

**Family Ghosts:
Kinship, Identity, and Memory in the American South**

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the relationship between cultural memory of ancestral racial violence among White American Southerners and cultural conceptualizations of kinship, particularly through the impact of various kinship frameworks on notions of inheritance and cultural and familial identity. My population of interest consists largely of “old stock” residents of rural and small-town agricultural communities, those whose families have remained in the same area for generations, frequently going back to settlement. My ethnographic inquiry takes place between the small towns and unincorporated communities of Haywood and Lauderdale counties in West Tennessee. Tensions between the uncertainties of the past, present, and future, between desire and revulsion, and between the area’s history of racial violence and its pride in Black artists such as the author Alex Haley and musicians Tina Turner and Sleepy John Estes, reveal deep cultural anxieties over the heritability of guilt, the uncertainty of the healing process, and rights of access and ownership to the land itself.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE, AND GENERAL INFORMATION

The small towns of Haywood and Lauderdale Counties, like many similar towns sprinkled across the South, are heavy with the weight of time. As I drove through the backroads of West Tennessee, pausing occasionally to take a photograph or to get stuck, not in traffic, but behind tractors, I noted the places where the past sang out to me. The loudest voices in this choir were architectural: dilapidated barns collapsing under the weight of kudzu vines, old homes still occupied but no longer actively maintained, the old Tupperware factory, long-since closed. Anonymized, many of these sites look like any small town after the factories close, but this is my home, and I know where all the ghosts are. There, in a field by the Forked Deer River bottom, is the former location of a local watering hole, controversial in its day as the only location in the county to serve beer. Off the town square in Halls is the vacant lot where the Methodist church used to be before the tornado. Pieces of stained glass, recovered from the rubble, form a suncatcher that hangs in my parents' kitchen window. The dusty back rooms of Beulah United Methodist Church, now converted to storage for disused furniture, are where my father spent the Sundays of his boyhood listening to the enthusiastic instruction of Ms. Betty Jo Hare, herself now buried in the cemetery outside.

I pulled into a gravel lot beside a restaurant, little more than a shed with thick smoke billowing from the back. I walked up to the window, and the owner hollered out for me to come on inside. Ms. Helen Turner is a mythic figure in the barbecue scene¹, a

¹ Cummings, 2019

Black woman making her way as a business owner and master smoker in the usually male-dominated field. She is a small woman, with a welcoming smile and a confidence in her demeanor that comes from over twenty years at the helm. The air inside was sweet and heavy with hickory smoke and pork fat sizzling on coals. Ms. Helen took my order at the window inside while her daughter chopped freshly smoked pork on the huge old butcher block behind her. Barbecue in the upper Mississippi delta is typically pulled. The no-nonsense sound of chopping is largely unique to Helen's. There is not much in the way of seating inside the place; most people grab their food to go on their lunch break. In one of the handful of chairs sat a man around my father's age, casually conversing with Ms. Helen and the handful of regulars that came in and out. Hearing me speak to order, he said "You're from down around Memphis, aren't you?" I told him I was raised there, but my folks are from up in nearby Plum Tree². "Plum Tree," he said, "I know some folks up around there. Who are your people?" I told him I was a Griffin and he replied "I know a couple of them! Good to have you back up here."

This was one of the reasons I had chosen Haywood-Lauderdale for this project. My paternal family has resided in the small Haywood County community of Plum Tree for seven generations. The home originally built for my fifth great grandfather Albert and rebuilt for my father's elder sister became my home base as I came to better understand the community that my family called home, and its complicated relationship with itself, race, and history. I knew from the outset that this project would be poking at a bruise culturally, so I chose this space because my family relationship meant that my arrival

² Pseudonym affectionately borrowed from Service, 1907

would be understood as a return, rather than an intrusion. Race is an anxious subject for many residents, especially White members of “old stock” families that have remained in this area for upwards of a century and almost unavoidably bear family connections to slavers, Klansmen, or Confederate soldiers. Explicitly because this is also my home and my history in the intimate way only my kinship can afford me, I was able to ask the questions necessary to carry out this project without being rejected outright. In my reception as a woman in the Griffin family, I traded on an expectation of familial maintenance. Like most of the families I worked with over the course of this research, Griffin women are the keepers of family history and the custodians of familial relationships. My interest in the meanings of family history broadly was received as a socially correct state, a course of inquiry appropriate for my role succeeding generations of my aunts in the meticulous documentation of genealogical data. The very concepts of inheritance and kinship that my research examined facilitated its continuance.

In order to maintain a family history, there must be a history present to maintain. “Old stock” here refers to the longevity of a familial presence in a region, a state which, while not explicitly predicated on economic class, nevertheless tends to correlate with greater financial stability. While there are certainly old stock families without money, the ability to remain in one place and cultivate generational wealth both in the form of land ownership and the nourishing of inter-familial allegiances which facilitate social wealth has advantageously positioned some families in this social sphere. Certainly, I benefited in my ability to conduct this research from my family’s old-stock status. My name is

socially legible, marks me as a neighbor, and is thus valuable beyond the calculable benefits of money.

While the moonlight and magnolias image of the South evokes an idea of old-stock families as genteel antebellum aristocracy clinging to a nostalgic past glory, many of the old-stock families here date their arrival to reconstruction. While some families, like the Hare's, descended from antebellum landowners who profited directly from the institution of slavery, some, including my own, arrived in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, part of the cohort of previously under-classed White Southerners who were able to purchase land during the post-war period of low pricing and made their way farming or milling lumber³. While these families may not have benefitted directly from the institution of slavery, many still bear ancestral connections to other forms of racial violence via the Confederacy, sharecropping, or membership in the Ku Klux Klan and its myriad affiliate organizations.

Marriage between old-stock families also means that while the Folger name, for example, may have put down their roots in Plum Tree in the 1870's, any given Folger whose grandmother was a Hare could likely trace their lineage to the slaveholders of the Hare family. Some of the families who arrived postbellum have little specific documentation of their family's line prior to their arrival. My own great-grandpa Albert was among these settlers. My aunts and I are continuously searching for documents verifying his specific date and location of birth, or the names of his parents. From letters,

³ Merritt, 2017

we can glean that he had family in the Carolinas and Georgia, but their economic status is unknown. Thus, some families are unsure if they have slaveholding ancestry.

