who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land. The plantation land was farther back still, almost to the swamps" (26). Segregation prevails in most social settings: when Jim gets a Coke after a long day on the tractor, he observes, "If I could have gone through the back of the store I could have saved myself plenty time and walking. But a colored person couldn't go through the back of the store to the yard. He had to enter the yard from the big gate" (84). Though he contemplates one day making a stand for equality, his exhausting labor deprives him of the energy and motivation for such a bold gesture: "Either I was too thirsty to do it, or after I had been working in the field I was just too tired and just didn't care" (43).

Like segregation, paternalism survives on the plantation and encourages its African Americans to see the social system as natural and inevitable. Most of Hebert's employees remain committed to the ideals of paternalism, and they believe that he does as well. Indeed, he does his best to look the part; his clothes offer an appearance of consistency that his actions subvert: "Winter and summer he wore a seersucker suit and a panama hat" (83). In particular, nearly all of his workers see Hebert's bonding Marcus out of jail to work for him as a favor done for Miss Julie Rand, an elderly woman who was Hebert's longtime cook and who raised Marcus when his mother died and his father abandoned him. Rand herself tells Jim, "That white man been good to me. I went to him 'cause I didn't have nowhere else to turn" (14). When she repeats this sentiment to him later, Jim assures her, "I'm sure he won't forget what you did for his family" (114). When Jim fears for Marcus's survival on the plantation, he thinks, "I was hoping that when his trial came up they would lock him in prison, but after thinking about it I knew that wasn't going to happen. Not after Miss Julie Rand had given Marshall Hebert's people forty years of her life" (171). Even when Jim and others begin to suspect that Hebert has other motivations for freeing Marcus, Bishop, the most stalwart defender of Hebert's good name, insists that his master acts strictly out of paternalistic *oblige*: "He got him out for her. . . . For her. He got him out 'cause she came there crying. He didn't know that boy from Adam" (218). Bishop and the other older folk on the plantation, in particular, cling to the ideals of paternalism as a way of making their lives make sense. As Karen J. Carmean notes, "To sustain the illusion of order, perpetuate tradition, and support his belief in white superiority, Bishop must believe Hebert deserving of his position. And to support his faith, he must absolve him of all responsibility" (52). Thus,

Bishop reacts with understandable panic when, as he tries to keep the door of the big house shut to Marcus, Hebert orders him, the faithful retainer, to “get out” and, finally, even strikes him. Bishop pleads, “Your people say I can stay here. Your people liked me. They say long as I was a good boy I could stay here. They say if I looked after y’all and I was a good boy, this house was my home till I died” (236). Bishop’s greatest sorrow results from his belief that he has failed the paternalist order. Jim tells us, “He was praying for Marshall and he was praying for the house. He was asking the old people who had died to forgive him for letting them down” (237).

Paternalism also helps to divide black and white workers exploited by the plantation system. Hebert makes this explicit when he tells Marcus, furious at the absolute terms of his bondage to the planter, that he should direct his rage at Bonbon instead: “The man killing you in the field out there” (188). Their close identification with Hebert and the ideal associated with his status as plantation owner leads most of the African American workers to despise the Cajuns and see them as the root of all the trouble in the area. For instance, Jim notes that Bishop seems uncomfortable when he and other African Americans gather to discuss the mounting tensions, not least because of the familiar way in which Jim calls Hebert “Marshall” instead of “Mr. Marshall.” Says Jim, “Bonbon was a poor Cajun, and he [Bishop] would have talked about Bonbon all day. But things were a little different when they were about Mr. Marshall” (218). Even after Hebert’s duplicity becomes apparent, Aunt Margaret blames the turmoil on the Cajuns (280). As Shane Bernard observes in *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, Cajuns held a marginalized status as whites-but-not-whites; according to Bernard, the perception of Cajuns as “white trash” extends as far back as the nineteenth century. He cites a post-

Civil War journalist who “referred to them as ‘good representatives of the white trash,’ reviled even by local blacks as ‘Acadian niggers’” (xvii). Carl Brasseaux also notes that the term “Cajun” signified “white trash” for most Americans in the late nineteenth century (104). Gaines clearly indicates that these attitudes have lingered: Marcus thinks of Bonbon as “not even a solid white man, but a bayou, catfish-eating Cajun” (57).² In their distaste for Bonbon, Bishop, Aunt Margaret, and others confirm Zora Neale Hurston’s assertion in “The ‘Pet Negro’ System” that, as a way of surviving in a racist society, Southern African Americans strive “to be associated with ‘the quality’ and consequently are ashamed to admit that they are working for ‘strainers’” (596). Hurston also notes that “Class-consciousness of Negroes is an angle to be reckoned with in the South,” and she argues, “If ever it came to the kind of violent showdown the orators hint at,” the pets and their white patrons would protect each other so that only the “‘poor white trash’ and the ‘stray niggers’” would be caught in the crossfire (596).

However, the ostensibly placid surface of the rigidly segregated plantation belies the abundance of complicated interactions and exchanges occurring across race and class boundaries. Gaines finds the hope for change in these violations of the established order, and he explores them through his narrator Jim Kelly, whose complicated relationships with both Bonbon and Marcus lead him to a new understanding of the relationship

² Valerie Babb argues, “Implicit in Marcus’s assessment of Bonbon as a ‘catfish-eating Cajun’ is a disapprobation based on caste and power. To him Bonbon is not a ‘real’ white man but merely a pretender to the throne of white power, because he has not descended from the old lines of social power that a Marshall Hebert has. While Marcus has been accustomed to the rule of established southern families, he sees in Bonbon a parvenu usurper and resents the authority given to Sidney and refused him” (67). Though I would agree that this description of Bonbon applies to most of the other African Americans’ attitudes towards Bonbon, I would suggest that Marcus is much less enthralled with planter power than Bibb indicates here.

between race, class, and power. Jim has a particular aptitude for sensing these race and class tensions because of his unique status on the plantation. Keith Byerman observes that, “as a man who works hard and has benefited somewhat from the plantation system, Jim Kelly sees little to be gained from open resistance.... On the other hand, he is keenly aware of the indignities that that system inflicts on blacks” (70-71). Unlike Bishop or the older African Americans workers, Jim did not grow up on the plantation; he has lived there for only three years. According to Jim, “I had heard that Hebert needed a man who could handle tractors and I had come here for the job” (147). Jim’s expertise puts him in a unique position: he has more responsibility and authority than the other field hands, a closer relationship with Bonbon, and, thus, a certain degree of privilege and protection. Gaines suggests the relationship between mechanical savvy and privilege when Jim notes, “I drive the tractor and I have an umbrella.... The ones walking behind the trailer got the mean part of it” (18). Significantly, Jim nearly always describes the sun that his umbrella protects him from as white, thus suggesting that his skill affords him a certain safety from the realities of the racist power structure. In two notable examples, he describes the sun as “white, small and still strong” (38), as “white as snow, hot as fire” (82). Further, Gaines has noted that, as the plantation system in Louisiana began to embrace mechanization, Cajuns and other whites, not African Americans, tended to use the machines, and that these machines gave Cajuns an advantage over African American farmers that further divided the two groups, a subject that Gaines explores both in this novel and in *A Gathering of Old Men*. According to Gaines, “My people had been slaves on the place and they had become sharecroppers when the owner of the plantation turned it over to sharecroppers. But then the Cajuns became sharecroppers as well. They got the

better land. They got better machinery, and they produced more, and a lot of blacks moved out because they could not compete” (“An Interview with Ernest Gaines” 186-87).

Thus, as an African American tractor-driver supervised by a Cajun overseer and employed by a white plantation owner, Jim occupies a complicated position. Erik Olin Wright’s concept of “contradictory class locations” helps to explain his unusual status on the plantation. Though Wright primarily directs his analysis towards fractures in the nebulously defined “middle-class,” I would argue that we can usefully employ the concept in Jim’s case as well. According to Wright, “if we want class structure to help explain class consciousness, class formation and class conflict, then we need some way of understanding the class-relevant divisions within the employee population” (19). Wright argues that the “possession of skills or expertise” (19) contributes to these divisions. Because of the scarcity of these skills, “employees who possess high levels of skills/expertise are potentially in a privileged appropriation location within exploitation relations” (22). Jim’s abilities would indeed have been necessary for a post-World War II plantation. As historian Bruce J. Shulman argues, during the war, “mechanization of the Cotton Belt accelerated.... [T]he proportion of southern farms operating tractors skyrocket[ed], [and].... the new machinery diffused rapidly through the Cotton Belt, so that by the end of the war decade, the traditional southern mule farmer had all but disappeared from the regional landscape” (102). Though Jim works primarily with corn, not cotton, it seems that the same trend holds generally true on Hebert’s plantation; though Jim elsewhere notes that Hebert has plenty of hands around, he has few capable of handling the new technology and has to advertise for qualified workers. Although Jim

does not use his unique position to appropriate any more capital than his peers, as Wright suggests experts do, it does afford him other advantages. Indeed, Jim has come to the plantation because of Hebert's need for someone with his scarce skills. In addition to the better working conditions that he experiences because of his expertise, Jim finds that his skill results in a close but cautious relationship with Bonbon. According to Jim, their relationship began "when I showed Bonbon I was good with any machine he had there. Maybe if I hadn't showed him how good I was he wouldn't have put so much trust in me. He wouldn't have treated me different from the way he treated all the others" (147). Bonbon does more than simply trust Jim with additional responsibility; he trusts him with revelations about his family and personality. Jim reports, "[he] told me things about himself, things about his family—things he never told anybody else. No, I had to show him how good I could handle tractors. And every time I did, he told me a little bit more" (147). Jim elaborates on the close connection between his skills and their relationship: "Bonbon needed somebody to talk to just like anybody else needs somebody to talk to. And since I knew all about trucks and tractors, I was the person he chose" (148). Thus, Jim's status as an expert distinguishes him from the other African American workers; it sets him literally and symbolically above them and makes him worthy of Bonbon's confidence.³

³ Herman Beavers has also noted the way in which Jim's mechanical expertise gives him a unique status on the plantation, though Beavers' analysis is more concerned with narrative and memory than with class. Beavers reads *Of Love and Dust* as a fiction "in which the individual, in order to reach a new state of awareness or self-recovery, must break free from repressive paradigms of folk memory," and in which "the protagonist must break out of an older, restrictive circle of memory in order to move into a space where he or she can begin to utilize the past in new ways" (68). According to Beavers, "Jim's mechanical ability leads Bonbon to cross the boundary of racial difference into the space of sanctioned remembrance. Trucks and tractors provide the means for Bonbon to ignore Jim's inequity of social status, to add flesh, blood, and bone to his authoritarian presence as overseer" (73). Beavers claims that Jim's in-between status "works to cement, rather than challenge, the status quo" (76). Similarly, Frank Shelton rightly claims that Jim "owes

However, Jim's expertise does not always work to his benefit. Marcus initially distrusts the older man, referring to him repeatedly as a "whitemouth," a loaded term indicating that though Jim's skin may be black, he gives voice to the ideology of those in power (6, 24, 46). Admittedly, Marcus' reservations have some validity. Jim often feels compelled to preserve the status quo of the plantation: he tells Marcus, "We don't want any trouble on this plantation, hear?" (122). Moreover, though Jim generally has a positive, respectful relationship with the other African American laborers, at times his unique job keeps him from communicating clearly with them. For instance, when he tries to speak with Aunt Margaret, who cares for Bonbon's daughter, Tite, "the tractor was making so much noise she could barely hear me" (180). Perhaps Marcus realizes that Jim's privileged status means that when their interests come into conflict, Jim can use his limited power against him. For instance, Jim expresses his frustration with Marcus's frequent disruptions of plantation life by forcing the inexperienced hand to work as hard as a longtime veteran: says Jim, "I didn't have any pity on him. I drove the tractor just like I was supposed to drive it when three people were working back there" (173). Most significantly, his expertise keeps him from having to choose sides in the ultimate confrontation between Marcus and Bonbon. On the day that Marcus plans to leave with Bonbon's wife, Jim notes, "just as we knocked off, the tractor went dead on me. My heart

the trust whites place in him and his responsible position on the plantation to his knowledge of machinery" (23). However, he further asserts that "it is suggestive that Gaines associates them [Cajuns] with the tractor, which has become for him 'the machine in the garden.' While Gaines certainly feels that social change is necessary, such mechanization of agriculture is portrayed as dehumanizing, and it does not bring with it improvement in the lot of his black characters" (21). I would argue that Gaines's treatment of the relationship between mechanization is somewhat more complicated than Beavers and Shelton would have it; in fact, it is only from his unique--albeit admittedly compromised--perspective that Jim can come to understand the best ways in which to challenge the status quo.

jumped in my throat because I didn't know how long it was going to take me to get the tractor fixed....I started to leave with them [the field workers] and come back to fix the tractor later, but I told myself that fixing the tractor was my work just like driving it" (269). Further, Jim says that he wants to get back to the quarter so that he can tell Marcus he admires him: "I admired his great courage. And that's why I wanted to hurry up and get to the front. That's why my heart had jumped in my throat when the tractor went dead on me—I was afraid I wouldn't be able to tell him how much I admired what he was doing" (270). His profession of admiration notwithstanding, Jim still chooses to align himself with the interests of the plantation status quo, represented by the tractor, instead of with the other workers who want to return to town before the fight between Bonbon and Marcus. Jim's expertise, and the obligations to Hebert's interests that come along with it, keep him from getting back to the quarter and perhaps preventing Bonbon from killing the rebellious Marcus.

If Jim avoids committing to Marcus' rebellion, he does not remain content on the plantation, either. In fact, at the novel's end, he rejects Hebert's gesture of paternalism and abandons the plantation, and I would suggest that by examining his relationships with Bonbon and Marcus, we may best understand how Jim comes to realize the necessity of breaking away from traditional plantation race relations. Marcus is a self-reliant city dweller who has little connection to the myths and memories of the plantation; further, since he was likely born in the late 1920s, he has spent most of his life in a South in which the New Deal, and, more recently, World War II have offered increased opportunities for individualism to African Americans. As Harvard Sitkoff argues, although the New Deal may not have delivered on all of its promises, its "reform

spirit...helped create a psychological climate in which black southerners and their allies could struggle with expectations of success" (133). No surprise, then, that Marcus has few illusions about the supposedly selfless paternalism of elite planters like Marshall Hebert. Even before he completely understands his benefactor's plans, he is suspicious. Near the end of the novel, he shares with Jim a story from his past that helps explain his reluctance to believe in paternalism. In his early teens, Marcus got a job in a parking lot, where his supervisor, an older African American man named Big Red, extorted a dollar from him every day. According to Marcus, "I didn't think that was fair and I went to the boss and told him. He told me not to give Big Red a damn thing" (250). But, when young Marcus informs Big Red that he has gone over his head, Red doubles his fee. When he goes back to the boss, the boss repeats his earlier advice but refuses to tell Big Red himself. Says Marcus, "I didn't tell Big Red anything because now I saw what was going on. Big Red was his number one nigger, and he didn't care what Big Red did" (250). Marcus snaps and attacks Big Red, and he finds the same system at work in jail: a black man named Cadillac pummels Marcus for having no cigarettes. Marcus notes, "The next morning the jailer looked at me all bruised, but he didn't say a thing. He even gived Cadillac more food than he gived the rest of us. Cadillac was his nigger just like Big Red was the other white man's nigger" (251-52). These experiences inspire Marcus to look for salvation, or at least survival, in a fiercely held individualism. Though Jim protests that "They got the world fixed where you have to work with other people," Marcus insists, "When they let me out of jail, I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself" (253). Marcus's experiences with Big Red and Cadillac are significant because they

demonstrate the hollowness of the lofty rhetoric that figures racial paternalism and the “pet Negro” system as emerging from benevolent *noblesse oblige* on the part of selfless, wealthy aristocrats. Through Marcus’s story, Gaines reveals paternalism as just another form of labor coercion and exploitation used by whites in positions of power—even decidedly urban and unaristocratic figures such as a parking lot manager and a jailer—to keep African Americans in line.

Marcus’s experiences prepare him to see Hebert’s overtures as motivated by his own interests, not paternalistic goodwill, and, rather than accept Hebert’s favors with the shame-faced humility expected of him, he behaves in a manner singularly inappropriate for plantation labor. He continues to wear his flashy dress clothes in the field, even though they offer him little protection from the blazing sun. He tells Jim, “I’ll never put that convict shit on my back.... I’m used to silk” (31). Further, he resists all of Jim’s attempts to help him see his situation in a positive light or to encourage him to think of others. Jim warns him that “All you can do is make things harder for yourself and everybody else around here,” but Marcus argues back, “Things can’t get harder for me, Jim. I’m a slave here now. And things can’t get harder than slavery” (225).

Although crossing the threshold of the big house would suffice to get him killed on other plantations, Marcus goes even a step further: he decides that if he must do Hebert’s bidding and kill Bonbon, then he will run away with Bonbon’s wife, Louise. Indeed, his plan rests on the consistent and violent enforcement of Southern racial rules. He intends to take Louise away and then kill Bonbon when he attempts to stop them. When Jim asks him why he can be so certain that Bonbon will follow, Marcus replies, “Because Bonbon own people’ll kill him if he don’t. Because this is the South, and the

South ain't go'n let no nigger run away with no white woman and let that white husband walk around here scot-free. Not the South" (224). Thus, if Bonbon is to retain his standing in the community, and, indeed, perhaps his life, he must protect the honor of Southern womanhood, an obligation which Hebert ignores in order to rid himself of his insubordinate subordinate. As Marcus tells it, "He got to get rid of Bonbon, not me. I'm a nigger, me. I ain't nothing but a nigger. Bonbon is the man" (224).