While Haywood and Lauderdale counties are separate governmental entities, the kin ties, shared history, and even municipal services blur the border between them. Many residents in the towns and unincorporated communities along the border find that their mailing address is in one county, but their utilities are in the other, leaving them legally in both counties at once. Many of the old-stock families in the region are split between the two counties, further socially intertwining them. It is for this reason that I have chosen to hyphenate Haywood-Lauderdale and treat them as a single community for the purposes of this thesis.

I stopped at the cemetery at Beulah before arriving at what would be my home for most of this research. Not far from the church is the family homestead Grandpa Albert built and Aunt Shannon rebuilt. I had agreed to care for the house and the four resident cats while Aunt Shannon and Uncle Billy were out of town for a few weeks and remained in the home with them for some time after their return. Aunt Shannon had another reason for wanting me there. The house will be mine one day, and she wanted to be absolutely certain it will find itself with the next generation of Griffins in loving and capable hands. As she showed me around and gave me all the necessary caretaking information for both the house and animals, Aunt Shannon gave me a list of places that could help me with my work. She grew up here, learned to cook and can at her grandmother's elbow in the old house on this very spot, and she knows seemingly everybody.

The day after Aunt Shannon and Uncle Billy left, I attended church up at Beulah. Like many small-town churches, it is made up primarily of two or three families, in this case the Griffins, the Hares, and the Folgers. Church services in Plum Tree are community meetings as much as they are religious ceremonies, and I attended every one during my time here. After this first ceremony, I talked with Mr. Dave Folger, a childhood friend of my father's, at the back of the small sanctuary. His wife had told him I was visiting for research, and he asked what the research was on. I told him that I was interested in how people remember and discuss historical subjects pertaining to race, such as slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Civil War. He exclaimed "There wasn't no Civil War!" and suddenly his wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law rushed over to quiet him down before he could say anything potentially more controversial or embarrassing. I let the subject drop.

I had intended initially to take up Michel-Rolph Trouillot's duality of history, "what happened" and "what is said to have happened⁴." What happened in Haywood-Lauderdale, as with much of the South, during these periods of interest is well-documented. I was interested in how alternate histories were constructed and functioned in White Southern spaces. This encounter, Mr. Folger's female family members ending the conversation to avoid a faux pas, as well as a few similar encounters, demonstrated that overwhelmingly, that question in and of itself was deeply loaded to the point of taboo. My primary question thus became, why? What within this historical and cultural context makes race such a dirty word among White Southerners? What terrifies about the

⁴ Trouillot, 1995

maintenance and passing on of historical knowledge? I spent the next two months living in Haywood-Lauderdale, attending church services, participating in community events, visiting the people and places that residents referred me to, and asking people questions as I encountered them. Thus, I uncovered deep-set systems of kinship and inheritance, foundational elements of worldview and personal identity intrinsically threatened by frank conversations about racial violence.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* is concerned largely with the influence and expression of power within the generation of historical meaning⁵. Using various contested histories, he examines how individuals function within differing definitions of "history" as both actors and narrators, and how narration functions as a means of using history to act within the present. This necessitates questions of agency as alternating alterations and careful omissions within historical meaning-making reflect the whims of systemic power and generate new alternate histories to justify its continuance. As previously mentioned, I had begun this project much more intent on the twin histories of Haywood-Lauderdale, how this historical alteration process is undertaken between White Southerners in this particular contested space. The Civil War, of course, did happen, and in fact happened quite dramatically in this very space; Haywood County is home to Fort Pillow, where Confederate soldiers massacred 300 Black Union soldiers as they surrendered⁶. Mr. Folger's words enact the silencing Trouillot describes. "There wasn't no Civil War" may have been a prelude to anything from Confederate apologia⁷ to

⁵ Trouillot, 1995

⁶ Tapp, 2014

⁷ A common rhetorical device within Confederate apologia is the reframing of the Civil War into terminology like "The War Between the States" or "The War of Northern aggression." See Wetta, 2014

outright conspiracy theory, but his family made it clear they did not want me to hear more. Consequently, I found that the omissions present moved beyond the careful excisions of Trouillot's observations and moved the subject of racial history instead into the realm of taboo. Probing the boundaries of these unspoken social rules revealed new questions of inheritance, guilt, and the tensions between desire and fear present within the shell of Southern nostalgia.

In *Communities of Kinship*, Carolyn Earle Billingsley argues for the use of genealogy as a method of historical research using a case study family to document the settlement of the cotton farming regions of the American South⁸. Since the book's publication in 2004, this practice has been increasingly adopted among historians. As Billingsley acknowledges in establishing the status quo of her argument, genealogy's longer-standing use has had a reputation as amateur, a hobbyist approach to historical inquiry. While I certainly encountered this usage with some frequency, particularly among older residents of Haywood-Lauderdale, I am interested in contrasting this regimented, document-based genealogy as described by Billingsley with the more informal process of oral storytelling, matriarchal labor logistics, and pedigree which will be illuminated in the course of this thesis. I also present these informal processes as their own form of social history production parallel to the more formal methods of knowledge production employed by professional historians and regimented, yet informal methods employed by hobbyists.

⁸ Billingsley, 2004

The roots of analysis for kinship and inheritance in this thesis lie in Marshall Sahlins' *What Kinship Is- And Is Not*⁹. The notion of “mutuality of being” presented by Sahlins describes a shared personhood within the social experience of kinship, and further argues that this co-identification allows for certain inheritances, including ancestral harm or family grudges. Expanding on this concept, this project explores the boundaries of consanguinity and consubstantiality in Haywood-Lauderdale. Consubstantiality, beyond the “shared blood” of consanguinity, expresses not just a shared origin, but a shared substance and continuity of personhood through the ever-living organism of the “family.” This thesis deals with a shared “soul” of a family beyond that of any individual member, and the complex systems by which new members may join into it, or otherwise be barred from doing so.

In his article “Hierarchies of Connection: On the Inheritance Argument for Slavery Reparations,” Johnathan Stanhope takes up the idea of inherited harm as an argument for reparations, making the case that the harm done by various forms of racial violence constitutes a debt continuously owed and as-yet unpaid to descendants of the suffering persons¹⁰. As with the argument for familial consanguinity, I argue here that these ideas represent a significant source of racial anxiety in White Southern spaces. I also argue that this anxiety predominantly manifests in the form of fear that, as Black descendants of victims of racial violence may inherit both that harm and a right to reparative action, so too may *White* descendants of the *perpetrators* of such violence inherit a comparable guilt and thus an obligation towards these reparations.

⁹ Sahlins, 2013

¹⁰ Stanhope, 2021

The nature of this subject necessitates a level of hauntological interpretation. In “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does It Mean to Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature?” Patricia Yeager describes the South as a region haunted by its own violent legacy¹¹. Such ghosts, she argues, are a well-hidden yet ever-present underlying cultural object. Much of Yeager’s analysis contrasts White Southern Gothic conjurings in their fixation on retribution for past crimes or ancestral sins with Black Southern Gothic literature’s focus on the ache of undelivered justice. This thesis applies this framework of analysis to spectral imaginings in the transmission of oral histories between keepers of both White and Black histories in Haywood-Lauderdale.

Many of the specific narratives utilized in the avoidance of racial conversations among White Americans broadly are examined in Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*¹².

DiAngelo breaks down the emotional responses common among White people when confronted with either personal racist actions, or uncomfortable conversations around systemic racism. As she outlines, much of the tension experienced in these conversations is not centered on a desire not to *be* racist or not to *do* racist things, but rather a desire not to *be seen as* racist. Racism is thus understood socially not as a phenomenological statement about the world and a broad problem to be solved, but rather as a personal attack on the White individual as being a singularly bad person. Applied to this thesis, these frameworks bear out in reflection on ancestral wrongs and the systems White ancestors operated within and frequently personally upheld. Many of the interactions

¹¹ Yeager, 2005

¹² DiAngelo, 2018

documented here manifest as a desire to defend ancestors from this personalized accusation of racism.

I also entered into this line of inquiry with an eye towards the tensions, harmonies, and contradictions between the colloquial narratives of community past, and those official perspectives which were supported by local institutional narratives. There is a documented Black History in Haywood-Lauderdale, maintained in an official capacity by the state of Tennessee in the institutions of Fort Pillow State Park¹³ and the Alex Haley House and Museum State Historic Site¹⁴.

Fort Pillow was the site of a battle during the Civil War and is now most prominently remembered as the site where Confederate troops, under the purview of Major General and future Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan Nathan Bedford Forrest, massacred primarily Black Union troops as they attempted to surrender¹⁵. Today, the site is a state park, whose interpretive center is largely dedicated to discussion of this event and the subsequent controversies around the exact circumstances of the massacre¹⁶.

The Alex Haley House in Henning, Tennessee functions as a historic house museum and dedicated interpretive center focused on the life and work of influential author Alex Haley. Haley had spent his boyhood years in his grandparents' home which still stands at the site, and it is there that his grandmother gave him the oral history which led him to

¹³ *Tennessee State Parks*, 2024

¹⁴ *Alex Haley Museum*, 2024

¹⁵ Tap, 2014

¹⁶ *Tennessee State Parks*, 2024

write his most well-known work, *Roots*¹⁷. The museum today chronicles his life, his research journey, and the role his family held in the Henning community.

These perspectives formed the basis of my initial questions, adjusted inquiries, and later interpretations. Given the list of people and places suggested to me by my aunt, I charted out spaces in which to begin my observation. For institutional perspectives, I visited a handful of government offices, the Dunbar-Carver Museum and Delta Heritage Center in Brownsville, and the state parks and natural areas around the bottomlands. Having attended my fair share of church homecomings and holiday celebrations in Haywood-Lauderdale, I also identified these community events as spaces in which familial ties were most active, and resolved to be an active presence at all I could manage.

In addition to my direct requests for interviews and visits to relevant institutions, I spent a significant amount of time photographing the area's historic sites and natural areas. I had taken up photography semi-professionally and saw utility in the practice for this research as threefold. The first function was to provide a visible record of signs and documents which I could reference later rather than typing or hand-notating their text. The second function was to form the basis of a photo essay intended to accompany my eventual thesis and provide visual support to the imagery evoked here. Lastly, and most relevant to my ethnographic efforts, my photography outings served to invite conversations which would then provide an opportunity to introduce my research to interested parties and possible participants.

¹⁷ Haley, 1976

My personal inquiries snowballed as each person I spoke to had a recommendation, usually older relatives or close family friends, for whom I should speak to next. More than once, at community events, friends and family would walk me over to another attendee, introduce us, and direct me to tell them about my work. Because of the small population and interconnected nature of this community, privacy is paramount in the presentation of these findings. With the exception of public figures, all given names and surnames have been replaced with pseudonyms. Due to its prevalence here, as well as its small population, the community in which I resided has also been given the pseudonym Plum Tree, taken affectionately from Robert W. Service's 1907 poem, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*¹⁸.

¹⁸ Service, 1907

CHAPTER TWO

UNCOMFORTABLE INHERITANCES

A few days after my arrival in Haywood-Lauderdale, I visited the local senior center for an appointment with the activities director, Ms. Charlene Davis. I had reached out several months before about using their library as an interview location, and Charlene had asked if I would be interested in participating in some genealogy and history focused programming with the seniors, so we had set up a time to work out the details of my involvement. As she sorted through the files on her desk to find the next month's activities schedule, she asked me to remind her again of my name. She had greeted me by my first name at the door; I understood that she was asking for my "family name" as it is commonly referred to. Small communities like Haywood-Lauderdale tend to be insular, and the first step of determining trust is to establish some sense of belonging or connection to the community on the part of a stranger. Invariably, the first question people would ask after clarifying this connection was some variation of, "Who are your people?", "What's your family name, sugar?", "Who all out in Plum Tree are your folks?" Charlene's follow up question was in kind. She was from Halls, but one of her high school friends had married a Griffin girl from Plum Tree. Do I by any chance know Shannon? The question had a subtle irony to it. Plum Tree's population can be measured in the double digits, of course I know Shannon. However, the social game, especially among new acquaintances, is one of dancing around meaning. Directness may be taken as blunt or even aggressive, an impolite transgression which frequently indicates outsider status. What she wanted to know was how exactly I related to the members of my family

she was personally familiar with, how my family could reasonably connect me to her. I told her I had visited with my Aunt Shannon and Uncle Dan just that morning, suspecting Uncle Dan had been the classmate she mentioned. Charlene asked which one of Shannon's brothers I belonged to, and clapped with satisfaction when I told her my father's name. "Alright, I know who you are, then!"