Although the tacit validation of an interracial love affair by a wealthy planter potentially has subversive implications, Gaines does not hold up Marcus and Louise's relationship as a positive model. Jim describes Louise as still a child, sexually stunted: "Louise was about twenty-five, but she was the size of the average twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl. Most of the time she wore the clothes of a thirteen-year-old-girl—she wore skirts and blouses instead of dresses" (119). Such descriptions recur throughout the novel; elsewhere, she looks to Aunt Margaret "more like a twelve-year-old child than she did a twenty-five-year-old woman" (155). As Jim puts it, "she had given birth to a child, but she was still a child herself" (164). On another occasion, Jim characterizes her as an insubstantial white ghost (120). Further, Marcus initially finds himself attracted to her only as a way to inflict pain on Bonbon (117, 118). And according to Jim, Louise actually wants Bonbon to kill Marcus so that Hebert will send him away and she can be rid of her husband, whom she does not love (165). Although the relationship between Marcus and Louise does seem to grow beyond these initial selfish motives, Gaines continues to characterize it as immature and unrealistic. Aunt Margaret tells the young lovers, "y'all act like two black children or two white children playing in the yard. There ain't nothing to stop y'all from going North 'cause North right around the house. Well, North ain't

right around the house, and y'all ain't no children. Y'all grown people, and y'all white and y'all black. And there ain't no North for y'all" (207). Marcus does demonstrate a degree of empathy for Louise; he tells Jim, "She much slave here as I was" (261), but he ultimately reveals himself as mainly concerned with his own welfare. After all, just before he and Louise make their break, he tells Jim, "I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself" (253). Gaines suggests the superficiality of Marcus and Louise's love for each other when Jim asks Marcus if he truly cares for her. Though Marcus first responds "Yeah," Jim notes, "He didn't say it too strongly, though." When Jim repeats his question, Marcus repeats his affirmation "a little stronger," but, when he attempts to convince Jim, he sounds as though he is attempting to convince himself as well: "Yeah, I think I do. Yeah, I do. Maybe I didn't till just now—till you asked me. Now, I know I love her. It wouldn't be the same 'thout her. Yeah, I love her—love that little woman. Ain't claiming she much to look at—nobody in his right mind can honestly say that; but I love her anyhow" (260). Further, though Marcus does feel drawn to her because of their shared status of captivity, he also reveals himself as largely concerned with the way in which she strokes his ego and tends to his needs. He tells Jim, "She said, 'Marky-poo, 'thout you I'll go crazy.' That's what she told me. 'Thout you I'll go crazy, Marky-poo. I need your arms round me. I need your arms round me all the time, Marky-poo'" (261). He continues, "Pretty good arm, huh?... She say she like the color of my arms," all the while "twisting his arm one way, then the other way" to admire his own perfection. This display prompts Jim to realize, "He was the same Marcus. No matter whatever happened,

he was still going to be the same Marcus” (261). Ultimately, Marcus’ vanity and superficiality undercuts whatever revolutionary potential his individualism may possess.⁴

Although Marcus and Louise’s escape attempt comes to naught—Bonbon kills Marcus and leaves the plantation—Marcus’ repeated violations of the physical and metaphorical boundaries of his role on the plantation open up the possibility for social change and raise the question of what model of interracial and/or cross-class political action Gaines implicitly endorses. Gaines has noted of his rebellious young character, “You see, Marcus was pre-revolutionary, pre-Civil Rights. Marcus looked after Number One” (108). By examining the relationship between Jim Kelly and Sidney Bonbon, we can better understand the nature of the alliances Gaines believes individuals must form in order to undermine the system of paternalism and rigid race/class divisions that characterize the plantation system.

Jim’s position outside of and above the other African American workers makes it possible for him to understand Bonbon’s similar plight. As overseer, Bonbon occupies a position of power that aligns him with Hebert and planter power. Jim describes him as a “simple and brutal man”: “The big house had given him a horse and a whip (he did have a whip at first) and they had told him to ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could” (67). Most of the farmhands respect his authority:

⁴ My reading of Marcus and Louise’s relationship is less sympathetic than Suzanne W. Jones’s in her excellent *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties*. Jones argues that “the vengeful sexual encounters that each separately engineers metamorphose into a mutually satisfying emotional relationship, transformative to them as individuals” (156). Similarly, Joseph Griffin asserts that “their relationship rapidly develops into a mutually satisfying and transforming one” (79). I would agree with Jones and Griffin that Marcus and Louise do develop real affection for each other, but I contend that it does not truly lead to the transformation she identifies; even at the novel’s end, Marcus still displays his selfish arrogance, and, most importantly, Louise still clings to her immature, childlike ways. Neither character has transformed in any meaningful sense.

they do his bidding and fawn over his prowess with a gun. When he makes an impressive shot, one of workers, Freddie, compliments him: "If anybody can, you can, Mr. Sidney" (40). As with Troy Flavin in *Delta Wedding*, though, Bonbon's close relationship to African American labor complicates his racial identity and his relationship to the aristocratic planter, as does his Cajun background. Suggestions of racial otherness pervade Jim's descriptions of Bonbon. Jim tells us, "His mustache was lighter than his tan face and much lighter than his red neck" (79); thus, his long labor in the sun darkens his skin and associates him with the other dark-skinned workers in the fields. Jim notes of Bonbon's white-haired daughter Tite, "Her hair looked whiter still with his big red hands going through it" (167-68). Most notably, Jim even observes, when they go to a bar in Baton Rouge congenial to mixed-race individuals, that Bonbon "was darker than many of them" (143-44). Bonbon's racial and class otherness means that Hebert does not have to treat him as an equal; in fact, Bishop has standing orders that Bonbon should come no further than the kitchen of his home.

Bonbon finds himself, then, caught in an ambivalent position. His Cajun identity means that he is considered "white trash," and this status complicates his difference from the African Americans whose work he supervises. As Constance Penley puts it, "If you *are* white trash, then you must engage in the never-ending labor of distinguishing yourself, of codifying your behavior so as to clearly signify a difference from blackness that will, in spite of everything, express some minuscule, if pathetic, measure of your culture's superiority" (90). Jim often describes Bonbon as wearing a "white cowboy hat" (79); when Bonbon first appears in Jim's narrative, Jim reports that he "still had on that sweat-stained white straw hat and he was still wearing the dirty, sweat-smelling khakis he

had worn in the field that day” (4). On another occasion, Jim informs us that “His khaki shirt was wringing wet with sweat. His white straw hat was turned up at the sides like a cowboy hat; he even wore cowboy boots” (36). While the sweat serves as physical evidence of the labor he performs as Hebert’s subordinate, the white cowboy hat, I would suggest, serves to separate Bonbon from the laborers beneath him. Clearly, its color aligns him with Hebert rather than with Jim, Marcus, and the rest of the crew. Further, Gaines has commented in an interview that, during his childhood on the plantation in Point Coupee Parish, one of his few escapes from the plantation and one of the few contacts with broader American culture occurred when he “went to the big city of New Roads every so often on Friday night to see cowboy movies” (224-25). Thus, perhaps Bonbon’s hat and boots help him confirm his whiteness by associating him with an identity not implicated in plantation labor. Indeed, the late 1940s would have been an ideal time for Bonbon to attempt to re-invent himself through his clothes: according to Bernard, after World War II, “Cajuns cast aside the antimaterialism of their ancestors and embraced the age’s rampant consumerism” (25).

However, Bonbon finds this perpetual process of affirming his whiteness too much to maintain, largely because of his love for Pauline Guerin, Marshall Hebert’s African American cook. Their relationship causes him to violate the boundaries so crucial to life on the plantation. According to the plantation workers, no one was surprised when Bonbon began making “her lay down and pull up her dress” in the fields. However, “something had happened to Bonbon. At first he had laid with all and any of them.... But after being with so many, now he settled for one” (62). According to Jim, Pauline, in turn, “knew he loved her more than he did his wife up the quarter or his people who lived

on the river” (66). Jim continues, “He couldn’t just take her like he was supposed to take her, like they had given him permission to take her—no, he had to fall in love” (67).

Thus, Bonbon simply cannot behave in a manner befitting a poor-white Cajun overseer, and his inability creates problems for those committed to maintaining rigid distinctions of race and class. Jim notes that sometimes he visits Pauline “at the big house while they made Bishop, Marshall Hebert’s butler, look out for Marshall. Bishop hated what he had to do—but what else could he do? If he had mentioned to Marshall that Bonbon had gone farther than the kitchen, Bonbon, or Marshall himself, probably would have killed him” (66).

Gaines further invests their relationship with disruptive potential in his descriptions of their children, the twins Willy and Billy, whom Gaines describes as chaotic figures who destroy any boundaries they encounter. Jim points out that Pauline’s neighbors, Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully, “had this barb-wire fence that came up on the gallery all the way to the wall. The fence was brought up there, according to Aunt Ca’line, to keep Pauline and Bonbon’s two little mischievous mulattoes on their side. But putting the barb-wire fence up there was like putting nothing there. The two little boys had ridden the fence so much, a grown person could step over it without touching a strain of wire” (60). We quickly learn, however, that the fence Willy and Billy so efficiently wear down has significance for other reasons: it symbolically contains the threat to the plantation order implicit in Pauline and Bonbon’s love. Jim notes that whenever Pa Bully “cut[s] his eyes toward the other side of that fence where they had no business going,” Aunt Ca’line warns him to avert his gaze. She has warned him ever since Bonbon “started coming to the house: that was seven or eight years ago” (62). Thus, by

destroying the fence, the twins threaten to expose their parents' relationship to the rest of the plantation, an exposure that would have deeply unsettling results.

Lest we too quickly assume that Gaines simply means to celebrate the disruptive power of the racial hybridity embodied in the "two mischievous mulattoes" as containing the potential to break down the boundaries of plantation society, we should note that the twins' chaotic presence sometimes has negative effects on the poor working people of Hebert's plantation. For example, when Bonbon gives them a BB gun for their fifth birthday, "nobody and nothing was safe on the place. If they weren't shooting at another child, they were shooting at a dog or a chicken. They put a hole in the back of Jobbo's little girl's neck, and Jobbo had to take the girl to the doctor and pay the doctor bill himself. They shot the mule that Charlie Jordan was riding and the mule threw Charlie in the ditch"; they even shoot Aunt Ca'line's irreplaceable "number one rooster" in the eyes (68). When Pauline offers compensation, Aunt Ca'line protests, "This rooster do the work of five on this plantation, and you go'n pay for him? What you go'n do, give me five roosters?" (69). Thus, the disregard for borders and boundaries suggested by the twins' indiscriminate gunplay does not automatically carry positive connotations; their chaotic behavior sometimes further deprives the already downtrodden workers of the plantation of the resources they need to survive.

Gaines has struggled with the political implications of mixed-race individuals before. In his short story "Bloodline," written before *Of Love and Dust* but published afterwards, Gaines tells the story of Copper, the illegitimate mixed-race nephew of Frank Laurent, an elderly plantation owner. As Felix, that story's narrator, notes, "If Copper was white, then this plantation would go to him....But he's the wrong color to go round

claiming plantations” (160). Copper has returned to the plantation in military garb, proclaiming himself the general of a tremendous army and demanding an audience with his uncle. Like Marcus, he violates traditional boundaries, refusing to enter the home he considers his through the back door. Frank attempts to force Copper to come to the big house and adopt the proper subservient role, but Copper handily bests even the largest group of men that his uncle sics on him. When Frank finally submits to meeting with his nephew on his terms, Copper lays out his plan: he intends to claim his birthright, lead his armies to revolt, and restore the land to the full potential it has been denied by generations of oppression. Copper feels that the land has not been allowed to thrive in the way that it could because of the cruel system of labor used to farm it: “The land has been wasted and it’s still being wasted, but it’s not beyond saving.... As for the houses, they’ll have to be torn down and built from the ground up” (210-11). Significantly, he argues that Frank has not truly understood the suffering that motivates his desire to revolt because his paternalism has kept him from really paying attention to any of his subordinates. Copper tells him, “you’ve always been in a position to give them a dime. Dimes clear all conscience” (214). Most interestingly, Copper imagines his army of the suffering as interracial; he intends to form a community of those who are oppressed for any reason, not just skin color. He tells Frank, “There’s millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me” (213). As in the case of Willy and Billy Guerin, Copper’s revolutionary potential is ambiguous. At the end of “Bloodline,” Copper simply leaves, promising to return and “bathe this whole plantation in blood” if they continue to deny him his birthright, but deferring any actual struggle until some unnamed future date (217).

Another instance in which Gaines resists imbuing racial ambiguity with implicitly positive connotations is in his description of Marcus and Louise's relationship. When Marcus first appears, Jim notes, "It was too dark to tell if he was white or colored" (3). Elsewhere, Jim observes, "Marcus had a lot of Indian blood in him, and he probably had a lot of white blood in him, too" (57). Moreover, Marcus and Louise's plan to escape involves exploiting the slippery nature of racial identity. Louise covers her face and her daughter's with soot so that they can pass as black, and she so skillfully manages the difficult task that, according to Aunt Margaret, "Tite looked more like a little nigger than Jobbo's little girl Edna ever did" (241). Moreover, "you couldn't tell Louise wasn't colored. She had blacked up her face just the right amount. She had put on a hat with a veil. You couldn't see her yellow hair at all, and you had to raise the veil to see her eyes or her mouth" (243). However, Gaines suggests that this alteration is strictly superficial, without any corresponding shift of perspective for Louise. Aunt Margaret notes that, as Louise powders Tite's face with soot, "Louise didn't look like a woman, she looked like a child playing with a doll," a description that suggests that the same immaturity that characterizes her relationship with Marcus is still at work in this attempt to escape. Most significantly, Louise does not develop any new attitudes about race. When Aunt Margaret attempts to dissuade her from going through with the plan, Louise flies into a rage. She tells Margaret, "Shut up....Shut up. If you can't help me, just shut up" (242), and she threatens to hit her. Gaines links this outburst, one which indicates that Louise still sees Margaret as her inferior, to the inevitable failure of their attempt to escape by exploiting racial ambiguity: when Tite sees the violent confrontation between Louise and Margaret, "The water started running down Tite's face, leaving a white trail from her eyes to her

mouth" (242). Tite continues to cry and further expose her white skin as Margaret faces down her mother. Thus, Gaines suggests that performances of racial hybridity or ambiguity do not inherently generate any kind of positive social change unless individuals are willing to accept the larger political implications of the slipperiness and instability of the color line.

If Louise utterly fails to realize this essential truth, other characters in *Of Love and Dust* come closer, at least, though they, too, may fail in the end. Gaines continues to explore the potential for resistance to the plantation order through an ideal of hybridity when Bonbon and Pauline seek out a space where they can be together outside the strict segregation of the plantation. They find it, however briefly, when Jim drives them to Baton Rouge. Not incidentally, Bonbon uses Jim's mechanical expertise as an excuse to have him along to pose as Pauline's husband and allay suspicions: he tells Jim he wants him to help him "pick up a piece for that hay machine" (131). The errand is only a diversion. According to Jim, "We found a bar where a lot of mulattoes hung out" (143). Jim observes, "You had some black skin in there, but most of them were mulattoes. I suppose they took Bonbon for a mulatto, too. He was darker than many of them" (143-44). Significantly, Bonbon divests himself of the outward symbols of his whiteness in this mixed-race space: he takes off his white cowboy hat, though he leaves it on the table (143). Here Pauline and Bonbon find momentary comfort: Jim says, "you could see how much he cared for her. For a second there they looked at each other like they were the only two people in the place. Just him and her in this cool, dark place all by themselves" (144). Alas, such bliss does not last long because Bonbon proves incapable of extending the political implications of their relationship, their togetherness in this "mulatto bar,"

into the larger social sphere. When Jim gets up to leave them alone, he reports, "I moved my chair back and that broke the spell. That reminded him of everything. That reminded him that he was white and she was black. That reminded him of the mulattoes in the place. That reminded him of the white people outside who didn't go for this kind of mixing in public" (144-45). Bonbon relies on Jim in this situation; he needs Jim to ask the black proprietor of the establishment for a room for him and Pauline because he sees such an equal economic and social transaction as beneath him. According to Suzanne Jones, "Playing pimp for Bonbon forces Jim to take a long hard look at how he is implicated in maintaining the status quo for black people when he facilitates the southern racial customs that discriminate against them" (154). Jim does refuse his overseer's request, to Bonbon's chagrin: "He didn't like it when I said I wasn't going to be his pimp.... He was helpless in a case like this. He wanted to be with her...; but he had to go to a black man, in a respectful way, and ask that black man for a room. He didn't know how to do that. He didn't know how to talk to a black man unless he was giving orders" (145).