It was not uncommon over the course of my stay in Haywood-Lauderdale for people to ask my last name before they asked my first, if they ever asked my first name at all. Truthfully, unless somebody planned to develop a closer relationship with me, or they were idly curious as to which one of his grandmothers Frank had named his kid after, my first name was not important. First and foremost, I am a Griffin. Secondly, I am Frank's kid. If you know Frank, you functionally already know me, and the rest of the interaction can proceed all the smoother for it. There are, however, heavier implications to identification via family name. The social game of introductions and triangulating identity through family connections occurred consistently with nearly every person I encountered. The one exception is perhaps the most telling.

I made a great many introductions over the course of my time in Haywood-Lauderdale. I occupy a halfway position between insider and outsider in this space, a form of relation which would categorize me as a "halfie"¹⁹. As a member of an old-stock family in Plum Tree, I have a valid claim amongst residents to identify with this space as a form of home. As somebody who has never lived here long-term, I must undergo certain social processes to assert this claim with every new relationship. This particular

¹⁹ Abu-Lughod, 1991

introduction occurred in a government office concerned with Black history, helmed by a man I understood to have moved into the area himself. I spoke with the director, explained my intentions as a student and a researcher, and offered my full name. He paused unexpectedly, straightened his back, and invited me to have a seat in his office. He asked me to spell my last name. I did. He handed a business card across the desk that bore the same name. “Your folks came up this way from Georgia, didn’t they?” he guessed. I replied that they had. “I’m sure you know what this means.” I replied that I thought I did. We looked at each other for a moment. The space between us contained generations. Somewhere, up this forgetfully long and painfully short span of history, it was very likely that a member of my family had enslaved a member of his. Here is where the anxiety arises for these post-bellum families struggling to document their family before the war. In the absence of knowledge of ancestral violence, there is the anxiety of having it confirmed.

We spoke for a while about similar previous encounters he had experienced, the varying ways other White people from outside Haywood-Lauderdale had reacted to this connection. He told me that some people had actively refused the connection to slavery, insisting that they must be distant cousins. While this may in fact be the case, the individuals making this case likely had not considered the contributions of a history of racialized sexual violence to that possibility. He told me also how some people had apologized to him for their ancestors, how he appreciated the sentiment and at the same time felt a pressure stemming from that person’s desire for absolution.

A few weeks after this conversation, I had lunch with an old friend of mine that lived in the area, herself a White Southerner with generations in Haywood-Lauderdale. Megan and I had been coworkers in our student jobs during college and had a history of joking about the interconnectedness of familial bonds “back home”. We joked about being distant cousins often enough that some other members of staff had started assuming we actually were. Over lunch, we caught up about our lives after college and entering our respective graduate programs. I told her about my encounter with Mr. Griffin. She expressed that she “live(s) in fear” of meeting a descendant of somebody enslaved by her ancestors. “Why fear,” I asked her, “what are you afraid of?” She told me that she would not know what to do with the guilt.

Megan self-describes, accurately, as liberal progressive. She is curious about the world around her, agrees with the removal of Confederate monuments, and wants accurate history to be more accessible to American children. She had previously lamented to me how the Lauderdale County school system had not prepared her for some of the civil rights history she ultimately learned in college, and how her high school classmates who did not attend university for one reason or another would subsequently not be given this knowledge as readily as she had. She is willing, even enthusiastically so, to confront the ugliest parts of American history. Yet, she is afraid, because the ancestral guilt associated with this past may no longer exist only as an abstract.

Guilt was the common thread among White reactions to this kind of undeniable confrontation with history. Mr. Griffin had spoken about people apologizing to him for the sins of their ancestors, asking even subtextually for his absolution of that ancestral

crime. Megan, a young, well-educated White woman whose politics generally align with Black liberatory efforts and accurate presentations of history in educational settings, felt an apprehension of her own family's possible connections to slavery so intense it presented as a lingering dread. Many older, more politically conservative residents, like Mr. Folger, disavowed or otherwise denied this connection outright. These reactions, varied across political beliefs, all carry with them a desire for distance, a need to disown or disinherit an unwanted, violent kinship. Through absolution, avoidance, or denial, they are attempts to outrun an inherited guilt.

When Ms. Davis said, "Now I know who you are!" during our first encounter, she meant something beyond knowing how we related to each other socially. She also knew what to expect of me. My family has a reputation in the area, as most families do. We are deeply principled if you like us, stubborn as a mule if you do not. We are insatiably curious if that is something you admire, and incurably nosey if it gets on your nerves. These traits, built into the overarching reputation that socially defines the family body, are part of that core substance which is assumed present within every member, that "Griffin-ness" that dictates our roles and expectations.

After church one day, my neighbor Beth Folger recounted to me what she knew of the various family reputations around Plum Tree. The Folgers, who she had married into, were always generous with their time and resources, if a bit stuck-up and easily offended. The McLaurie's, her parental family, had a strong sense of leadership, but "boy could they ever gossip." She told me it felt right that I had gone into research, and that it fit the Griffins' natural curiosity. Her husband Dale joined us at this point, having

finished a conversation with the pastor. He stated that these traits must be innate in some way, perhaps genetically, because no amount of being raised by McLauries had been able to “fix” Beth’s adoptive nephews, recently arrested for stealing catalytic converters in a neighboring county. This unusually direct barb sparked a bit of a debate as to nature versus nurture that largely centered on whether the two young men could ever be considered “real” McLauries. Much of Dale’s stance was that accepting them alongside their frowned-upon behavior would negatively impact the reputation of the entire family. He felt that, despite little being known about the family that had produced these young men, that there had to be some flaw to their character which was passed to them, and which may somehow infect at the very least the reputation of the McLaurie family.

The adopted nephews were White, like the rest of the McLauries. However, this exchange, and in particular Dale’s concern about the heritability of undesired behaviors or traits, echoes centuries of racial violence acting under the guise of biological science. It is, stripped to its core, an argument for eugenics. Early eugenicists like Sir Francis Galton took so-called “criminal families” as case studies to prove a genetic disposition for crime²⁰ which, applied to the Southern framework of social inheritances, produces this anxiety about natal families. Beyond this, however, Dale’s fears about fully accepting the boys as McLauries reveal a kind of backwards inheritance, a fear that the criminalized habits of two adoptive members may infect or implicate the entire preceding family line.