Bonbon does, finally, ask the bar owner for a room, a gesture that suggests he begins to see the necessity of transgressing the rules governing racial interaction if he and Pauline are ever to be together. Gaines qualifies Bonbon's progress, however, by pointing out that the overseer finds it impossible to relinquish all signs of his power. When they enter the bar, Jim notes that Bonbon has brought his gun in with him: "He needed it everywhere he went. He needed it around his own Cajuns, he needed it around the Negroes in the field, and even needed it around these mulattoes who didn't know him at all" (144). Upon Jim's return to the bar, when he finds that Pauline and Bonbon have in

fact rented a room, the proprietor notes Bonbon's weapon as well: "I see he bring his gun....Bad, a man need a gun all the time—no?" (149). Bonbon's reluctance give up his weapon foreshadows the tragic consequences of his inability to imagine a new way of living in the segregated South.

Although Bonbon fails to break away from the traditional codes governing race and class, he does learn to see his plight as connected to Jim's, to see the oppression that he suffers as part of the larger oppression of all the laborers on the plantation. He tells Jim, "Me and you—what is we? We little people, Geam. They make us do what they want us to do, and they don't tell us nothing. We don't have nothing to say 'bout it, do we, Geam?" (258). Bonbon's statement ties him and Jim together as "little people" who live under the control of the powerful planter and who, perhaps, therefore have common interests. Bonbon's murder of Marcus initially keeps Jim from reciprocating the feeling of solidarity. He says, "I couldn't feel any pity for him. Far as I was concerned, all the human understanding we had had between us was over with now. He saw this in my face and I could see how it hurt him" (277-78). However, as Jim's anger fades, he begins to see Bonbon's impossible position: "If he hadn't killed Marcus, he would have been killed himself. The Cajuns on the river would have done that" (277). Most importantly, Jim's growing comprehension of Bonbon's difficult situation leads him finally to reject the paternalism that the other African American plantation workers cling to, for he ultimately understands how paternalism divides workers who, aside from their racial differences, have a great deal in common. Aunt Margaret and the other old folks on the plantation quickly return to the old ways, forgetting the recent conflict except to worry that "Them Cajuns might start some mess" (280). Jim, however, realizes that the Cajuns are not the

real enemy: “[Hebert] killed Marcus; Bonbon didn’t” (279). Jim’s realization motivates him to opt out of the oppressive system. When Hebert warns him to leave the plantation, he claims to be concerned about marauding poor whites attacking Jim in retaliation: “These Cajuns know you and that boy lived in the same house, and they might get it in their heads to do you something” (278). Jim, however, understands that his knowledge of the way in which Bonbon and Marcus disrupted the caste and class system—and of Hebert’s complicity in that disruption—has made Hebert uneasy. According to Jim, “He wanted me to leave because I knew the truth about what happened” (278). In his most crucial act, Jim refuses Hebert’s paternalistic charity: Hebert offers him “a recommendation....Telling people that you’re a good worker” (278). However, Jim declines the recommendation, prompting Hebert to a red-faced rage, and he leaves the plantation behind.

Jim walks away alone, a fact which complicates a reading of the novel that focuses on the importance of forming interracial and cross-class coalitions. His solitude stands in sharp contrast to the vision of interracial working-class community in Reverend Goodyhay’s congregation in *The Mansion*; perhaps we can infer that it takes a shared trauma such as war to break down long-standing barriers of distrust and prejudice, and that Jim understands that with those barriers still firmly in place few of the workers left on the plantation would be receptive to any attempt to change it from within. Ultimately, in *Of Love and Dust* Gaines exposes racial paternalism as not the exercise of goodwill towards the downtrodden but as a tool whereby wealthy whites maintain the loyalty of their African American workers and keep them from perceiving their common interests with poor white workers. Gaines challenges the rigid distinctions between race and class

that make that separation possible by examining the disruptive potential of racial hybridity and the ramifications for traditional social customs if people truly understand the slipperiness and mutability of the color line. Finally, he places his hope in figures like Jim Kelly, individuals who can perceive the truth about paternalism and can understand the ways in which workers of all races are oppressed by the plantation system and who can begin to forge an alliance—even if complicated, tenuous, and transient at first—across lines of race and class.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Super-Negroes” and Hybrid Aristocrats: Race and Class in Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*

This chapter is a revised and expanded version of my essay “Hybridity and Racial Identity in Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*” published in the journal *Mississippi Quarterly* in 2002:

Costello, Brannon. “Hybridity and Racial Identity in Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 55.1 (2001-2002): 3-42.

In an essay written shortly after the publication of his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy asserted the inescapable commitment of the writer—especially the Southern writer—to the issue of race: “Every Southern writer must come to some kind of terms with the Negro. He can no more avoid it than a Negro writer can avoid writing about the white man” (182). As one might expect, Percy focuses his attention on racial issues in many of his novels, from the subtly nuanced interchanges between Binx Bolling and his Aunt Emily’s butler Mercer in *The Moviegoer* to the satirically exaggerated chaos of the Bantu revolution in *Love in the Ruins* (1971).¹ Like Hurston, Faulkner, Welty, and Gaines, when Percy wrote about race, he inevitably also wrote about class, and his work

¹ For instance, Michael Pearson claims that Percy sets up racism as a thematic counterpoint to the central theme of his work: “love, human and divine.” Says Pearson, “Racism thrives on ignorance and abstraction, love on understanding and a recognition of individuality. By implication as well as intention, everything Percy has written is a criticism of the racist mentality” (495). By framing his discussion of racism in these terms, he overemphasizes the theological dimensions of Percy’s work. Indeed, Percy himself claims that he would have to eliminate Christianity from any viable formula for better race relations “Because the Christians left it out” (“Questions They Never Asked Me” 421); Percy displays here a concern for cultural realities that his readers sometimes ignore. John Edward Hardy does briefly discuss race in Percy’s novels but he ultimately asserts that “it is most important that we not miss the novelist’s design to transcend *all* social issues, the racial one most troublesomely included” (80). For Hardy, “The problem, and its solution if any, like all other problems of human enmity, is rooted most deeply in the individual, personal conscience” (115). Jac Tharpe characterizes Percy’s position on race as that of a “Southern moderate,” but he also frames the racial struggle in terms of existential angst: “blacks must reach the economic level the whites have attained, and then suffer the alienation the whites endure, to discover that nobody has any home” (24). Most recently, Farrell O’Gorman has offered an intriguing examination of Percy’s changing racial views, and their presentation in his fiction, by focusing on “the inherent connection of his religious conversion, his personal shift from segregationist to civil rights advocate, and the treatment of race in his writing ...as not only generally Christian but also specifically Catholic” (68).

is crucial to understanding the relationship between racial paternalism and the construction of aristocratic class identity as the South moves from a society and an economy rooted in the agricultural life of the plantation to a society and an economy firmly planted in the business world of the cities and suburbs. Percy evinced an interest in the breakdown of racial paternalism as early as his 1956 essay "Stoicism in the South." In this piece he notes that "the old alliance of Negro and white gentry has broken up," and he muses, "What is the reason for this dissolution of the old alliance?... Does it not, in fact, reflect a profound cultural change which, as it has turned out, cannot be accommodated within the ethos of the upper-class white?" (84). He further argues, "The fact is that neither the ethos nor the traditional worldview of the upper-class white Southerner is any longer adequate to the situation" (84). In *The Last Gentleman and Love in the Ruins*, Percy explores the implications of this truth, searching for an ethos that *would* be adequate for a South in which paternalism no longer serves to organize relationships among races and classes

We can best begin to understand the way in which Percy grapples with racial paternalism by examining the words of the man whom Percy credited as the greatest influence on his life, his adoptive father, Delta planter William Alexander Percy (to whom Walker and his cousins referred as "Uncle Will"). The elder Percy played a major role in the political and social development of the early twentieth-century South, and Walker's perceptions of the relationship between race and class could not have escaped his enormous influence. As Percy biographer Jay Tolson has argued, early in Walker's life he adopted Will Percy's attitude of paternal supremacy as his own, and this appropriation "is not surprising.... Widely shared among prosperous white southerners, it

would have been part of Walker's cultural heritage, even if he had not lived in Will's house" (95). Walker Percy stresses the elder Percy's impact in his introduction to the reissue of Will Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*: "about him I will say no more than that he was the most extraordinary man I have ever known and that I owe him a debt which cannot be paid" ("Uncle Will" 62). However, Walker Percy did not ultimately adhere to his uncle's racial politics. Though he pays warm tribute to Will Percy in this introduction, he significantly chooses his attitudes about race as a representative example of how his own philosophy differs from his adoptive father's:

The views on race relations...diverge from my own and have not been helpful, having, in my experience, played into the hands of those whose own interest in these matters is highly suspect. But even when I did not follow him, it was usually in *relation* to him, whether with him or against him, that I defined myself and my own direction. ("Uncle Will" 56)

Both Percy's remarks here and their location provide helpful jumping-off points for exploring racial paternalism and class in his fiction. By claiming that he has forged his own ideas on race "in relation" to Will Percy's and by making this claim in the introduction to the elder Percy's most famous work, Walker encourages us to return to William Alexander Percy's example in general and *Lanterns on the Levee* in particular to re-examine the racial attitudes in relation to which he has formed his own.²

In a passage from the *Lanterns on the Levee* chapter "A Note on Racial

² Although Will Percy did not publish *Lanterns* until 1941, considerably after Walker's adolescence in Greenville, it no doubt accurately reflects the sorts of racial attitudes implicit in the household in which Walker grew up. Further, its publication came considerably in advance of Walker's first attempts at fiction in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Relations,” Will Percy gives perhaps his most comprehensive statement of his beliefs about race in the South:

To live habitually as a superior among inferiors, be the superiority intellectual or economic, is a temptation to dishonesty and hubris, inevitably deteriorating. To live among a people whom, because of their needs, one must in common decency protect and defend is a sore burden in a world where one’s own troubles are about all any life can shoulder.... And, last, to live among a people deceptively but deeply alien and unknowable guarantees heart-aches, unjust expectations, undeserved condemnations. Yet such living is the fate of the white man in the South. (298)

Will Percy’s paternalistic *noblesse oblige* shines through clearly here: he takes up the white man’s burden with a resigned acceptance that he must dutifully care for and protect these ignorant subordinates, even from himself. Further, he obviously believes that all his paternal efforts will ultimately serve no end and that African Americans will forever live as immoral inferiors.

However, no matter how ostensibly benevolent his intentions, Will Percy certainly participated in the subjugation, exploitation, and marginalization of Mississippi’s black populace. Though chattel slavery ended with the Civil War, white landowners continued to exploit black Southerners. According to James C. Cobb, although Delta blacks hoped that the end of slavery and the demand for labor might open the way to economic and political independence, their hopes were thwarted by the “region’s planters, who...fought to regain their political, racial, and economic dominance and, insofar as possible, recapture the dream of a Delta where the planter’s power was

absolute and his wealth unrestricted” (47). The primary economic system eventually created as a means of accomplishing this goal was sharecropping, which, as Cobb states, “shift[ed] some of the risks of cotton growing onto the laborers and provid[ed] greater incentives for the workers to give their best efforts...and remain on the plantation until the harvest was complete” (55). This arrangement also ameliorated one of the main problems of the Reconstruction South’s economy, a lack of credit or capital, because the African American tenants did not have to pay cash money for rent and supplies, and the planters did not have to “make regular cash payments to workers before the crop was harvested” (55). However, while this arrangement seems quite an advance, in actual practice it became in many ways as abusive as slavery. The dream of economic advancement was frequently deferred each year at settlement time, when “some freedmen received payment in the form of dead stock or broken equipment or found themselves losing a larger part of their anticipated wages to ‘lost time charged at unheard of rates’” (59). Moreover, as Neil McMillen reports, “blacks still found themselves subject to the arbitrary power of whites” (124), and “when an exasperated landowner concluded that an example was required, he and his manager might assemble all hands and flog an offending black field hand” (126). Though McMillen singles out Will Percy’s plantation as a “model estate” where “physical coercion was rarely if ever used” (125), the threat of violence still hung over the black tenants.

Significantly for both Percys, in *Lanterns on the Levee* William Alexander Percy attempts to justify his domination of African Americans as merely the natural result of the essential differences between his aristocratic white identity and their childlike immaturity. Will Percy sees this contrast as the heart of the relationship between the

racess, a relationship central to the formation of any proper, aristocratic white individual's personality from the earliest stages of youth. He claims that "any white boy who was not reared with little Negro children might just as well not have been born at all" (46), for in his own youth, his Negro playmates tempered his essentially intellectual nature with the knowledge not only of "gaiety and casualness and inventiveness, but the possibility that mere living may be delightful and that natural things which we ignore unless we call them scenery are pleasant to move among and gracious to recall" (54). Indeed, for Will Percy the white person's need for this access to the natural world that the black person provides extends into adulthood. He asserts, "In the South every white man worth calling white or a man is owned by some Negro, whom he thinks he owns, his weakness and solace and incubus" (287). Will Percy's so-called incubus in this case, a black man named Ford, serves in much the same capacity as his younger incarnations: in exchange for Percy's paternal care, he keeps him in touch with the magical, primitive side of nature that white people have sacrificed for their enlightenment. Ford spins his master tall tales and creates a mythology of folk tales mingled with his own invented absurdities. As Percy puts it, "Ford is my fate, my Old Man of the Sea, who tells me of Martin and admonishing cooters and angels that do the loop-the-loop, my only tie with Pan and the Satyrs and all earth creatures who smile sunshine and ask no questions and understand" (296). Again, by defining the African American race as childlike and inferior, Will Percy not only justifies his paternal authority over their affairs but also constructs his own identity as a civilized, rational aristocrat. As he repeatedly stresses the fundamental importance of a supernaturally simple black presence for the proper construction of a white identity, Will Percy reveals the true motivation behind his exploitation of blacks

beyond the merely economic or political: his ability to know himself rests largely on his ability to know the Other according to strictly defined terms. Therefore, the elder Percy thought it of supreme importance that no individual violate these terms or take on characteristics of the other, lest this system of identity lose its defining power.

Will Percy also reminds whites that "the black man is our brother, a younger brother, not adult, not disciplined, but tragic, pitiful, and lovable; act as his brother and be patient" (309), a theory of race that ostensibly implies a fundamental similarity between the races. However, he expresses as well a clear uneasiness with the practical outcome of such a theory. If intermarriage between races became common, Percy argues, "the end of the century would behold a Delta population neither white nor black, but hybrid" (21). Further, he asserts that the white Southerner believes that "the hybrid is not a desirable product...[:] amalgamation is not the answer" (21-22); thus, he suggests that he in fact thinks African Americans should never leave their essentially different, subservient position.

Crucially for Will Percy, his paternalistic attitude towards African Americans maintains not only racial distinctions but also class distinctions within the white race; paternalism separates elites like himself from another class of whites who have populated the Delta, "the poor whites, who owned no slaves, whose manual labor lost its dignity from being in competition with slave labor, who worked their small unproductive holdings ignored by the gentry, despised by the slaves" (19). The descendants of the first poor whites have not exceeded their ancestors, argues Percy: "they were not blest with worldly goods or mental attainments" (19). Most damningly, Percy places them lower than the African Americans whose childlike nature so delights him. He writes,

“Intellectually and spiritually they are inferior to the Negro, whom they hate. Suspecting secretly they are inferior to him, they must do something to him to prove to themselves their superiority. At their door must be laid the disgraceful riots and lynching gloated over and exaggerated by Negrophiles the world over” (20). Thus, just as tolerant affection characterizes the descendants of the aristocratic gentry, violent hatred characterizes poor whites. He makes this contrast even more explicit elsewhere when he notes that the differences of opinion on the race problem are “between those Southerners who through poverty, lack of inheritance, and ignorance misunderstand and dislike the Negro, and those who by training and opportunity feel themselves his friend and protector” (227).

However, the traditional system of race and class that have given Will Percy his identity, dividing black from white and aristocrat from trash, has already begun to fail. Will Percy sees the disintegration of his mutually (in his eyes) beneficial black-white relationship characteristic of race relations as the twentieth century moves towards its midpoint and African Americans grow increasingly dissatisfied with their social, political, and economic situation. As he claims near the end of *Lanterns*, “The old Southern way of life in which I had been reared existed no more and its values were ignored or derided. Negroes used to be servants, now they were problems” (312). Will Percy perceives any African American’s attempt at a role outside that of the subservient as a betrayal of the old system of noblesse oblige, a rejection of his paternal generosity. As Michael Kobre puts it, such rejection jeopardized “the entire ideological structure on which patricians had constructed their sense of identity and value” (85).

The breakdown of this structure interested Walker Percy greatly. We know both from his novels and from his biography that he eventually grew beyond the biases he inherited from Uncle Will.³ True, he does at times defend the fundamental honor of Will's intentions. For instance, in his introduction to *Lanterns*, he writes

Take the words 'paternalism,' 'noblesse oblige,' dirty words these days. But is it a bad thing for a man to believe that his position in society entails a certain responsibility towards others? Or is it a bad thing for a man to care like a father for his servants, spend himself on the poor, the sick, the miserable, the mad who come his way? It is surely better than watching a neighbor get murdered and closing the blinds to keep from 'getting involved.' It might even beat welfare.

("Uncle Will" 58)

However, though he may praise the abstract ideals of paternalism, he also realizes the potential for exploitation inherent in a social system that essentializes an entire race as ignorant children.