²⁰ Larson, 2004

Beth's two daughters, four and six respectively, are also subject to the expectation of inherited personality. They played together in the aisles of the little church while I spoke with their parents. The oldest, Kara, is more reserved and will go to great lengths to defend her personal space. The younger, Kaylee, is more outgoing, and sometimes dominates decisions about play activities with her sister. While I spoke with Beth and Dan, the girls got into a disagreement about their pretend game, and Kaylee stomped one foot on the ground and shouted "No!" loud enough to echo in the small space. Kara began to cry. Dan took Kaylee outside to talk and Beth picked up Kara and held her while she calmed down. Dan's father, Mr. Dave, laughed and said of Kaylee's outburst "That's that McLaurie blood in her!" Beth appeared unamused but did not disagree. She gently rubbed her sniffling child's back and whispered that Kara's sensitivity was a sign that "she takes after her daddy's family."

Families function in this way as a form of pedigree, as each behavior and trait is categorized according to which family it is associated with, where an individual "got it from." If Kaylee is bossy, it is because she is a McLaurie, and her mother is expected to be prepared for this inevitability. If Kara is sensitive or quick to have her feelings hurt, it is because she is a Folger, and *all* the Folgers are touchy. This is connected to Dan's hesitance to categorize Beth's nephews as "real" McLauries. Familial reputation dictates social reception, so any threat to that reputation via the behavior of any one member is taken as a harm committed against the entire family body. An individual transgression or single eccentric may be excused, but here is a pattern of behavior, and worse, there are two of them. Dan perceived acceptance of these young men into the social body of the

McLaurie family as a threat to the health of that body. If the Griffins can be understood as being ontologically curious, or the Folgers as ontologically sensitive, allowing the McLauries to develop a reputation based on a few members with a history of theft is a deeply personal risk to even the most scrupulous cousin.

At the Ripley Fourth of July fireworks display, I observed a complex phenomenon with regards to introductions among married women. My friend Rebecca, recently married and recently permanently returned from college, switched which last name she introduced herself with depending on whom she was talking to as she re-acquainted with family friends and old teachers. Her husband, Brad, was from nearby Nutbush, and she used his last name when speaking with anybody from that community. With previous acquaintances that had known her by her maiden name, or friends of her parents, she used that previous name. The last names here are part of a delicate social game, carefully choosing which familial connections to prioritize between her two families. Beth had done something similar when we first met, introducing herself as Beth Folger but qualifying that she was “originally a McLaurie.” While getting food at the event, Rebecca introduced me to her sister-in-law, Marcie. Marcie had met Rebecca’s brother while they were in college and was from a similarly sized town in Alabama. In her introductions, she exclusively used her married name. In this space, in the absence of any ancestral connection, her maiden name was irrelevant. When she clarified at all, she explicitly mentioned that she was from Alabama so as to avoid any attempt to triangulate her kinship and instead identified herself primarily via her husband.

These expressions of familial allegiance, socially signaling whose body these women are a part of outside of their own, gesture towards Sahlins' mutuality of being²¹. When I introduced myself to anybody in Haywood-Lauderdale, or when Beth, Rebecca, and Marcie introduced themselves at public events, we were identifying ourselves as representatives of our families. Each of us was also making a social claim. For Beth and Rebecca, they were aligning themselves both with their marital and natal families. Marcie was claiming her entry into the community by way of her marriage. I was claiming my relationship to this space by way of my paternal family. All of us, in one way or another, were claiming an inheritance. While Marcie was assuming her place in an established family in the area, and her right to social inheritances in it, Beth, Rebecca, and I were assuming inherited identities. The established relationships between families, the personality traits, and the positionality within social spaces all constitute a social inheritance which, for old-stock families, goes back upwards of a century.

One afternoon in late July, I visited with Ms. Willy Hare, a family friend, in her home. It was a hot day, and the air around the bottomlands was heavy and damp. I had planned to take some photos of the Hatchie River but had delayed this for another day as the air was so humid that I could not prevent my camera's lens from fogging over. Ms. Willy insisted I have a glass of tea or at least water after being out in the heat. Her home was blessedly cool, with the ceiling fan in her living room working overtime. I could hear a window air conditioner running at full blast in her kitchen. I was here, partly to catch up with Ms. Willy, but also due to her offer of telling me about some family heirlooms of

²¹ Sahlins, 2013

hers. She eagerly showed me a quilt that had been passed through her family for over a hundred years. She invited me to pull it off her quilt rack and examine the pattern and the hand stitching, pieced by her third great grandmother. On a shelf above the quilt rack sat a hinged picture frame. On the left side was a printed copy of a daguerreotype photograph of Ms. Willy's grandmother, who had made the quilt. On the right was a color photograph, a school photo of Ms. Willy's granddaughter who had been named in her great great grandmother's honor. Ms. Willy proudly informed me that the quilt would go with her granddaughter when she had her own home, along with her great aunt's cedar chest and a number of other heirlooms. She explained that her granddaughter loved sewing and wanted to begin quilting soon, just like her namesake, and that they would have "gotten on like a house on fire." She had never met this grandmother, yet she spoke of her as if they had been close her whole life. A century was compressed down to one relationship.

It is one thing to inherit a quilt, or a house, or even a habit of bossing around younger siblings. It is another thing entirely to inherit a legacy of violence. The various disavowals which I encountered in association with historic violence betray a fear that the very systems of inheritance and identity which structure our entire social system also incriminate us by association with the crimes of our ancestors. When Confederate apologia movements reframe the Civil War as the War of Northern Aggression, they attempt to construct for themselves a new inheritance which presumes victimhood rather than guilt. Similarly, when people asked Mr. Griffin's forgiveness for the actions of their family, they seek forgiveness for themselves as well for having descended from them.

When my friend expressed fear of meeting the descendants of those whom her family had harmed, this was the fear of that undesired inheritance, what her descent from slavers said about her. Disowning these relations is more difficult than questioning the kinship of some unruly nephews, if it is even possible.

The disowning of relations is not simply an attempt to divorce the speaker from the actions of their ancestors, but also a denial of the possibility of material blood relations with the descendants of the people their family enslaved. A frequent method in the production of a continuous stock of enslaved people, particularly after the dissolution of the transatlantic slave trade, was the rape of enslaved women by their enslavers²². The 1998 controversy at the inclusion of the descendants of Sally Hemmings, an enslaved woman who gave birth to several children by Thomas Jefferson, in Jefferson family gatherings at Monticello demonstrates both the motivations for and consequences of this kind of familial denial²³. Accepting these relationships, what should, by accepted blood standards, be cousins, requires a reckoning with the identification of the shared ancestor as a rapist, as sexually violent beyond the understood violence of enslavement. Denying these relationships is further silencing. It denies Black descendants access and recognition afforded to White descendants. For generations, the Black descendants of Thomas Jefferson were denied access to Monticello, even as their White cousins enjoyed those same freedoms.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, History as a productive exercise is more than the documenting of categorical facts about the past. Rather, the keeping and production

²² Feinstein, 2019

²³ CBS, 2019

of memories is a social exercise intended to serve various social projects²⁴. White descendants of slavers and Klansmen who are unable or unwilling to emotionally process their kinship with these violent histories have a vested interest in the production of a history which absolves their kinfolk and thus, themselves.

²⁴ Trouillot, 1995

CHAPTER THREE

PRODUCTIVE MEMORIES

The Dunbar-Carver Museum can be hard to find, and even harder to find open if you are not already aware of it. At the time I conducted this research, they had no website, no posted hours, and no easily accessible phone. I made my way there by word of mouth and by finding a flyer left, as coincidence would have it, only hours before my arrival at the Haywood County courthouse a week before. Like many small-town local history museums, the collections are built from limited resources stretched to their fullest by the exhaustive effort of a handful of deeply devoted individuals. The center of the room is taken up by movable cork board displays of historic documents and explanatory text documenting Haywood County's Black history. The back room contains sports memorabilia from the high school, including a team photo from legendary musician Tina Turner's time on the Carver High basketball team. Another is dedicated to musician, minister, and activist Reverend Clay Evans. A small off room replicates a classroom. The front desk is manned by a handful of volunteers made up of alumni at Carver, primarily retired teachers and civil rights activists themselves.

The museum as it currently exists tells the story of the school as it once was. Carver High School, as it was known in its final iteration, was an all-Black school attended by the students of smaller community schools in and around Brownsville. In its time, it had been central to Brownsville's Black community, a space for organizing as well as educating, and its faculty and administration were prominent community leaders. The school closed in 1970, following the desegregation of the public school system in

Haywood County a few years prior. Alumni dedicated the Dunbar-Carver Museum to the history of Black education in Haywood County in 2007, and since then have continued its mission of preservation and community enrichment through museum exhibitions, family reunion and alumni tours, and the maintenance of an alumni society.²⁵

The front door was propped open to let fresh air and sunlight into the dim space of the former school when I arrived. I introduced myself to Ms. Dora Daniels, who was tending the museum that day. She told me she had been a student at Carver before attending the University of Tennessee and then training at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, a historic incubator and training site for civil rights leaders not far from Knoxville. We chatted for a while about how UT's campus had changed over the years. She had attended in the late 60's, only a few years after the university began admitting Black undergraduates²⁶ and had not seen campus since the early 2000's, so she asked a few questions about how some older buildings had fared during the last few rounds of rebuilding. I told her I was in Haywood-Lauderdale for my thesis and asked if she would be interested in speaking with me about some of the history covered by the museum, as well as her own experiences in Brownsville. She said she would love to and pulled out her phone to call two of the other curators of the museum. She asked them to come as soon as they were able, there was somebody they needed to talk to.

While we waited, Ms. Daniels showed me the space and gave detailed information about the history of Black coalition building in Brownsville. There, by the

²⁵ Dunbar Carver Museum, 2023

²⁶ *Knoxville News Sentinel*, 2017

door to the athletics exhibit, was a portrait of the charter members of the Brownsville chapter of the NAACP. Mere months after this portrait was taken, she told me, a White mob led by the local sheriff lynched the treasurer. On a late summer evening in 1940, Elbert Williams was dragged from his home, taken to the banks of the Hatchie River, shot, and left to die²⁷. Her voice was even and matter of fact as she said this, but there was a pained look in her eye that betrayed the anger and sorrow that lingers from this crime. Nearby, she showed me photos of the Jefferson Courts housing complex, a complex of four-unit apartment buildings which had been a site of residential Black organizing, now long since torn down, and told me how Jefferson Street had been Brownsville's Black Wall Street. At one time, she told me, over thirty Black-owned businesses operated in the area. Of these, only the laundromat and the funeral home remain today.

She hesitated a moment before telling me that some people in her generation in Brownsville felt conflicted about the effects of desegregation on the Black community. Jefferson Street had sprung up out of necessity as Black residents were barred from White businesses or otherwise disrespected in their patronage. It became a space through which to build Black wealth, to keep wealth in the community. Families like the Daniels's and the Bells' came to prominence in the community and reinvested that wealth in turn. Carver High School itself had been a necessity as Black children could not be taught in White schools. It became a space in which to cultivate Black knowledge and scholarship. The professors at Carver were pillars of the community, and school events

²⁷ Bond, 2011

were often opportunities to organize. The businesses on Jefferson Street began to struggle when they began to compete directly with White businesses or national chains after desegregation. Rather than move White children to Carver and expand the school system, the county closed the school and dispersed its students among the other schools. Desegregation had been hard-won, Ms. Daniels told me, but the loss of these spaces in the wake of it was a source of sorrow.

The loss of spaces in which to organize and cultivate Black wealth following desegregation is not a phenomenon unique to Brownsville. Land speculation, aggressive (and structurally favored) competition, and ongoing divestment have similarly gutted other historic Black neighborhoods in the South, from small towns like Brownsville to major cities like Houston²⁸. Desegregation itself was not the problem, as Ms. Daniels told me, but rather a complete lack of structural support in a new combined social and economic arena, and in fact frequent hostility from the structures the community should have been able to rely on.

Ms. Daniels briefly mentioned a few of her own family members over the course of this discussion, but only in the context of personal experience. Her mother had attempted to protect her from the intimate knowledge of racism for as long as she could. She had to explicitly discuss it when a group of White teenagers threw food at her walking home from school. Ms. Daniels presented this as an example of the ways Black parents attempted to shield their children rather than something unique to the Daniels family. There are, undeniably, prominent family names within the Black community in

²⁸ Longoria, 2013

Brownsville. However, and this is perhaps owing to the nature of the museum as a historical record of a community, these accomplishments were presented to me not as the will of individual families, but as a cumulative effort among Black residents to support and uplift one another.

Ms. Daniels also spoke for some time about the monument in front of the courthouse. She told me that a few years before, some local high school students brought a petition to remove it, but that for her at least, it had blended into the scenery for most of her life. She was more personally concerned with issues like housing inequality and police violence, though she agreed with the students that the statue symbolized the same systems that underpinned those problems. She chuckled conspiratorially and asked if I had noticed the statue was saluting with the wrong hand. She looked at the picture I had taken of the courthouse and pointed to the cannon sitting in front of the statue. “That one did bother me,” she told me. She said it had previously sat pointed towards a Whites-only water fountain, and that as a child she had been told by White children that it would fire if a Black person ever tried to drink there.