Percy's first sustained examination of the relationship between racial paternalism and class, *The Last Gentleman*, follows Williston Bibb Barrett on his quest for identity

³ His active participation in the civil rights movement indicates that Walker Percy found the political and social equality of African Americans a worthy goal. Patrick Samway notes that "Walker was deeply concerned about the civil rights issue, and gradually, through friends and acquaintances, he had begun to make decisions about how he could personally contribute to the movement" (243). In particular, Percy helped found the interracial Covington Community Relations Council, an organization that chartered both a credit union accessible to economically disadvantaged blacks and a Head Start program (270). Percy even spoke as an expert witness for the black students of Covington High School in their campaign to have the Confederate flag removed from their school (281). Significantly, Percy felt that this struggle for equal autonomy extended to selfhood as well: in a review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he warned of the "fatal pitfall" that lies in the path of the young African American writer: "the temptation to see the Negro and even himself through the sociologist's abstraction" (10-11). Even before his first attempts at fiction, Percy asserts the inevitable reductiveness of perceiving African Americans as members of a stereotyped class.

and reconciliation with his family's tradition; Percy examines the ways Will's experiences with race relations and his paternalist heritage mutate over the course of his return to his much-altered ancestral homeland, the Delta country of the American South. Will Barrett comes from an aristocratic family whose identity at least in part depends upon a subjugation and objectification of African Americans that masquerades as protection. For instance, Will's "honorable and violent" great grandfather "once met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barbershop and invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street" (6).⁴ However, Will, in turn, cannot perform his aristocratic whiteness; he cannot interact with African Americans in the manner prescribed by his family's paternalist tradition. As the narrator ironically remarks, "The engineer [Will] was the only white man in the entire South who did not know all there was to know about Negroes" (151). Unlike the typical Southerner, who "looks at a Negro twice: once, when he is a child and sees his nurse for the first time; second, when he is dying and there is a Negro with him to change his bedclothes," Will "actually look[s]" at black people in an attempt to understand them in some way of his own. Will truly holds no single worldview: the narrator describes him as "a Southerner who had crossed up his wires and was something betwixt and between" (251).

Such an in-between position makes Will a confusing anomaly in the world of elite Southerners. The aristocratic Southern white gentleman constructed his identity in large part through his interaction with African Americans, whom he necessarily considered his

⁴ Although some might interpret Great-Grandfather Barrett's battle with the Klan Wizard as representative of the struggle between two feuding moral and economic systems rather than an act of racial paternalism, Bertram Wyatt-Brown observes that "Actually these two elements were practically inseparable" (*House* 228).

helpless inferiors. Though men like Will Percy made much of their paternalistic attitudes towards black people and claimed they wanted to help their “junior brothers” advance to a white standard of civilization, these paternal identities paradoxically depended on the fixity of the black Other in a downtrodden situation. After all, if African Americans attained enlightened whiteness, they would no doubt lose that connection to the perfect innocence that Will Percy so craved (and likely gain a considerable disgust with their constant exploitation). By maintaining a strictly defined Other against whom they could define themselves in utter opposition, aristocratic whites constructed a system of identity predicated on binary polarities. As we saw in *Lanterns on the Levee*, individuals who have invested their identities in such a system would fear any notion of a racial hybridity, either sexual or cultural, any incoherence in the structure of their selves. After all, if members of either race shift from what theorist Homi Bhabha calls their “primordial polarities” and begin to operate in an interstitial space, they threaten to create new forms of identity which render any claim to an identity based in segregated binarism unworkable. Further, aristocratic whites depend upon the childlike otherness of African Americans so that they may demonstrate the paternalism that separates them from low-class whites; if the otherness that separates blacks and whites begins to break down, then so also will the supposedly essential class distinctions separating different groups of white Southerners, thus challenging the aristocrats’ claims that they are inherently most fit to lead.

I would argue that Will’s journey back to the South represents his attempt to reconcile his own uniquely hybrid nature with the binaristic tradition of identity handed

down by his father.⁵ Of course, the concept of hybridity has a rather contentious history. Robert Young has pointed out that in using a term so central to the racist discourse of the nineteenth century, “it can easily be objected that hybridity assumes, as was often the case with nineteenth century theories of race, the prior existence of pure, fixed, and separate antecedents” (25). I would suggest that we may avoid that pitfall by employing the term here in Bhabha’s formulation, in which hybridity refers to a new, politically contestatory condition that becomes possible in the contact zone between separate cultures—the “interstitial perspective” (3)—generated by colonialism. Thus, for Bhabha and for Percy, hybridity does not connote the simple mixture of so-called essential characteristics. As Bhabha states, true “cultural difference must not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of the national community” (162). Rather, it suggests a more complex process of exchange and interaction between racial cultures whose authentic differences arise from their particular geographical, temporal, and political situations, not a colonizer-imposed exoticism. We may thus read *The Last Gentleman* as a novel that attempts, in Bhabha’s words, to

⁵ In “Walker Percy and Albert Murray: The Story of Two ‘Part Anglo-Saxon Alabamians,’” Roberta S. Maguire also takes up the issue of hybridity in Percy’s work, albeit from a different angle. Maguire argues that Percy’s relationship with fellow novelist Murray “played an important role in the evolution of Percy’s thinking about race, or, more precisely, his thinking about the relationship between black and white southerners” (10). According to Maguire, when Murray visited Percy in 1969, Murray “emphasized his view of the complexity of black-white interrelatedness—that the hybridity of American culture does not mean that differences become indistinguishable, but rather that differences and similarities become interwoven” (18). Maguire argues that Percy was particularly influenced by Murray’s character Scooter, from *Train Whistle Guitar* (1973), a protagonist who is “a role-player *par excellence*” (22). Maguire’s essay is valuable, especially for its tracing of the Percy/Murray relationship (one that goes unremarked upon in both of the major Percy biographies) and for its discussion of the Murryan influence on Percy’s African American character Elgin from *Lancelot* (1976). However, I would suggest that Maguire somewhat overstates Murray’s influence on Percy’s thinking about hybridity; though she cites *The Last Gentleman*’s David Ross as a kind of failed version of the role-playing figure that both Percy and Murray write about, she neglects the ways in which Will Barrett operates as an ultimately successful hybrid figure.

“authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (2).⁶

Will Barrett’s father, suicidal lawyer-planter Ed Barrett, finds hybridity threatening. Like “Uncle Will,” Ed Barrett articulates his fear of cultural hybridity through his diatribes against the mingling of black and white sexual behaviors. However, the type of hybridity that he fears has little to do with genuine cultural differences but with characteristics he perceives as essential to each race. Not surprisingly, his ideas owe much to those espoused by William Alexander Percy in *Lanterns on the Levee*. Will Barrett recalls that as he watched his father pace the street before their house in Ithaca, Mississippi (the primary setting of Will’s flashbacks and a clear analog to Greenville, Will Percy’s hometown), they could see that “West, atop the levee, couples sat in parked cars,” and they could hear that “East, up De Ridder...came now and then the sound of Negro laughter” (78). However, Ed Barrett considers this physical segregation inconsequential in comparison to a far more grave cultural exchange: sexual license. Mr. Barrett nods east towards the African Americans and claims that “They fornicate and the one who fornicates best is the preacher.” He perceives their supposedly loose sexuality—“Fornicator and not caring”—simply as another aspect of their essential amorality. However, while he believes this behavior is intrinsic to black nature, he rails against it when practiced by whites because for him their adherence to a moral, ethical system sets them apart from the “savages” and guarantees their position of power. In order to maintain their authority as “elder brothers” who help black people attain their level of

⁶ Ania Loomba criticizes Bhabha’s construction of hybridity; she claims that as he develops the idea, it “swells from its previous colonial context to become paradigmatic of all oppositional theory and politics.” Loomba finds this quality “illustrative of how feebly it was grounded in the colonial encounter to begin with” (309). However, I would suggest that we may still productively utilize Bhabha’s formulation by continuing to supply the specific cultural context that Loomba finds lacking.

civilization, decent white Southerners must also adhere to the rules that they claim define civilized behavior. Says Mr. Barrett of the levee-goers, “they fornicate too and in public and expect *them* back yonder somehow not to notice. Then they expect their women to be respected” (78). Ed Barrett’s concern here goes far beyond a simple fear of miscegenation. He believes that by bringing their sexuality into public view, white people undermine their morally superior position and give blacks a vantage point from which to question white authority. Significantly, Will’s father seems less concerned with the actual fornication than with its nature as spectacle; perhaps he recognizes on some level the rather arbitrary constructedness, the performative nature, of these identity-granting boundaries.

Whatever the case, Mr. Barrett sees nothing but destruction and degeneracy in this trend: “One will pick up the worst of the other and lose the best of himself. Watch. One will learn to fornicate in public and the other will end by pissing in the street” (78). Thus, Mr. Barrett can conceive of this cultural hybridity only negatively; for him, true identity depends on the perpetuation of dramatically different characteristics for each race. When he eventually realizes that the white people of Ithaca have begun to flaunt characteristics that he considers “black,” he also realizes that his old-fashioned aristocratic system must inevitably fail. Consequently, Mr. Barrett suffers a dramatic crisis of identity that culminates in suicide (though Will represses this last detail nearly until the end of his trip home). Ed Barrett recognizes in his fellow whites the same capacity for “ethical immunity” that his class posits as the exclusive domain of blackness. He can no longer construct a culture of difference if his compeers refuse to act differently. Will recalls that

the night of his father's death finds them once again outside of their house, watching as always "To the west the cars of the white people...nosing up the levee" and listening to "the sound of Negro laughter" (260). On this ostensibly triumphant night, Will's father becomes even more melancholy and morose than usual, even though his enemies, lower-class whites without his own aristocratic, paternal sensibilities, have left town. He believes that their retreat represents not a victory for his way of life but a signal of its end: "They don't have to stay. Because they found out that we are like them after all and so there was no reason for them to stay.... Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hated us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay?" Here, the way that class inflects Mr. Barrett's conception of race becomes of crucial importance; the poor, working-class white Deltans have no vested interest in maintaining either an economic system or a system of identity that offers aristocratic planters security. The polarities that defined him have lost their value, so Mr. Barrett selects a new pair: "their" way or death. Not surprisingly, he opts for the only one that will allow him to retain a semblance of his old identity.

Ironically, however, for a culture that ostensibly abhors hybridity, aristocratic Southern culture as practiced by men like Will Percy and Ed Barrett promoted a close (if controlled) interaction between African Americans and whites, especially at a young age. This interaction, in the case of Will Barrett, provides the grounds for an authentic experience of cultural difference at least partially divorced from his father's impositions. The narrator claims that, as Will Percy might have prescribed, Will Barrett "Like many others...had had a little black boy for a friend" (151). Although the narrator ironically remarks that Will had not "enjoyed perfect love and understanding" with his black

playmate and that “unlike the others, he had been from the beginning somewhat fuddled and uneasy,” Will obviously preferred his company to other white children on at least one instance. Once, he fled his summer camp in North Carolina and returned home, where he “with the help of a Negro friend built a tree house in a tall sycamore. They spent the summer aloft, reading comics while the tree house tossed like a raft in a sea of dappled leaves” (9).

Further, aristocratic households would naturally employ African American servants to assist the lady of the house with menial duties as well as with child rearing. Significantly, Percy makes only the briefest mention of Will’s mother, and Will’s stepmother hardly seems an adequate substitute. She “was a good deal older than his father, was nice enough but rather abstracted” (12). Rather, Will’s black nurse, D’lo, fills the maternal role. Indeed, his only indoor childhood memory involves “sitting in the kitchen watching D’lo snap beans or make beaten biscuits” (7). Moreover, when he returns to his father’s house, he does not seek the help of the quartet of stern aunts rocking on the porch. Instead, he goes to the kitchen, D’lo’s domain. Although a certain formality still informs their interactions (Will pays/bribes her for her help), their relationship closely resembles that of a mother and her wayward child. For instance, Will believes that D’lo intuitively “had somehow known that he was here,” and when he describes his situation, he “could not have sworn she did not know all about it” (263). Further, D’lo supplies him with hearty nourishment and helps him look presentable: she finds for him “his father’s Rolls razor and, while he washed and shaved in the downstairs bathroom, fixed him a big breakfast of sausage and batter cakes” (263).

Perhaps, then, we may usefully read Will Barrett as the hybrid product of two

racial cultures. As Bhabha helpfully observes, “The effect of cultural power is seen to be the production of hybridity rather than the noisy command of colonial authority or the silent repression of native traditions” (154). Will’s cultural hybridity manifests in one of his most intriguing characteristics: his “radar,” his “knack of divining persons and situations” (37). He can tune in to a person’s narrative wavelength, intuitively understand what sort of listener that person’s narrative requires, and shape himself accordingly. Val Vaught notes Will’s amorphous nature when she tells him, “Everyone thinks very highly of you—though for strangely diverse, even contradictory reasons” (164). Although most of Percy’s readers have made some comment about Will’s radar, they have failed to notice that Percy often figures this radar in terms distinctively associated with African Americans. Percy describes it as the chief characteristic that has enabled them to survive in such an oppressive society for so long:

The Vaught servants were buffaloes by the engineer and steered clear of him. Imagine their feeling. They of course lived by their radars too. It was their special talent and it was how they got along: tuning in on the assorted signals about them and responding with a skill two hundred years in the learning. And not merely responding. Not merely answering the signals but providing home and sustenance to the transmitter, giving him, the transmitter, to believe that he dwelled in loving and familiar territory. He must be made to make sense, must the transmitter, must be answered with sense and good easy laughter: sho now, we understand each other. (151-152)

Although it may seem as though Percy indulges in a bit of racial essentialism here, he takes care to describe the radar as “two hundred years in the learning,” a phrase that

stresses that this talent does not lie intrinsically in every person of African descent but that African Americans since the time of slavery have necessarily developed this trait to survive. Through this process, the servants satisfy what Bhabha calls the “colonialist demand that [the colonizers’ narrative demands] should be addressed directly, that the Other should authorize the self, recognize its priority, replete, indeed repeat, its references” (98). They alter themselves to serve their masters’ need for constant re-authorization of their identity.

Thus, not surprisingly, Will’s anomalous presence confounds the Vaught servants. They do not know how to deal with Will because unlike other white people he does not “transmit” but, rather, only “receives”; he, “like them, was all ears and eyes and antennae.”⁷ Significantly, they conceive of his condition in terms of hybridity: “He was like a white child who does not grow up *or rather who grows up in the kitchen*” (152, my emphasis). This phrase is significant given that Percy takes care to depict how in both the Vaught and Barrett households maternal African American figures hold sway over this site of domestic power. Thus, Will’s appropriation of “Negro radar” stands as the clearest evidence of his hybrid nature. Perhaps this helps explain his discomfort around Lamar Thigpen, Mr. Vaught’s racist-joke-telling step-son-in-law. Will dislikes jokes because he must “attend to the perilous needs of the joke-teller” (181), and Lamar’s jokes in particular force him to answer a narrative demand that conflicts with the very part of

⁷ I should note that at one point, Percy’s narrator claims that *all* Southerners, not just African Americans, possess a “radar”: “It was unsettling, too, coming among a people whose radars were as sensitive as his own,” a group of people who are “as light-footed and hawk-eyed and God-fearing a crew as one could imagine” (145). However, he also quickly notes that Will’s “radar was remarkable, even for the South. After standing around two or three days, as queer and nervous as a Hoosier, he quickly got the hang of it” (145-46). I would suggest that Will’s radar is so exceptional because it is so akin to the radar that African Americans have had to develop to survive.

himself that makes him such a good listener.

However, this gift does not necessarily work to the overall benefit of any of its possessors, Will included. That is, this constantly self-denying, self-objectifying behavior, however necessary, may ultimately destroy any coherent identity. For instance, Lugurtha, the Vaughts' African American cook, more than anything else wants "to find fervent areas of agreement" and so voices her opinions only on such trite and simple subjects as juvenile delinquency. Will, too, suffers this loss of selfhood. His almost involuntary transformations into whatever those around him desire prevent him from inspecting and coming to terms with his own identity: he "hardly knew who he was from one day to the next" (14). Even though he spends five years ostensibly looking inward via psychoanalysis, Will learns nothing because he simply divines what his analyst wants to hear and gives it to him: "Never had [Dr. Gamow's] own theories found a readier confirmation than in the free (they seemed to be free) associations and the copious dreams which this one spread out at his feet like so many trophies" (24). Even when Gamow realizes Will's game and confronts him, Will makes "an equally charming confession, exhibit[s] heroic sweats and contortions to overcome his bad habits, offer[s] crabbed and meager dreams, and so ma[kes] another trophy of his disgrace" (24). For the entire duration of his treatment, Will satisfies Gamow's every wish and never once uncovers anything about himself.⁸

⁸We may wonder why Will persists in his visits to Dr. Gamow's office at all. Though it seems a small point, Will may continue his analysis because this man, whom Will thinks of as "a father of sorts" (41), also participates somewhat in the essentializing and objectification of black people. For instance, he has decorated his office "in a Bahaman theme, with a fiber rug and prints of hummingbirds and Negresses walking with baskets on their heads" (25). Perhaps Gamow uses what he (wrongly) perceives as an image of native tranquillity and innocence (and ignorance?) as a contrast with the ultra-civilized, clinical practice that takes place in the room. Further, when Gamow entreats Will to join a therapy group, he describes one

Inevitably, Will's "betwixt and between" hybrid identity comes into conflict with itself. His father's paternalist identity rests on "knowing" the Other according to very specific, limited terms that may bear little or no relation to the Other's actual characteristics. On the other hand, his "mother's" radar helps provide Will with a more authentic knowledge of others that would make such a willful ignorance impossible, yet it also denies him any truly individual identity of his own. This tension between an identity founded upon false knowledge and a truer knowledge that precludes identity lies at the heart of Will's return to the South. We may read his quest as an attempt to come to terms with his family's paternalist, aristocratic white identity and to find a system of racial interaction that will accept his hybridity without destroying his identity. As he journeys through the South, Will repeatedly faces social systems that promise him a coherent identity yet which he eventually perceives as fundamentally racist.

As the novel opens, we find Will seeking temporary refuge from his dilemma in New York City, where he works as a humidification engineer for Macy's. His flight to the North does not, however, represent an escape from his family's tradition. Rather, it offers the only way of existing within that tradition available to Will. He fills the long-established role of the prodigal Southern son: "In Southern genealogies there is always mention of a cousin who went to live in New York in 1922 and not another word" (6). From this borderline space, far removed from the day-to-day realities of Southern life, Will can fantasize about returning to an aristocratically idealized South. He imagines that once he retires from Macy's, "he could retire and go home...[:] he might even restore

of its participants as "an extremely sensitive Negro who is *not* success-oriented—a true identity problem there" (30). Thus, Gamow posits driving ambition as central and essential to African American identity.

Hampton plantation to its former splendor” (13). Tellingly, Will does not figure his dreams of agrarian glory in terms of updating or modernizing; rather, as the phrase *former splendor* implies, he imagines a return to the glorious aristocratic past. He expresses this desire in even more explicitly paternal terms after he has begun his trek South, when he thinks “I am returning to...recover Hampton plantation from the canebrakes and live out my days as a just man and little father to the faithful Negroes working in the field” (118). Even in New York, though, Will still exhibits evidence of his hybridity. For instance, he falls in with two radically (and racially) disparate crowds: an “interracial group” from Greenwich Village and “the Siberian Gentlemen, a nostalgic supper club of expatriate Southerners, mostly lawyers and brokers, who...spoke of going back to Charleston or Mobile” (14). Despite the obvious cultural and philosophical differences of these two groups, his joint association does “not strike him as in the least anomalous” (14), perhaps because Will, as a product of two cultures who belongs to neither, necessarily requires community with both.

Will’s hybrid nature comes most strikingly into conflict with his desire to take on his family’s paternal role almost immediately as he begins his trip South. When the Vaughns semi-accidentally abandon Will in New York, Will must hitchhike his way home. He gets his first break from “pseudo-Negro” Forney Aiken. Most critics, as William Rodney Allen notes, complain “that Will’s episodes with Forney Aiken are not sufficiently well-integrated into the novel” (61). Further, those critics who even mention Forney tend to read him as Peggy Whitman Prenshaw does, as a broad “parody of the doublespeaking media sociologist, agent of deceit and disguise, a hail-fellow-well-met hyping ‘moral causes’” (91). This sort of reading, while accurate as far as it goes, ignores

much of the complexity of his interactions with Will. Through their misadventures Percy first begins to problematize Will's efforts to re-insert himself into his father's paternalistic mold.

Forney, a white photojournalist from the North, has decided to infiltrate the "cotton curtain" as a burial insurance salesman to do a "series on behind-the-scene life of the Negro" (101).⁹ With the help of a dermatologist, Forney has made his entire body appear black, save one small patch on his forearm. However, despite his physical disguise, Will sees—or rather hears—through his deception. Forney does not speak as Will believes an "educated Negro" would: "with a certain relish and a hearkening to his own periods" (98). Of course, the fact that Will presumes to know exactly what a black person of a certain type should sound like (he even gives Forney tips on the proper African American way to pronounce "insurance") suggests that he has begun his attempt to re-enter his father's Other-knowing paternalist tradition. Ironically, by not speaking as Will expects a black man to speak and then revealing himself as in fact not a black man at all, Forney actually if incidentally reaffirms Will's false position as a "knower" of the African American Other.

However, Will's first attempt to put paternal ideals into practice meets with disaster, largely because of his forcible suppression of his radar's warnings. Will and Forney sojourn into the all-white neighborhood of Levittown, a suburb of Philadelphia, to pick up author Mort Prince. As Will and Forney approach Prince's house, Forney greets "the householders on the next lawn, whom he fancied to be well-wishers of some sort.

⁹ Forney's quest obviously has its roots in John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*.

They were not well-wishers" (110). Indeed, the other suburbanites see only a black man followed by Will, whom they believe works as a "blockbuster," a realtor who sells homes in all-white neighborhoods to black families. Will sees this case of mistaken identity as an opportunity for him to defend the helpless black race as paternally as his aristocratic grandfather might have, although the posse of householders certainly presents a less formidable threat than the KKK. The possibility excites Will: "Adrenaline erected his hair roots, could it have come at last, a simple fight, with the issue clear beyond peradventure?" (111). He hopes that "the time had come again when you could be insulted, hear it aright, and have it out then and there as his grandfather used to have it out" (112).

But, Will has trouble keeping his anger "pure and honorable" (113). His desire to fight the worthiest foe among the householders, a burly fellow whom Will dubs the "alpinier," for the rights of the African American conflicts with his desire to accommodate himself to the situation via his "radar," and "despite himself, [he] beg[ins] to tune him in to see how it stood with him." Will desperately wants two-fisted paternalism to win out over his radar: when he sees the alpinier "advance upon the writer, hand outstretched, perhaps for the 'papers,' perhaps to shake hands, but advancing nevertheless," he chooses to ignore the possible alternatives and to interpret the advance as an attack. He even thinks of the alpinier rather archaically as the "villain" to counter his own role as the "hero." However, Forney has no interest in any paternalistic pugilism. As Will moves to Mort's defense, he sees that Forney wants to defuse the situation by rolling up his sleeve and showing the crowd his white patch, thus draining the scene of its racial charge. Will realizes that this unmasking will rob him of his chance to behave as his grandfather

would, and he “angrily” orders Forney not to roll up his sleeve (114). Unfortunately for Will, in the midst of all this chaos, he gets slugged, not by the villainous alpinist but by a decidedly less impressive foe (at least in his grandfather’s terms): an irate housewife. Forney shows everyone his arm as Will goes down, and the situation dissolves into “the dreadful cordiality of misunderstandings cleared away, of debits to be balanced.” The contrast between the farcical nature of the skirmish and the imagined gravity of Will’s grandfather’s noble showdown emphasizes Percy’s ironic critique of traditional Southern race relations. Thus, Will’s first attempt to ignore his radar and live only according to the rules of his father’s “pole” meets with humiliating defeat.

The confusion and dislocation Will feels on his jaunt with Forney serves as a preview for what follows in Alabama. There, as Kobre notes, Will realizes that “the old paternalistic relationships of white gentleman and black servant are no longer stable or clear-cut” (93). When Will does finally reunite with the Vaughns and arrives at their house in Birmingham, he confronts another means of mediating cultural interaction, a modern interpretation of the Old South colonial ideals. Though the Vaughns live in a suburban “castle fronting on the golf links” rather than on a plantation, they still maintain their identity in the world through strictly defined racial roles. Indeed, the Vaughns see their African American servants much as Binx Bolling’s Aunt Emily saw Mercer, as living connections to the Old South way of life. When a large contingent of Vaughns and assorted hangers-on leave for a football game, the three servants stand “waving farewell on the back steps, Lugurtha fluttering her apron” (214-215). This display prompts Lamar to remark, “There’s nothing like the old-timey ways!” (215). The servants “remind Lamar of an earlier, more gracious time, even though the purple castle didn’t look much like an

antebellum mansion and the golf links even less like a cotton plantation.” The Vaughts participate in a trend that Grace Hale identifies in her study *Making Whiteness*.

According to Hale, although “[p]rofound differences existed between the relatively self-sufficient agrarianism of the Old South and the more urban and consumer-oriented society of the new,” white southerners “of the rising middle class” nevertheless “insisted on conflating the plantation household and the post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power...of the plantation-based planter class” (87). She goes on to claim that “making the home a central symbolic site, an echo of an antebellum elite’s plantation-centered world, also helped ground the new middle class’s cultural authority in an indigenous even if romanticized source of power” (93).

At the Vaught household, Will at first has no trouble fitting in: he plays golf with Mr. Vaught and his cronies and prepares for college. However, as time passes, Will increasingly realizes his incompatibility with the Vaughts’s system of racial interaction. When a group of young people from his native Delta country comes to visit, he proves unable to enjoy their company: it makes “him uneasy to see how little he was like them” (209), particularly when they discuss the integration of their formerly whites-only university. While his fellow Deltans have no identity problems because they know “what they wanted and who they hated,” Will remains “so mystified by white and black alike that he [can] not allow himself the luxury of hatred” (210). Significantly, he even thinks of them as “lordly” in their hatred, a term that recalls the aristocratic nature of plantation race relations. His refusal, indeed his inability, to separate race into simple binaries deprives him of the identity that comes so easily for them.

Will does find a temporary refuge for his hybridity in a rather peculiar room in the

Vaught castle: the pantry. Will most often and most comfortably situates himself here in this interstitial space, a space “not properly a room at all but rather the space left over in the center of the house when the necessary rooms had been built.... It fell out somehow or other that both Negro and white could sit in the pantry, perhaps because it was an intermediate room between dining room and kitchen, or perhaps because it was not, properly speaking, a room at all” (152). The fact that this room exists because “Mr. Vaught, who also did not know what he did not know, had been his own architect” suggests that any construction of white culture that assumes omniscience in making allowances for the presence of African Americans has at its heart the potential for hybridity and therefore resistance. Bhabha’s reading of Renee Green’s architectural art project *Sites of Genealogy* might apply equally well to the Vaught pantry: Green uses the attic and basement of the museum to signify binary opposites, and the stairwell, like the Vaught pantry, “prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identities opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). In the pantry Will finds his hybridity satisfied (if only briefly), for its curious nature frees him from the requirement to choose an identity based on any particular racial binary.

However, Percy also problematizes the notion of the pantry as a site of ideal hybridity. Although this curious room does function as a space for transcultural interaction, those interactions still occur in an area ultimately ruled by paternalistic white authority. Even though “many doors and vestibules” lead out of the room, they all lead simply to another area on the Vaught estate. Thus, any cross-cultural exchanges do not

occur unmediated in a vacuum but rather in the heart of an authority that controls the kinds of hybridity generated. Percy addresses this issue through the character of the Vaughts' butler David Ross, a sort of failed hybrid who, in Will's words, "ain't black nor white nor nothing" (248). David, the pantry's other chief occupant, also has difficulty fitting into any racial role. Will, who still clings to his father's binaries, thinks of him as "different from the other Negroes" because "he had not caught onto either the Negro way or the white way" (152). However, while this intermediate position eventually provides Will with a position from which to critique these binaries and forge an identity separate from either, it simply leaves David open to exploitation: he cannot "be cunning with a white man's cunning or cunning with a black man's cunning" (153). Further, even his radar does not function properly: when Will unexpectedly calls him on the phone, David proves incapable of answering his narrative demand: "David, feeling summoned, cast about for the right response—was it surprise? joy?—and hit instead on a keening bogus cheeriness" (247). When Will tells David he is sick, David, "aiming for the famous Negro sympathy, hit[s] instead on a hooting incredulity" (248).

David, son of Lugurtha the cook, has no biological father in the novel, but he has in a sense adopted Mr. Vaught as a father figure, and he even behaves as a privileged son would. Will thinks of him as "David sure enough, of royal lineage and spoiled rotten" (177). David uncritically accepts the bootstraps-capitalist ideal that Mr. Vaught embodies. After all, Mr. Vaught earned his wealth through individualistic enterprises: "he had made his first fortune by inventing and manufacturing a new type of journal box for coal cars.... Now he owned and operated the second largest Chevrolet agency in the world" (147). David has grown up surrounded by unbridled success, and he therefore

believes that he, too, can easily attain this American capitalist ideal of success and personal achievement with no difficulty. He frequently answers “advertisements in magazines, such as *Learn Electronics! Alert Young Men Needed! Earn Fifty Dollars a Day! Send for Selling Kit!*” even though his “long black-and-pink fingers could never quite work the connections and the soldering iron” (153). Importantly, Percy does not describe David’s incompetence as resulting from his blackness but, rather, because he acts “like a rich man’s son,” pampered and sheltered. Even with his electronics mishap, David still continues to pursue his goal, this time with the intention of going door-to-door in the Vaughts’ neighborhood to sell ice dispensers.

By innocently and faithfully pursuing these endeavors, David behaves like “baby brother at home” (154) in two ways. First, he conducts himself as a spoiled younger son who expects success to come naturally. Second, he acts like “baby brother” in Will Percy’s paternalist sense: he unquestioningly believes that white people genuinely want to help him attain their lifestyle, to become just like them. David acts “as if everybody was going to treat him well,” but Will Barrett, more familiar with the depths of white paranoia, recognizes this blind faith in the system as David’s “awful vulnerability.” He knows that David will fail because “they’re not going to treat [David] well. They’re going to violate [him]” (154). David remains committed to an externally created identity that promises progress but guarantees fixity in his subordinate situation. When the authoritarian culture completely controls the interactions with the subordinate culture, as in the pantry, it renders any true hybridity impossible.

This reading may at first seem to suggest that Percy believes that only those individuals who belong to the ranks of paternalistic authority, rich white Southerners

such as Will, can truly attain any politically viable sort of hybridity, for only they have the autonomy to resist the types of identity offered by their culture. Thus, while Will can flee to the North and live off his inheritance, David must accept the meager opportunities available to him in his subservient position. Indeed, some of Will's reflections on David seem to suggest a sort of condescending anger at his bungled hybridity, a sentiment that problematizes a view of Will as progressive hybrid hero and of Percy's progressive racial politics in general. However, Percy attempts to resolve that tension, at least in part, by having Will encounter an African American character whose hybridity has succeeded far better than Will's. Later in the novel, when Will chances upon Forney Aiken again, Forney has with him a contingent of thespians and playwrights. When Will meets one playwright, "a slender pop-eyed Negro" (251), he feels a remarkable sensation: he experiences for the first time "as powerful and white-hot a radar beam leveled at him as he leveled at others." Will realizes this playwright has "done the impossible!—kept his ancient Negro radar intact and added to it a white edginess and restiveness" (251). Indeed, the playwright represents one of the very few Percy characters who achieves identity without falsely assuming some kind of role. The narrator contrasts the playwright with an actor in his company: "Where the actor [is] all self playing itself and triumphantly succeeding, coinciding with itself, the playwright [is]...not in the least mindful of himself" (251). Significantly, although the playwright, like Will, has a powerful radar, he does not share Will's compulsive desire to remake himself in everyone else's image of him. Perhaps his creative vocation allows him to externalize his working through of other "selves" in a way that Will cannot. Though Percy problematically offers no hint as to how he achieved this "impossibility," the playwright's presence in the novel

offers at least the possibility that a black person can escape a paternalist-imposed identity, can escape the “moral scheme,” as Kirby puts it, of paternalism.

At any rate, Will realizes that he cannot stay in the pantry forever because of its problematic position within the power of paternalist authority. The pantry for him becomes even more explicitly a place of limitation: when Kitty maneuvers to keep him from continuing his southern trek, he reflects that “that pantry’s got us, locked in...and you [Kitty] the chatelaine with the keys at your belt” (202). As he sadly realizes how much the pantry functions as a cell rather than a place of liberation, he stares at Lugurtha “through two doorways.” While he watches her, he reflects, “the biscuit dough, the quick kneading movement of her hands against the sifted marble, put him in mind of something.” Though he does not completely realize it, Lugurtha must remind him of D’lo, who also has a penchant for biscuit making. The fact that he stares at her while he bemoans his imprisonment suggests that he perceives black culture as somehow necessary for his escape from the identity that the Vaughts would force upon him. However, that he must stare at her “through two doorways” signals his continued separation from that culture.

Fortunately for Will, he gets an opportunity to depart from the Vaught household. However, his escape from their home does not automatically coincide with an escape from their paternalist ideology. When Jamie and his brother Sutter steal away in the night, the other Vaughts want Will to pursue them (each for his or her own reason). He follows Sutter’s map down through Mississippi to Tyree County, where Valentine Vaught, a Catholic nun, directs a mission for poverty-stricken African American children. Percy’s readers have usually treated Val fairly generously, as a flawed but fundamentally

holy woman committed to the spiritual advancement of her charges. Gary M. Ciuba argues, “she teaches her Tyree children out of a desire to give them back the world rather than from the potential haughtiness of noblesse oblige” (113). Indeed, perhaps Will at first perceives her as the critics do. After all, Val ostensibly represents a system of racial interaction different from either the Vaughnts’ or Mr. Barrett’s. Mr. Vaught considers her the “worst of all” his children because she took his hundred-thousand dollar gift and “Gave it to the niggers” (65). Further, Val purports that she does not participate in the Southern racial theories proposed by men like Will’s father. She claims that while she once heard Mr. Barrett “make a speech to the D.A.R. on the subject of *noblesse oblige* and our duty to the Negro” (162), she does not necessarily share his views: she tells Will, “I can’t say that I agree with your father on his reasons for treating Negroes well rather than beating them up” (164). Even the location of her school seems at first hopeful: Will recalls that in years past, the school “was one of the old-style country academies” where privileged children could study under “Dr. so-and-so who taught Greek and Colonel so-and-so who taught military science” (232). Will, ever the amnesiac, feels certain that he or his father attended this institute. But now he finds “instead a raw settlement of surplus army buildings, Quonset huts, and one geodesic dome, stretching out into the piney woods, each building fed by a silver butane sphere. It looked like a lunar installation” (232-33). Thus, it would seem that Val has productively taken a site once used for the perpetuation of aristocratic ideology and converted it into a place where a new way of thinking about race might begin.