Some time into this tour, the other curators arrived. Both were also former Carver students. They had other business to attend to but were interested in my research and stopped by briefly after Ms. Daniels’s phone call. One, Mr. David Brand, spoke about his interest in promoting the museum further. I had only known about it via a personal recommendation and a flyer on an out-of-the-way notice board at the courthouse, which confirmed his desire for better outreach. I had my camera with me that day and agreed to take a few photos of the museum both for my use here, and for the eventual creation of a

website for the museum. The third curator, Ms. Doris Thompson, arranged a time for me to return to the museum to formally interview her.

A week later, I sat in one of the folding chairs in the meeting room at the museum with Ms. Thompson and spoke with her about her own family's history with the Haywood-Lauderdale area. She had grown up outside of town on a small farm owned by her grandparents. She told me they were lucky to own their land, and that many of their friends were sharecroppers. Decades-old frustration was visible on her face as she expressed the ways White landowners cheated Black farmers. "People took advantage of them just like in slavery," she told me. Her own third great grandparents on both sides of her family had been enslaved in that same area, and she drew a direct line between legal ownership and permanent indebtedness. Sharecroppers relied on credit to their landlords for most necessities, and this was used as a form of social and psychological dominance. Ms. Thompson witnessed an incident of this kind of degradation in a dry goods store as a child. A Black sharecropper had come in to purchase clothes for his children while their landlord was present. The White store owner asked the landlord how much the farmer was allowed to spend. "They burst his ego in front of his children," she said with disgust. When it came time to "settle up," Ms. Thompson told me, the landowners would frequently claim even more debt than was owed, either to coerce more money or to prevent farmers from leaving.

We had spoken about the lynching of Elbert Williams, and I asked her if she had any knowledge of any formalized Ku Klux Klan activity in the area, past or present. "Oh yeah, they were active," she told me, adding that a few years before, a former city

official, long retired, died and his family held an estate auction. His grand wizard hood sold for \$300. I had heard stories before of people cleaning out deceased family members' homes and discovering Klan robes, often to their horror. Her story had shocked me, that this family had been so brazen as to sell these memorabilia at auction upon its discovery, to proclaim it as part of his estate, his legacy. Ms. Thompson declined to name which family this was.

A week later, I had a conversation about sharecropping with Mr. John Hare at a mutual aid event put on by the ladies of the church in Plum Tree inside the volunteer fire station, a one-room building with a concrete floor and a firetruck whose keys were shared among the men of the community. I had helped with setup and was talking to various attendees while resting. Mr. Hare was born in the late 1950's, and his father and grandfather had been landlords to Black sharecroppers. In telling me this, he referred to his family as sharecroppers themselves, making no linguistic distinction between those who owned the land and those who worked it. Initially, knowing multiple descendants of White sharecroppers, I had to ask to verify which side of this interaction he was referring to. He told me with great pride how his father and grandfather "took care" of their workers, how they provided money for transportation and housing and shoes for their children. "It was good business sense, too," he told me, "because they can't work if you don't give them those things. It's kind of like maintaining your truck." These loans functioned as investments "besides, they had to pay it back eventually anyway." He said that a lot of the tenants took on a great deal of debt upfront in this system, and that farmers that wanted to change whose land they worked had to negotiate for the new

landlord to purchase that debt from the current one. I asked him what he thought about this process of debt-buying, of the process of paying another White landowner to take a laborer from one property to another. He thought for a moment and said, “I suppose it was kind of like slavery in a way.”

Mr. Hare expressed these ideas and observations cheerfully, with the earnest belief that his family had been exceedingly charitable towards their tenants with no dissonance between this perception of his ancestors and the distinct precarity of the sharecroppers’ experiences. He had constructed a phantasm²⁹, an imagined reality, or imagined history, in which to contain the contradictions of his desires for his ancestry and the material reality of their engagement with sharecropping tenancy. He desires a history which behaves *as if* his ancestors were benevolent or charitable and internalizes, and thus reproduces, a history which behaves *as such*. The idea of sharecropping loans as charitable, as contributing to the moral reputation of his family, *should* be in tension with Ms. Thompson’s account of the dry goods store, as well as his own admission that these decisions were ultimately self-serving. However, because he desires these traits for his ancestors (and thus via inheritances, for himself), these contradictory ideas may not only coexist, but further the familial reputation as shrewd yet ethical businessmen.

It was only because of the comfort that this rationalization provided that Mr. Hare was able or willing to speak so candidly with me on the subject. His wife, Mary, joined us later in the conversation, when he compared debt-buying to the selling of enslaved people. As the women in the Folger family had previously done, she intervened. When

²⁹ Naas, 2008

John told her we were talking about sharecropping, she gently scolded him for “talking this poor girl’s ear off” and said she was sure I was uninterested in his stories. He brushed this off, but I understood her meaning beneath her words. The conversation made her uncomfortable, and she wanted it to stop. She had married into this family but was acutely aware of her role within it and her obligations toward the family reputation. John may not have registered that his interpretation of this history may be controversial or even damaging to that legacy, but Mary certainly was. She had spent most of the event up to this point in this representative role within the Hare family, and intervening here was part of that responsibility. Whether it was Mary carefully ending my conversation with her husband, or Beth varying her last name and cutting off her father-in-law from making inflammatory remarks, it was primarily women who were facilitating the keeping of family identity and ensuring the smooth exchange of social roles.

After my conversation with Mr. Folger shortly after my arrival in Haywood-Lauderdale, I reflected on the intervention of his wife and daughters (including his daughter-in-law) as indicative of a social taboo. It was Mary’s intervention here that caused me to realize it was almost exclusively women who acted as social enforcers of this unspoken rule. It dawned on me then that, indeed, women broadly are the social organizers of this space. The very event where this conversation occurred had been organized entirely by women. The sole male involvement in planning and setup had been to drop off supplies in a pickup truck and to move the firetruck out of the station so we had more room. The social labor of organizing the event, getting word out about it, arranging for supplies, and indeed all the physical labor of setting up tables and arranging

donated clothes and home goods, was performed by women. Every Sunday the prayer list, Beulah's primary method of organizing community support, was arranged, maintained, and investigated by the women of the church.