However, Will quickly realizes that Val offers no more useful a means of mediating cultural interaction than did the Vaughnts or his father. Rather than revising the

past, she merely repeats it; her new structures symbolize not a fresh, different racial ideology but a reconstruction of the old. Will can find no means for understanding his hybridity here, for hybridity in Percy's formulation requires the interaction of authentically different cultures. When Will tunes her in with his radar, he sees that Val's ideology, benevolent though it may appear, would completely annihilate African American culture and replace it with a version of her own. Val claims she stays in Tyree because of her fascination with a "linguistic phenomenon" (235). The black children grow up almost completely mute: she tells Will that "Nobody at home speaks. They don't know thirty words. They don't know words like pencil or hawk or wallet." Val stays so that she may give them language: "What's that? they ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me." She describes this as an empowering process. As she informs Will, "When they do finally break into the world of language, it is something to see. They are like Adam on the First Day." Critics have generally taken this claim at face value: Ciuba argues that "By giving her silent students the word...she gives them back the entire world that she affirms as well as their very selves as Adamic namers" (111). However, Val's statement articulates a powerful contradiction. The children have little in common with Adam, for Adam gave the things of the world names of his own creation and constructed a knowledge of the world on his own terms and without the burden of history. The Tyree children, by contrast, receive the names of things from Val and thus learn to understand the world only in terms prescribed by an authority who bears a closer relationship to aristocratic ideology than she admits. Val does not teach the children to speak so that they may use the power of language to understand the world and their culture in some way of their own but, rather, so that they will only understand the world through her belief

system. Thus, she perpetuates the “moral scheme” of paternalism that Kirby identifies: “most insidiously, paternalism bound blacks to whites, apprenticed them not only as laborers but also as moral creatures” (16).

Percy does, however, provide a sliver of hope for the Tyree children. When Jamie reaches his lowest point, he asks Will to call Val, but when Will eventually gets through, he reaches not Val but one of her students, Axel. Will inquires about Val using her full religious name, Sister Johnette Mary Vianney, but Axel refers to her by a name of his own creation: “Sister Viney” (308). Thus, perhaps Val’s attempt to control completely the terms of their knowledge must finally fail. Even as she gives their world her names, Axel and his classmates give her a name of their own creation.

I do not mean to suggest that Val’s work has no value or is unnecessary; certainly, these children will be better off with an education. However, Percy nevertheless suggests that something sinister underlies Val’s apparent benevolence; rather than creating something new on the grounds of the old-fashioned Southern academy, she merely repeats its ideology. As Will listens to Val’s spiel, he realizes that she “has her hooks out” for him. Will then begins to perceive the danger if he remains: “Another hour in this gloomy cancerous wood and I’ll be laid out stiff as a corpse, feet sticking straight up” (238). He no longer sees Val’s school in terms of a hopeful new beginning but rather in terms of a decaying and decrepit ending: “Seven-Up machines, plastic crucifixes, and worn, gnawed-at woodwork such as is found in old gymnasiums” (238). Val’s religion offers nothing new, so Will continues to follow Sutter’s map even deeper into his father’s Delta country, where he must most directly confront his father’s aristocratic tradition.

To this point, every alternative to his father’s paternalistic binarism that Will has

encountered has proven equally corrupt and incapable of providing any useful framework in which Will's hybridity might find some resolution. So, it should come as no surprise that when he reaches his hometown, Will once again attempts to quash his hybridity and re-assert the role of paternal defender, although in a somewhat different manner than he did with Forney Aiken in Philadelphia. Will once again encounters Forney and his entourage (inconveniently *sans* two-fisted writer Mort Prince) taking refuge from the racist local constabulary in the Dew Drop Inn, a bar run by an effeminate African American improbably named Sweet Evening Breeze. Breeze identifies Will with his father and, specifically, with his father's paternalism: he tells Forney's compatriots that "This here's Will Barrett, Lawyer Barrett's boy. Lawyer Barrett help many a one" (253). Placed in a situation in which someone actually needs his protection (as opposed to the incident in Philadelphia, when he simply created a need), Will has no trouble slipping into his grandfather's role; indeed, in this case it almost seems as though he uses his "Negro radar" to shape himself into the champion Breeze apparently needs. When the town deputies, Beans Ross and Ellis Gover, exemplars of the violent poor white that Will Percy so despised, arrive on the scene, Beans takes a blackjack "as soft and worn as skin" and routinely knocks Breeze unconscious with it. This act inspires Will to action, and he hits Beans "in the root of his neck as hard as he ever hit the sandbag at the West Side Y.M.C.A." (256). As Ciuba observes, Will "acts like his father's noble son" (131).

However, Percy questions the possibility and even the desirability of being that "noble son," for Will still cannot stay completely within his great-grandfather's role. His ancestor fought only the unreservedly evil Grand Wizard and therefore did not have to worry about how his foe might look in front of the other Klan members. But Will has a

friend of sorts among his opponents: Ellis Gover, who played halfback to Will's quarterback in high school. While Will does defend Breeze and Forney's troupe from these policemen, he cannot help tuning into Ellis's needs as well. He recognizes that Ellis will likely face considerable trouble for letting him assault Beans, so he provides Ellis with a cover story. Will takes Ellis "by the elbow just as he used to touch him in a football huddle" and tells him that he should report that Forney's group "got in behind" him and then bring charges against Will to clear himself (256). Will thus sees even more clearly the impossibility of maintaining his family's system of identity, for his radar prevents him from easily sorting people into heroes and villains.

After this encounter, Will seeks refuge from the police in his ancestral home. With the recent events undoubtedly weighing heavily in his mind, he remembers once again his father's diatribes against the apparent intermingling of black and white cultures, but this time Will remembers the tragedy that his father's commitment to that binary scheme of identity caused. He does not simply tell Will that he does not "have to choose that" and then withdraw from society; instead, he goes inside (despite Will's desperate request that he not leave him) and violently takes his own life. Will finally understands the type of identity that he has so long idealized, the standard to which he has held himself, as ultimately flawed. Ed Barrett, himself a product of his family's paternalist tradition, died because he could not make a new identity when the old one had obviously lost its validity, when the boundaries separating black from white and aristocrat from trash had begun to dissolve. Will thinks, "I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place. It wasn't even his fault because that was the way he was and the way the

times were, and there was no other place a man could look” (261). Because of his adherence to the tradition handed down by men like Will’s great-grandfather, Mr. Barrett believes that “there was no other place” to look for an identity, for a way of living in the world.

This realization immediately alters Will’s perception of his relationship with African Americans, and he begins to embrace his own, unique racial-cultural identity. No longer does he feel obligated to behave as a protector of childlike African Americans. As Will stands under a streetlight outside his father’s house—the very place where Ed Barrett would hold lofty and uplifting discourse with black passers-by on the necessity of good character—a young black man Will’s own age comes “whistling towards him under the street light” (262). When these two men confront each other, they have “nothing to say,” even though “Their fathers would have had much to say.” While their fathers’ discourse would have involved a complex and racially determined reinforcement of cultural roles, Will’s new understanding of the falsity of those roles allows him to begin to cast off the burden of paternalist identity and to say nothing, to demand no narrative.

Problematically, however, only Will seems aware of their new status and does not believe himself capable of helping his black companion. He thinks, “You may be in a fix and I know that but what you don’t know and won’t believe and must find out for yourself is that I’m in a fix too and you got to get where I am before you even know what I’m talking about and I know that and that’s why there is nothing to say now” (262). Thus, the white individual has transcended his old role and left the black individual behind. The troubling sense of condescending superiority that inflects this scene, much as it did Will’s earlier reflections on David’s failed hybridity, again complicates a view of Will or of Percy as

progressive. Perhaps, however, Will's reluctance to tell the black man about his "fix" results from a fear of replicating his father's noblesse oblige, of patronizingly offering the black man a model of identity to which he should aspire. Whatever the case, the black individual loses out. Indeed, when the young African American finally leaves, he does so "as if it were required of him" (262); Percy's use of this phrase suggests that the black man still perceives himself in a culturally subordinate role.

However, Will quickly thereafter encounters two men who have largely escaped their old race-class roles and formed new ones. Will receives final confirmation of the inevitable deconstruction of paternalist binaries when he crosses the river to visit his Uncle Fannin and his black servant Merriam. On the old family plantation, he sees that even those who do not choose suicide cannot maintain the old ways entirely. Critics have generally read Fannin and Merriam's relationship as a rather pathetic remnant of the Old South master-slave relation. John Coke calls Fannin "a Southern Caricature who has spent his entire life playing out an ante-bellum fantasy of race relations" (111), and Allen claims that Fannin and Merriam "are living in a world completely 'shut off' from the racial changes going on...throughout the South" (71). However, these readings neglect the subtle ways in which Fannin and Merriam's relationship has changed. True, when Will first arrives in *Shut Off*, Fannin and Merriam do seem on the surface to maintain a relationship much like that of an aristocratic master and his deferential servant. That is, they at first act very conscious of their socio-racial roles: as they ride in the truck, Merriam occupies as little seat as is humanly possible, and Will believes "that Merriam could have sat in the air if it had been required of him" (267). Further, when they hunt, Merriam plays Ford to Fannin's Will Percy; Fannin treats Merriam as his link to all

things natural and “takes due notice of the magic and incantatory faculty that Negroes are supposed to have—they know what animals are going to do, for example” (268).

However, Will also notices some slippage in their rigidly defined roles. For instance, Fannin carries a particularly decrepit gun, a “Browning automatic worn to silver, with bluing left only in the grooves of the etching” with a trigger guard “worn as thin as an old man’s wedding ring” (266). Merriam, on the other hand, carries “a brand-new single-shot nickel-plated sixteen-gauge from Sears Roebuck which look[s] like a silver flute” (267). Further, Will observes that when Fannin asks Merriam for his preternatural insight, “he does so ironically” (268). Also, when Will arrives unexpectedly on the scene, “Blackness...seemed to rush forward in [Merriam’s] face” (266); perhaps this curious phenomenon implies that when outsiders arrive, Merriam must emphasize his blackness to satisfy their expectations. After all, Fannin and Merriam make their money by providing businessmen from New Orleans and Memphis with a place to hunt quail, so maybe this elaborate facade simply gives them the look of inauthentic authenticity that white men from the city would expect to find on an old-style plantation.

Inside their house, the almost complete disintegration of their binary roles becomes most evident. In the living room, the modern has replaced the old: a “round-eyed Zenith and two leatherette recliners, the kind that are advertised in the back page of the comic section,” now occupy the “clearing that had been made long ago by pushing Aunt Felice’s good New Orleans furniture back into the dark corners of the room” (269). Again, Will’s outsider presence causes Fannin and Merriam to revert superficially back to their act. Will and Fannin sit in the two recliners, but Will “perceive[s] immediately that the recliner” that Fannin gives him belongs to Merriam, but Fannin “pretend[s] the

recliner had been brought out for the engineer...and Merriam pretend[s] he always roost[s] high in the darkness.” However, Fannin forgets this supposedly ordinary arrangement, and “sometimes...forgetting, would speak to the other recliner.” Indeed, the manner in which they watch television implies an almost equal footing for the two men: they argue and debate about the gunslingers in their Western with no sense of social or racial rank or station, and they both “cackle like maniacs at the doing of Captain K. and Mr. Greenjeans” (272). Their old master-servant relationship has completely disintegrated in the flickering light of a vacuum tube. Though they may, as Allen says, live “shut off” from the rest of the South, these “sad gags from Madison Avenue” have the power to “transport” (272) them out of their roles. However, Will cannot stay here either, for Fannin and Merriam, although they live mostly free of the trappings of the Old South's paternalistic ideology, also live apart from society. Their only interactions with the outside world come from the television or from the businessmen who pay for their anachronistic entertainments. Will knows that his hybridity can find no home in this funhouse of a plantation.¹⁰

¹⁰ Fannin and Merriam's relationship also usefully recalls that of William Percy and Ford, his black servant, especially in its suggestion of homosexuality. Will Percy refers to Ford as his “incubus,” and he figures his dismissal of Ford as an “annul[ment]” of a “contractual relationship,” a phrase that may imply a marriage of sorts. Historian John Barry makes that suggestion more explicit when he reports that “Some [blacks], it was rumored, might know Will far too well” (301), and that Ford reportedly referred to Will as his “old woman” (413). Fannin and Merriam carp at each other about the hunting dogs, and Fannin strongly wants Barrett to approve of Merriam; when he chastises Merriam, he does so “shyly, watchful of the engineer, lest he, the engineer, think too badly of Merriam;” Barrett realizes that “His uncle was pleading with him!” (270). However, the similarities end there: William Percy must dismiss Ford because he uses his sexual role to violate his racial boundaries, as when he invades Percy's morning shower and criticizes his body: “You ain't nothing but a little old fat man....Jest look at your stummick!” (*Lanterns on the Levee* 287). Percy cannot tolerate such a threat to his identity, and so he sends Ford away to preserve his self-image. He resists the deconstruction of colonialist identity caused by his relationship with Ford; Merriam and Fannin, by contrast, seem to accept willingly the de-polarization of their racial roles. Indeed, while, as Robert Young observes, colonialists often used same-sex sex as a way of circumventing the ever-present threat of “racial amalgamation” (26), here Walker Percy seems to suggest that an interracial homosexual relationship may in fact promote a sort of cultural hybridity. However, the insular nature of their relationship, one

Thus, through his recollection of his father's suicide and his experience in Shut Off, Will finally realizes that the white identity generated in the system of old Southern paternalism truly has no racial relevance in contemporary society. However, none of the other ideological systems that he has encountered upon his way has proven any more helpful; indeed they, too, provide opportunity for both the violation of individual black people and for the annihilation of their culture rather than a productive cultural interplay from which hybridity might emerge. Percy thus refuses to allow any pat, easy answers. For him, all ideologies—particularly those controlled by white authority—have the potential for corruption. However, hope remains. When Will finally arrives in New Mexico to attend to Jamie in his last days, he rejects suicide and asserts his intentions for the rest of his life to Sutter: Will plans to marry Kitty and to settle down in Alabama. However, he takes care to emphasize that he does not intend to adopt their racist viewpoints, nor does he intend to re-create the plantation system so that he can produce more hybrids like himself. Will wants to “promote tolerance and understanding between the races, surely the most pressing need before the country” (303). While Will's statement of purpose here somewhat recalls the sort of banal platitudes that Binx Bolling so despises in *The Moviegoer*, perhaps Will's complex, life-changing experiences have reinvested the used-up words with new force. His understanding of the potential good he can do may allow him to overcome his fear of repeating his father's paternalistic attitudes. Will realizes that because of his unique, hybridized position, he can work as a force for change within the system. Indeed, perhaps he even means that he will work for a new

which survives no doubt in part because of their relative isolation from the gaze of the outside world, remains essentially useless to Will, who now seeks to use his own hybridity for the public good.

racial ideology literally from “*between* the races,” from an interstitial space obligated truly to neither but capable of influencing both.

Of course, even this reading is optimistic. The hybridity that Percy depicts as so potentially salvific apparently only appears under fairly specific circumstances, and it does not always succeed. Though he describes African Americans with hybrid identities, he either represents them as failures (David) or insufficiently elaborates upon them (the playwright). Indeed, if the successful hybrid who works for racial equality and for new ways of formulating racial identity can only be the product of an aristocratic white family, then we are in some ways left with the *noblesse oblige* that Percy criticizes. Ultimately, however, Percy exposes a system of class identity based on racial paternalism as fundamentally flawed, dependent upon an essentialist binary distinction between black and white that does not truly exist.

If in *The Last Gentleman* Percy explores the necessity of deconstructing the false ideology of paternalism, in his next novel, *Love in the Ruins*, Percy examines what happens to a society that remains committed to that ideology. In the earlier novel we see a continuity between the plantation and the suburb; the gleaming purple golf-links mansion where Barrett’s new Southern friends (whose money comes from selling cars, not cotton) live seems to have little in common on the surface with the aging plantation manor of southern lore, but a version of traditional plantation race relations thrives there despite the supposed encroachment of bland conformity. Thus, although Alex Harris, in his splendid collection of photographs and short stories about the suburban south, *A New Life*, quite rightly cites Percy as a leader in the move to a Southern fiction that is about

more than “the legendary past of antebellum homes, poor black servants, struggling white farmers,” and so on (xv), I would suggest that we shouldn’t too quickly treat the Southern suburb—of the 1960s and 1970s at least—as antithetical to Southern traditions of race and class; instead, we should look for the ways in which those traditions which we associate with the plantation survive, albeit perhaps in mutated, altered, and complicated forms, in this new environment and what the manner of those transformations can tell us about the relationship between race and class in the 1960s and 1970s. Will Barrett cannot help us much further in this endeavor, since he rather quickly takes flight from the suburbs, realizing that he can find no answer to his own complicated racial dilemma there. Though he ultimately elects to return to the suburbs and settle down, we can hope that his growing awareness of the complicated nature of the intersections of race and class will prevent him from simply mimicking the Vaughts’ lifestyle. Percy’s next novel gives us a picture of what might happen if Will did not see the flaw in that system. If, as Percy has remarked, his fiction deals with the problem of a Quentin Compson who did not commit suicide, we might say that *Love in the Ruins* deals with a Will Barrett who did not leave the suburbs.

Written in 1971 but set in the near-flung future of the early 1980s, *Love in the Ruins* chronicles the exploits of Dr. Tom More, a brilliant but delusional scientist who believes he has invented a device—an ontological lapsometer—that will enable him to heal the Cartesian rift separating mind from body and thus to save humankind. A self-confessed self-committed mental patient as well as a psychiatrist, Tom fears an “unprecedented fallout of noxious particles” whose “effects are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and

worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself" (5). However, Tom believes that he can both render people immune from the particles' effects and eliminate those "secret ills" entirely: he has created a device known as More's Quantitative-Qualitative Ontological Lapsometer, or MOQUOL. With this invention, Tom believes he can take readings of the brain's electrical activity, readings which "then can be correlated with the manifold woes of the Western world, its terrors and rages and murderous impulses" (28-29). The woes of the Western world, or at least the part of it Tom lives in, seem manifold indeed. The novel's action takes place in a fictional Louisiana parish where political and racial tensions have reached a boiling point: the American Catholic Church has split from the Roman Catholic, left-wingers and right-wingers are irreconcilable, and Honey Island Swamp has become a haven for all kinds of derelicts, drop-outs, and ne'er-do-wells, including the Bantus, militant African Americans who have tired of waiting for a peaceful solution to the civil rights crisis and who now stage raids on outlying subdivisions and shopping centers. Tom More resides in one of these subdivisions, Paradise Estates, which he calls an "oasis of concord in a troubled land." According to Tom, in Paradise, "everyone gets along well, heathen and Christian, Jew and Gentile, Northerner and Southerner, liberal and conservative" (16). Such harmony conforms to Robert Fishman's concept of the suburb as a "bourgeois utopia": according to Fishman, "suburbia is more than a collection of residential buildings; it ...[is] a refuge ...from threatening elements in the city ...[and] also from discordant elements in bourgeois society itself.... [T]he suburban world of leisure, family life, and union with nature was based on the principle of exclusion" (4).

The plantation clearly influences the particular form which this exclusive utopia

takes in Percy's fiction, the specific way in which this politically diverse group of wealthy white Southerners forms consensus. Significantly, Tom's definition of "everyone" completely excludes African Americans and other minorities. Kobre argues, "conservatives and liberals can live side by side happily in the segregated utopia of Paradise Estates as long as everyone tacitly agrees to forget or abridge the real history of America's racial trouble" (129). Although strongly held political positions sharply divide the denizens of Paradise, they find common ground in an attitude of paternalism towards African Americans. The residents of Paradise have taken the trend that Grace Hale observes—grounding the middle-class home in the images of the aristocratic antebellum South—to a comical extreme. Indeed, the showplace of Paradise is Tara, a reconstruction of Scarlett O'Hara's mansion drawn from what its first owner called the "original plans"—that is, the drawings of David O. Selznick's set designer. Further, Tom tells us that even the Northerners who have moved south "have taken to Southern ways like ducks to water. They drink toddies and mint juleps and hold fish fries with hush puppies. Little black jockeys fish from mirrors in their front yards. Life-size mammy dolls preside over their patios" (16-17). According to Tom, although the African Americans in the area are generally held to be a bad lot, "Our servants in Paradise are the exceptions...[;] faithful black mammies who take care of our children as if they were their own, dignified gardeners who work and doff their caps in the old style" (17). He further observes, "Nearly everyone treats his servants well, picking them up in Happy Hollow and taking them home, allowing 'totin' privileges' and giving them 'Christmas gifts'" (17). At Christmas, the African American waiters at the Paradise country club dress up as Santa Claus: Tom tells us that "They grin sideways from their skewed Santa hoods and shout

‘Christmas gif! I give them money, a dollar, ten dollars, whatever’ (91). Tom even recognizes among the obsequious Santas a man he knows, Willard Amadie, whose put-on “goofy Gullah accent” and subservient attitude contrast sharply with his past as a tough-as-nails career soldier. This reliance on African American labor that conforms to a plantation-based stereotype characterizes Paradise-dwellers of all political persuasions. Tom notes, “When conservative Christian housewives drive to town to pick up their maids in the Hollow, the latter ride on the back seat in the old style. Liberal-housewives make their maids ride on the front seat” (13).

Tom’s description of this community, in which African Americans occupy roles based on an idealized version of antebellum race relations and in which wealthy whites bestow economic boons on needy servants, suggests that a form of racial paternalism is the glue that binds the citizens of Paradise together despite their political differences, solidifying a class identity that is based on a romanticized version of an Old South ideal. We might even perceive Paradise as an exaggerated form of the “aristocratic delusion” that James C. Cobb argued characterized middle-class residents of the Mississippi Delta, where, according to Cobb, the absence of a middle-class tradition forced “on middle-class whites the burden of shouldering an aristocratic heritage that was not really their own” (*Most Southern* 176)

However, Tom also reveals that the ostensible happiness of even these faithful servants may actually be a sham. In fact, they refuse to assimilate completely into the faux-antebellum system of Paradise Estates. Tom notes that, in addition to nouveau-plantation manors like Tara, Paradise also contains “the ‘Quarters,’ a long rowhouse, a ruin of soft warm brick which housed sugar-plantation slaves and which, set just above

water level of the bayou, was thought of by the Paradise developers as a kind of Natchez-under-the-hill and so restored and reroofed for domestic servants, even a chapel added so that strains of good old spirituals would come floating up to our patios in the evening” (99). But the domestic servants refuse to live in the former slave quarters: they “preferred their hollow, dank and fetid though it was.” Later, Tom describes Happy Hollow, where many African Americans live, as a “hot airless hole” where “the sun slants down like a laser” and where “the bare ground between the shacks and under the chinaberry trees never dries out” (141). Significantly, only the very old and the very young live in Happy Hollow; most of the young men have become militant Bantus, who, as the story opens, have attempted to kidnap the female students from Valley Forge Academy—“founded on religious and patriotic principles and to keep the Negroes out”—and hold them hostage. The lack of social and economic opportunity plays an important role in African American feelings of disenfranchisement. Even the menial labor of tending the golf course and caddying for wealthy whites has been made redundant by technological advances such as the golf cart and, more fancifully, Tifton 451, a new kind of grass that never needs cutting. These dire straits have even driven some African Americans who once conformed to the Paradise-approved social roles to take up arms. As Gary M. Ciuba points out, many African Americans have grown “discontent[ed] with their roles as mammies and gardeners” (134) and have chosen to withdraw from society to join the Bantu revolutionaries who reside in Honey Island Swamp. Tom recognizes one Bantu gunman as a man named Ely, who, Tom says, “was a bagboy at the A&P for forty years. What a transformation!... Forty years as a favorite at the A&P, toting bags to cars for

housewives, saluting the tips, and now he looks as if he'd just as soon shoot me as not" (312).

Tom attempts to portray himself as removed from this fray, dodging Bantu snipers and other dangers only so that he can prevent his invention from falling into the wrong hands and so avert a massive catastrophe. To his credit, he does at times evince a more open attitude about race than some of his neighbors. For instance, he belongs not to the thriving, overtly racist American Catholic Church but to the barely surviving Roman Catholic Church, a ragtag multiracial flock that counts among its membership "Two freejacks, light-skinned sloe-eyed men of color" (187). Nor does Tom discriminate in his medical practice: he serves white policeman and Bantu revolutionaries alike, often without hope of compensation (11). Further, he professes to be tired of the "ancient spurious friendship" between black and white that characterizes the paternalistic interaction between one of his neighbors and a young African American boy, and he has no patience with his mother's attitude towards her domestic servants.

However, Percy also makes clear that Tom is more committed to the paternalist ideals that unite the citizens of Paradise than he reveals. In fact, Tom believes that many of the problems befalling his future American society stem from the failure of whites to behave in the paternalist manner that William Alexander Percy would have found familiar—a failure to "protect and defend" their "younger brother." Tom speculates,

Was it the nigger business from the beginning? What a bad joke: God saying, here it is, the new Eden, and it is yours because you're the apple of my eye...and all you had to do was pass one little test...[;] here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That's all. One little test: you flunk! (57)

Tom hopes, through his lapsometer, to correct this terrible mistake, to bridge “the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man.” Indeed, Tom believes that this healing is necessary to bring an end to racial strife: in a moment of grand delusion, he sees himself as the new Christ, a Christ that will bring the races together. He imagines “the new Christ” lying in a ditch, as Victor Charles, a black man, and Leroy Ledbetter, a white man whose intolerance helped touch off the last series of riots, approach: “‘Victor, do you love me?’ ‘Sho, Doc.’ ‘Leroy, do you love me?’ ‘Cut it out, Tom, you know better than to ask that.’ ‘Then y’all help me.’ ‘O.K., Doc.’ They laugh and pick up the new Christ, making a fireman’s carry, joining four hands. They love the new Christ and so they love each other” (153). Significantly, Tom’s vision of himself as the new Christ follows quickly after a scene in which Victor Charles urges Tom to forsake his solitude and rejoin him, the racist Leroy Ledbetter, and the rest of the community at the “shrimp jubilee,” a now-defunct annual festival. Tom expresses shock at Victor’s request: “Here’s a black Southerner making common cause—against me!—with a white Southerner who wouldn’t give him the time of day” (149). Thus, we might read Tom’s messianic hallucination as a fearful response to the possibility that an African American man might choose to make “common cause” with a less aristocratic white man, thus threatening the paternalistic relationship that gives his life meaning.

Tom continues to reveal inadvertently that his vision for the salvation of Western man is as exclusive as his posh suburb. In an interesting choice of words, Tom claims that his device will allow humans to “reenter paradise, so to speak” (36). Percy’s pun makes us aware that all may not be as it seems with Tom’s lapsometer. Though he claims that it will ostensibly protect “humankind” from the coming catastrophe, he also claims that it

will not work on African Americans. As he tells the mysterious Art Immelman, "My sensors won't penetrate melanin pigment in the skin" (170). Thus, only white people could attain the metaphysical wholeness and freedom from rage and depression that Tom's device promises, and only white people could survive the imminent catastrophe unscarred. Significantly, Tom's friend Dusty Rhoades shrewdly notes that the device seems intended to affirm and reinforce only a specifically classed form of whiteness, as well. He asks Tom, "Is that thing nonpartisan?... Does it also measure alcoholism, treachery, laziness, and white trash morals?" (87).

While we might wish to consider the MOQUOL's bigotry as an incidental design flaw, Tom's own contradictory narration actually suggests that he has imposed this limitation himself whether consciously or not. Though he insists on the lapsometer's inability to "read" black people, he also, with no acknowledgment of the apparent paradox, claims that he has used it to diagnose the mind and soul of his colleague, the African American scientist Colley Wilkes: "once, before Colley and I fell out, I measured his pineal region. He had good readings at layer I, little or nothing at layer II. Diagnosis: a self successfully playing at being a self that is not itself" (112). I would suggest that this contradiction results neither from novelistic ineptitude on Percy's part nor from an insignificantly anomalous quirk on the lapsometer's part. In fact, this curious irregularity supports the notion of Tom as a crusader committed to preserving not all humanity but only that which conforms to certain norms. Tom always carefully sets Colley apart from the novel's other African Americans. He labels him a "super-Negro," an epithet that implies that he believes Colley has somehow transcended the supposed limitations of his race. However, Tom suggests that Colley has not gained his equality simply as an

intelligent and talented black man but, rather, by overcoming his blackness: Colley “is one of those super-Negroes who speak five languages, quote the sutras, and are wizards in electronics as well” (29). Later, he re-emphasizes the point, calling Colley “a super-Negro, a regular black Leonardo. He is the chief encephalographer, electronics wizard, ornithologist, holds the Black Belt in karate, does the crossword in the *Sunday Times*” (107-08). Thus, Tom’s lapsometer will diagnose Colley because Colley has assumed the type of identity that Tom recognizes and accepts as valid and worthy of salvation and preservation. Tom inadvertently reveals this prejudice in a conversation with Uru, the Bantu leader. Uru asks Tom point blank, “You don’t think we’re any good, do you?... I’m talking about greatness, Doctor. Or what you call greatness. I’m talking about the Fifth Symphony, the *Principia Mathematica*, the Uranus guidance system. You know very well what I’m talking about” (299). When Tom does begin to suggest an area of greatness, Uru cuts him off: “And don’t tell me about music and rhythm and all” (301). Tom falls silent, for he cannot apprehend “greatness” according to any terms but those of the dominant culture, and he therefore considers African American culture unworthy of preservation. Clearly, then, Percy suggests that Tom’s device fails to work on African Americans because of a cultural bias, not a dermatological one.

Thus, though Tom wishes to portray himself as above the political, racial, and class differences that fracture the South, he reveals himself as committed to maintaining the values of an oppressive status quo. Indeed, in the novel’s final chapter, Percy reveals just how committed to this order Tom is. Though no great catastrophe befalls the citizens of Feliciana Parish, great social upheaval occurs when the Bantus discover oil in Honey Island Swamp. They use their new wealth to purchase all the houses in Paradise Estates

and establish a new social order only superficially different from the old—that is, they represent their success in the terms of the paternalist, faux-antebellum system that so long oppressed them. Aside from their colorful Bantu robes and the fact that they worship Longhu6, the god of the winter solstice, and not Jesus, little has changed; the Bantu mayor of the town lives in Tara, and the Bantus charitably care for poor whites in the area: More tells us that Colley Wilkes and his wife fixed over a hundred Christmas baskets for impoverished “peckerwood” children. Nor has this new system ushered in an age of integration and equality—Tom can’t use the hospital because the Bantu medical society won’t let him in, and his African American friends caution him, “You can sometimes accomplish more by not rocking the boat” (389). Colley tells him, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.... These things take time, Tom.... Rest assured that some of us are working on it” (389).

Significantly, however, Tom has few complaints about the new arrangement because, I would argue, he is in fact so committed to the system of rigid class and race distinctions that validate life in Paradise that, if he cannot play the role of the wealthy paternalist in that system, he will gladly accept the role of simple, rural, humble Other. Tom notes, “I don’t have to listen to ‘Christmas gif’, Doc!’ and I don’t have to worry about tipping. Instead, I get tipped” (395). Moreover, Tom still uses his lapsometer for the maintenance of the status quo: now that nearly all the Bantus have attained the sort of Western “greatness” that he recognizes, Tom has no trouble making “magic passes” with his machine and diagnosing their metaphysical selfhood. Indeed, Tom even refers to one of his Bantu patients as an “Orientalized heathen Englishman” (393). Most significantly, he and his new wife make their home in the slave quarters the domestic servants once

disdained: he says, "Ellen and I are poor. We live with our children in the old Quarters. Constructed of slave brick worn porous and rounded at the corners like sponges, the apartments are surprisingly warm in winter, cool in summer" (381). Tom claims for himself those qualities which he—and William Alexander Percy—once claimed the African American servants possessed. For instance, as he hoes collard greens, he tells us, "Poor as I am, I feel like God's spoiled child" (383). Colley need not worry about Tom "rocking the boat." Indeed, he claims to enjoy his new life, and most of Percy's readers have taken him at his word here as well; they believe that Tom's new position greatly improves upon his last. For instance, Lewis Lawson claims that "Although he is poor, he is happy" (203). Howland believes that Tom "ekes out a happy life" (80), and Ciuba argues that Tom "gains a renewed sense of the world" because the "sensuous bounty found in poverty's bare simplicity differs from his former surfeit of objects and experiences in the old world of Paradise Estates" (166). Kennedy, who refers to Tom's "theory of poverty" as "mawkish" (134), is one of the few critics who sees any irony in Tom's situation. However, I would suggest that, positively as we might take Tom's claim to be "God's spoiled child" in a more religious-centered reading of this novel, no one so well-versed as Percy is in the clichés and language used to characterize and justify the oppression of African Americans could write such a sentence without being aware of, for instance, his own adoptive father's characterization of African Americans as the fortunate spoiled children of nature, people "who smile sunshine and ask no questions and understand" (*Lanterns* 296).

Ultimately, then, Percy satirizes this type of blind commitment to a class structure founded in racial paternalism as leading to an inability to imagine alternate forms of race

and class interaction, alternate, non-oppressive models of identity and of political participation—a failure of imagination that Will Barrett ultimately transcends. However, although Tom’s myopia makes him a bad savior, Percy locates some hope in the character of Victor Charles, an African American who, though he once conformed to the paternalist conception of what African Americans should be and do, has managed to cast off that yoke without repeating the mistakes of the Bantus; he approaches Tom to tell him he is running for Congress and to invite him to join his new political coalition. He tells Tom “I’ve got the Bantu vote...[; they] are willing to go with me. Chuck Parker’s helping me with the swamp people. Max is working on the liberals. Leroy Ledbetter’s got the peckerwoods. You could swing the Catholics” (342). While Tom slavishly adheres to the nouveau-plantation ideology that offers him an identity, Victor demonstrates his ability to work outside that system, to put together what Tom calls a “funny fouled-up coalition” that will carry on the spirit of “Kennedy, Evers, Goldberg, Stevenson, L.Q.C. Lamar,” a party that will work for social justice and hopefully break the deadlock between the opposing political factions. Victor can see contemporary Southern society in all its complexity. Hopefully, Tom can learn to see it the same way; his acceptance of Victor’s offer might well be the necessary first step.

As *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins* indicate, the legacy of racial paternalism in the post-World War II, Civil Rights-era South was of crucial concern for Walker Percy. In both novels, he suggests that traditional attitudes towards race and class, especially the emphasis on paternalism as a way of defining the aristocrat, have failed, and that those who seek to perpetuate them will ultimately find themselves trapped and isolated as Southern society continues to change. Tom More’s humble position at the end

of *Love in the Ruins* is but a comically exaggerated example of the marginalization facing Southerners who cling to an ideology of race and class drawn from a romanticized ideal of antebellum race relations. Instead, Percy argues, white Southerners should put aside any claim to aristocracy or class that depends on ignoring the complexity of individuals of other races or classes and embrace a “funny fouled-up coalition” that better exemplifies the complicated nature of Southern life. Such a vision of coalitional politics is not necessarily radical, even for 1971; however, Percy dramatizes just how difficult realizing the necessity of even such a practical solution can be when Southerners are blinded by outmoded ideologies of race and class.

CONCLUSION

This chapter includes material from an essay published by the author in the journal *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* in 2004:

Costello, Brannon. "Poor White Trash, Great White Hope: Race, Class, and the (De)Construction of Whiteness in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45.2 (2004): 207-23.

Throughout this project, I have argued that one important way of defining "class" in the early twentieth-century South was the performance of attitudes and behaviors—such as racial paternalism—associated with an idealized conception of antebellum race relations. Such a system of beliefs thrived even after the demise of chattel slavery because of the way in which the plantation remained at the center of Southern social and economic life. However, the massive changes to Southern society wrought by the New Deal, World War II, and the Civil Rights movement rendered unstable the social arena in which performances of paternalism could take place; the increasing urbanization of the South and the growing independence of African Americans were two of the central reasons that this system began to break down. I have examined selected works by Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Ernest Gaines, and Walker Percy to understand better how these canny observers both responded to the ways in which the collapse of racial paternalism complicates our understanding of class in the South and attempted to offer some alternate models of race and class interaction.

This project begins to fill an important gap in Southern literary studies by taking class as its explicit focus, in particular the close relationship between race and class. Because I have focused on the ways in which economic and political performances help to determine class position, I have found it most useful to rely upon theories of class that

focus on consumption rather than production. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Max Weber's *Economy and Society* have been most useful to me because they offer a framework for understanding the complicated ways in which social classes appear in reality. Both Weber and Veblen assert that wealth alone is not enough to determine class. As Veblen puts it, "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (36). Of course, I do not mean to suggest that a study of class in the South along more traditionally Marxist lines would be inappropriate. However, I hope this project makes clear that, regardless of the theoretical model employed, critics who would study class in the South must not simply assume that the term "class" has but a single, transparent definition. Thus, we should take care to define the ways in which we employ the term in our work. As I noted at the beginning of this project, to the extent that critics discuss "class" in Southern literature, they often do so in terms of economically impoverished and socially marginalized white Southerners—the so-called white trash figures who appear so frequently in the works of Erskine Caldwell, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Harry Crews, Dorothy Allison, and others. These readings are absolutely essential to understanding class in the South; as Matthew Guinn notes in *After Southern Modernism*, scholars have tended to consider valuable only those works which conform to the "aristocratic-agrarian ideal" of the Southern literary renaissance and have thus often silenced those writers whose voices might contradict that ideal. However, we should not too simply equate "class" with "trash"; such a conflation blinds us to the slipperiness and instability of class hierarchies and to the variety of other ways in which "class" operates in the South. For instance, we should not neglect the

complicated manner in which class divides African American society in the South, a theme taken up by writers as diverse as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Albert Murray, Raymond Andrews, Alice Walker, Randall Kenan, and Dori Sanders, among others. Further, we need additional studies into the ways in which the Southern upper class has constructed itself from a vision of antebellum aristocracy. For instance, though I have attempted to acknowledge the ways in which gender complicates performances of racial paternalism, a fuller study of the gender dynamics across racial and class lines and within individual class positions would contribute much to our understanding of class in the South.

Further, a detailed study of the ways in which race and class overlap and inform one another in the South since the early 1970s would prove invaluable as well. Such a study must be firmly historicized; as I have discussed, the radical changes sweeping the South in the relatively short span between 1945 and 1971 contribute to the vast differences between, say, Welty's treatment of paternalism and class in 1945's *Delta Wedding* and Percy's treatment in 1971's *Love in the Ruins*. Examinations of class in more recent Southern literature must take into account the influence of a wide array of events including the Vietnam War, the return of large numbers of African Americans to the South from which their ancestors fled, the Carter and Clinton presidencies, and the increasing suburbanization and, as John Egerton puts it, McDonaldization of the South. Certainly, the growth of African American political power in the South has further complicated the use of paternalism to establish an aristocratic class position. As David Goldfield points out, "between 1975 and 1985 more than 850,000 blacks moved south, compared with slightly more than 500,000 blacks who left" (244). These immigrants

were attracted, he says, “without ancillary pulls such as kin or place but with the promise of upward mobility” (245). He cites in particular an ironic reversal in the electoral landscape of rural Alabama. Writing in 1990, Goldfield notes, “so thorough is black power in rural Alabama that outnumbered whites are calling for federal examiners, while black leaders urge the federal government to stay out of local politics—a familiar refrain from an unfamiliar source” (230). Such power both reflects and furthers the growth of the black middle class, though, to be sure, African American poverty continues to be a major problem in the rural south (247). However, the South’s larger economic progress, embodied most strikingly in the city of Atlanta, Georgia, often obscures this suffering. As Bruce J. Schulman observes, by “the 1970s the South’s booming cities captured the imagination of the American press as its poverty had in the 1930s. Tales of Sunbelt prosperity replaced stories of Cotton Belt woe in the national consciousness. Even as the Sunbelt boom slowed in the 1980s, the southern economy continued to outpace the national average in employment growth and other indicators” (220).

Against this complicated backdrop, the intersection of race and class continues to be an important topic in contemporary Southern writing. Indeed, some recent, significant Southern novels have dealt explicitly with the way in which the legacy of paternalism still influences class position. Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988) is a prime example. Set in the 1960s, *Can’t Quit* deals with the troubled relationship between Cornelia, an affluent white woman, and her African American domestic servant Tweet. Douglas pays particular attention to the ways in which Cornelia’s privileged class position prevents her from really listening to Tweet, really understanding anything she has to say. Douglas further complicates this tension by adopting a self-reflexive narrative

voice that allows her to ponder her own similarities to Cornelia, her own complicity in the dynamic she denounces. Douglas's narrator describes Cornelia as a woman who would "have been the commonplace of her mother's generation and class. In her day, as everyone knows, upper-class girl-children had nursemaids or nannies or *mammies*" (11-12); Cornelia can enjoy a similar lifestyle despite her relatively "moderate means" because "black servants could be hired for sweatshop wages and because public schools were almost as exclusive as private schools. Blacks went to their own schools—and not for long" (12). Cornelia imagines her relationship with Tweet and other African Americans as that of a benevolent protector and her charges; she believes they "depend, at the least, upon her direction, but often, too, on her advice, her justice, or her generosity" (15). Moreover, she finds that she is too invested in a social system which provides her with such material comfort to acknowledge the challenges to that system that Tweet's stories offer—stories about lecherous storekeepers, dishonest landlords, and haunted fields. However, after Tweet suffers a stroke, Cornelia visits her in her home, where her servant confronts her with the reality of her situation by cursing her and angrily composing what Patricia Yaeger calls a "catalogue of white detritus" (211)—the dirty, fleshly, abject refuse of Cornelia's daily existence which Tweet keeps out of sight: "Fingernail clippings? Blood, too, like blood from old used Tampax, Kotex? I throwed out enough in my day. From your panties when you—when you—fff-floded? Washed enough of them. Shit? Cleaned enough of your toilets" (254). Thus, Tweet forces Cornelia to acknowledge that she does not exist somehow above and apart, that her privileged lifestyle fundamentally depends upon Tweet's labor. Patricia Yaeger cites *Can't Quit* as an exemplar of the Southern women's fiction that "explores a radically

dislocated surface landscape filled with jagged white signifiers and pallid detritus that bespeaks a constant uneasiness about the meaning of whiteness" (20). I would further suggest that we may see Douglas's text as one of the more recent in a tradition of novels that includes *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Delta Wedding*, novels which explore the ways in which paternalism allows affluent whites a worldview which denies the true nature of their African American servants' labor.

Seraph on the Suwanee also deals at length with the manner in which paternalistic, aristocratic class performances offer social mobility to poor white Southerners who can deploy them properly. Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993), a fictional re-imagining of the events surrounding the murder of Emmett Till from the perspective of working-class whites, examines this issue as well, though Nordan's Solon Gregg fares less well than Hurston's Jim Meserve. Like Gaines's Sidney Bonbon, Solon occupies a complicated racial category; his poverty qualifies his whiteness, forcing him constantly to assert and affirm it by attempting to adopt attitudes and behaviors associated with aristocratic whites whose racial identity is less questionable. Along with assorted other "damaged rednecks and maniacs with pistols" (70), Solon lives in Balance Due, also known as "Scumtown" (7), the "white trash ghetto" of the fictional Arrow Catcher, Mississippi. Significantly, Balance Due and the African American slum, the Belgian Congo, actually sit on one piece of real estate. They were once part of the same "big field, a significant Mississippi defeat" (68). His home there is a "clapboard shack" (6) in the worst part of town, where he mocks his wife and beats her. Solon attempts to transcend his trash status by defending the ideal of Southern white womanhood in the person of Lady Sally Anne Montberclair, wife of Lord Poindexter Montberclair, the

richest man in the delta, and he uses Bobo, a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago, as a foil. When Bobo says “hubba hubba” to Sally Anne and whistles at her, Solon leaps at the chance to assert his fidelity to aristocratic ladyhood. Immediately, Sally Anne becomes for Solon the idealized Southern lady whom he must protect from the black aggressor. Notably, Sally Anne does not even hear the supposed slight, so Solon’s chivalric defense has nothing really to do with her wounded sense of propriety, nothing really to do with anything but his own desire to act in a way that identifies him— with aristocratic whiteness and downplays his identity as trash. Solon tells Bobo, “I want you to apologize to my friend here. I want you to apologize to this here white lady” (38).

Solon, dissatisfied when Sally Anne ignores him and gives Bobo a ride home, elects to seek out planter Poindexter Montberclair to twist the story of Bobo and Sally Anne in such a way as to ingratiate himself to Dexter and to participate, however vicariously, in his less questionable upper-class whiteness. Although Dexter refers to Solon as “trash” (53), Solon expresses his desire to discuss the situation “like two gentlemen.” He claims that he wants to protect Sally Anne “like a brother.... That’s just the way I am, protective of innocence and beauty.” However, although he succeeds in convincing Dexter of Bobo’s lechery and Sally Anne’s treachery, he does not acquire the sort of white validation he seeks; quite the opposite, in fact. Poindexter shortly thereafter enlists his aid to kill Bobo, but in a way that keeps the distance between them clear at all times. Dexter tells Solon, “Decent whitefolks have always needed the likes of you.... We need people like you to help keep our niggers in line.... [I]t gives you lower classes, you white-trash boys, some *raison d’être*, wouldn’t you say so?” (118). Ironically, all of Solon’s attempts to use Bobo to cement his whiteness—protecting Sally Anne, informing

on Bobo, ultimately killing him—serve only to reaffirm his role as trash; he acts in exactly the way Dexter thinks he should. Dexter thus makes it clear that Solon will never fully participate in the system that he exists to defend.

Both *Wolf Whistle* and *Can't Quit You, Baby* look backward to a historical moment in which, from our vantage point at least, the political and moral issues surrounding race are clearly defined, though Nordan and Douglas do their best to complicate them. Surprisingly, perhaps, one of the most detailed examinations of the relationship between paternalism, idealized antebellum aristocracy, and class in the contemporary South comes from a writer not traditionally considered “Southern”—Virginia native Tom Wolfe, whose sprawling *A Man in Full* (1998) chronicles, among other things, the fall of Charlie Croker, a poor Georgian who rises to become a powerful real estate developer in Atlanta. In his youth, Charlie was but a hard-luck “Cracker” whose father worked in the pulp mill, “a horrible freak show of men with fingers and eyes missing” (77). Now, however, that young boy has re-invented himself as “Cap’m Charlie Croker,” the lord of Turpmtime Plantation, a striking blend of antebellum and modern attributes: “Twenty-nine thousand acres of prime southwest Georgia forest, fields, and swamp! And all of it, every square inch of it, every beast that moved on it, all fifty-nine horses, all twenty-two mules, all forty dogs, all thirty-six buildings that stood upon it, plus a mile-long asphalt landing strip, complete with jet fuel pumps and a hanger—all of it was his” (4). Charlie uses the plantation to identify himself with an aristocratic antebellum ideal. His African American employees call him “Captain Charlie, or just Cap’m” (40-41) in the manner of the master/slave relationships of yore. Indeed, the workers Charlie employs are the descendants of the plantation’s first laborers, and

Charlie sees himself—and his corporation—as filling the same paternalist role that their masters did then: “He told how Croker Global was today one of the biggest employers of unskilled black labor in that part of Georgia. He told of black workers tending the plats, black workers tending the horses, black workers tilling the soil, black workers preserving the ecology of Turpmtime’s eight thousand acres of swamp” (55). He continues, “These are Turpmtime people who count on Croker Global as the one steady rock in their lives” (55).

Most importantly, however, Charlie’s pretensions to paternalism do not merely signify his upper-crust status. In fact, Charlie uses his antebellum, aristocratic associations as a tool to gain more wealth. Certainly, Jim Meserve does the same in *Seraph*; however, while paternalism simply helps Jim organize African American labor, it helps Charlie attract powerful investors. As Martyn Bone notes, Charlie’s servants “perform a crucial role in the seduction of Charlie’s real-estate clients: they provide an authentic sheen of slavelike labor to the plantation’s simulated Old South” (231). Charlie deploys the images and symbols of the Old South to affirm his own authority and desirability as a business partner. When financier Herb Richman comes to visit, Charlie reflects that the magic of Turpmtime lies in creating a “luxurious bygone world in which there were masters and servants and everybody knew his place” (277). He tells an affectionate story about one of his employees, Uncle Bud, and the narrator notes, “He didn’t have to explain who Uncle Bud was. He merely had to say his name in a certain way, and one and all would realize that he was some sort of faithful old retainer, probably black” (277). Further, Charlie forces another employee, Mason, to detail the wonderful deeds Charlie has done for his family so that his guests will be awed by his paternalistic

benevolence (282). Charlie's paternalism is a self-conscious act, a performance which he consciously deploys because he perceives that creating himself in the image of a plantation lord makes him seem like a sound investment.

Of course, Cap'm Charlie's employees do get something out of this deal, and at times Charlie's affection for them seems quite genuine. However, later in the novel we discover that Charlie's commitment to the ideals of paternalism does not place him above staging other types of racial performances when it suits the needs of his pocketbook. Charlie's creditors, fed up with his constant evasions, threaten to expose the shenanigans by which he lowered the price of some much desired real estate in Cherokee County enough for him to acquire it. Charlie enlisted the aid of Andre Fleet, a crusading African American politician, and Darwell Scruggs, a former high school classmate and current Ku Klux Klan member, to stage a racially charged confrontation that made Cherokee County seem like an undesirable place to develop indeed. As Charlie watches the old news footage his creditors sent him to remind him of his shady dealings, he sees "Andre Fleet leading his placard-carrying black protestors from Atlanta through Canton, the county seat. There was Darwell Scruggs, albeit not in white raiment and pointy hood, screaming vile racial imprecations along with a pack of raggedy youths" (596). This display allows Charlie "to assemble his land in this viciously slandered county for about \$200,000, one-twentieth of what it would have cost before Andre Fleet and Darwell Scruggs did their duet" (596). However, to characterize Charlie as simply a shrewd, capable, and cynical manipulator of race and class would not be entirely accurate; after all, when Charlie is faced with the necessity of laying off a large part of his work force, he chooses to retain the servants at Turpntime and drastically reduce the number of

employees at a California warehouse. As Bone notes, "Charlie's desire to maintain his paternalistic, simulated, Old South sense of place at Turpmtime has an all-too-'real' impact on the lives of workers elsewhere in the Croker Global corporation" (231). Thus, the drive of acquisitive, competitive capitalism does not entirely supersede the moral obligations of paternalism. However, this desire to maintain his ideal of himself as an Old South aristocrat is undercut because his strategy—making room on his payroll for his plantation workers by eliminating warehouse laborers—essentially equates the two groups; though he tries to imagine the Turpmtime workers as separate from the system of capitalist exchange, he ultimately must admit that they are part of that system after all.

My purpose in briefly discussing *Can't Quit You, Baby*, *Wolf Whistle*, and *A Man in Full* is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of their engagement with race and class but, rather, merely to suggest some of the complicated ways in which the ideas discussed in this project continue to have relevance in the more contemporary South. Ultimately, if we would better understand the complicated intersections of race and class in Southern literature, we must clearly define both the historical context that informs the production of each text and the theoretical framework that informs our analysis. My project, which draws upon Weber and Veblen in order to examine the ways in which racial paternalism affects class structure, is one example of how such an intervention might function. I hope to explore further the implications of this project for the study of race and class in the South in future work.

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