These interventions do not necessarily represent a complete disagreement with the offending sentiments on the part of the women of these families. More frequently, they represented an objection to the public expression of potentially controversial ideas. Such ideas must be expressed only in the correct audience, one whose stance on these subjects is entirely understood. Lingering cultural anti-Catholic sentiment (itself historically racially intertwined)³⁰, for example, could only be expressed if the speaker is confident that nobody in the space is themselves or has relatives who are Catholic. Similarly, Mary's concern at her husband's discussion of his family's racial past stemmed not from a personal disagreement with his characterization of history, but rather the uncertainty of my interpretations of it, and the possibility that I may assume that the Hare family is categorically racist³¹.

Beth Folger would later privately communicate her own anxieties about Civil War education, saying that she did not trust the public educational system to treat the South fairly in their depiction of the events of and leading up to the war. While not as extreme as her father-in-law's confident assertion, this belief is certainly politically aligned with that sentiment. They identified the South as a specifically White region, maligned by either Northern aggression or by dishonest History, and furthermore identified themselves with that constructed South. While her personal belief or disbelief in the

³⁰ Mattick, 2022

³¹ DiAngelo, 2018

specific statement of her father-in-law is unknown, she shares at least a similar and supporting belief. It is key to note that her intervention in this taboo conversation took place in a public setting, while her sharing of her own anxieties took place in a more individual conversation.

I asked her why she thought the South was being treated unfairly. “Because they’re teaching our kids that we’re all racist,” she replied. “I’m not racist, and I wouldn’t associate with anybody who is. I have friends that are Black, even though that shouldn’t matter. I think we shouldn’t even *see* color, but the system has swung too far the other way, so people think that if you’re White you’re automatically a bad person.” This anxiety is reflective of a phenomenon described by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in his book, *Racism Without Racists* of “color-blind” racism³². The idea that racism can be solved by simply ignoring race altogether, paired with the idea that society writ large is now prejudiced against White people, is a rhetorical tool used to avoid having to address the systemic causes and consequences of racism, past and present³³.

This avoidance is not without its own set of consequences. Increasingly, as overt racial partitioning of American society has been nominally outlawed via anti-discrimination laws, new subjectifications have been introduced. Black neighborhoods are disproportionately hyper-policed, and Black detainees disproportionately sentenced relative to their White counterparts. Legal discrimination in housing, employment, and civic engagements like voting on the basis of felony status has allowed systems to continue the subjugation of Black populations while nominally remaining racially

³² Bonilla-Silva, 2017

³³ Bonilla-Silva, 2017

neutral³⁴. Deliberate, cultivated ignorance on the subject of race serves to maintain a system in which subjugation is allowed to continue so long as it changes its name. Both in casual conversation and in governmental policy, the problem being addressed is not the presence of harmful beliefs and practices, but their public acknowledgement.

Early in my visit, I spoke with a White cafe owner in Ripley by the name of Hugh Fletcher. The shop was empty except for myself and the staff, and he took the time to sit down and tell me “what [he] think[s] of all this.” His family had always been “white trash” as he described it, a subracial category which delineates generationally poor Whites from the more generationally wealthy, and historically from the antebellum pseudo-aristocracy of the planter class³⁵. It is a delicate term, acceptable as a form of self-deprecation, but “fighting words” if said about others. I asked him what he meant, and he told me his family had been White sharecroppers. “We had Black neighbors working near us and we weren’t any better off than them. We went through it too, but none of us complained about it back then! We worked hard and we made a better situation for ourselves.” I asked how his family went from sharecroppers to business owners. He told me that some of the men in his family had gone up north as young adults to work factory jobs, and that they saved enough money to buy their land from the landlord. The land was owned by his family already at the time of his birth. The word “we” used in his recounting of events is an identification of himself with his ancestors, not an expression of his individual experiences being in common with theirs.

³⁴ Alexander, 2020

³⁵ Wary, 1997

Sharecropping was a deeply exploitative economic arrangement which was not explicitly racially limited, and many sharecroppers did, in fact, voice complaints. In other parts of the South, groups of primarily Black sharecroppers organized under an explicitly communist banner in response to this system during the Great Depression³⁶, around the time Mr. Fletcher's family would have been purchasing their farm. Mr. Fletcher was equating poverty with racial discrimination, arguing that since his family and their Black neighbors were all poor, there was no meaningful difference between their material experiences. This argument ignores the fact that his family's neighbors were not only poor, but both poor *and* Black, and the intersecting subjugations which they would experience. His family still had access to the social currency of Whiteness, a privilege that was often conditional on participating in or otherwise condoning anti-Black violence³⁷. Notably, Mr. Fletcher described his family's landlord as a reasonable and good-natured man towards his family, a stark contrast from the surveillance and humiliation described by Ms. Thompson.

The productive aspect of history and memory-keeping is in service of particular social goals. The various interventions of the women of Haywood-Lauderdale functioned not simply to avoid temporary awkwardness as the men in their lives breezed past acceptable conversation topics, but to maintain and preserve a desired familial identity across generations, and to correct that identity as the desires upon it change with changing social norms. History produces identity, and thus a desired identity is produced through the careful cultivation of corresponding histories.

³⁶ Kelley, 2015

³⁷ Merritt, 2017

CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARDS A NEW SOUTHERN IDENTITY

Towards the end of my time in Haywood-Lauderdale, I ate lunch with my great aunt Loretta in a local restaurant that marketed itself on trendy yet “old-fashioned” Southern fare. The space was brightly lit, with faux-distressed furniture and white clapboard walls, clearly cashing in on the current Modern Farmhouse³⁸ design trend. Top 40 country music played faintly above the murmur of diners. The décor consisted of mass-market paintings of cattle, tobacco baskets, and dried or silk flowers: hydrangeas, magnolias, and cotton bolls.

When the waitress had brought us our tea in two mason jars with paper straws, Aunt Loretta chuckled. “These fancy little restaurants want to act like they’re old fashioned,” she told me conspiratorially, “but I don’t think Mama would have been caught dead drinking out of one of these.” Her mother, my great grandma Ruth, was exactly the kind of woman these spaces gesture to. She had passed on a year before my own birth, but by all accounts, had been the model of the Southern matriarch. She had no issue with mason jars generally, and in fact kept a large store of them for canning purposes. Herein lies the problem: canning. Mason jars are a practical vessel, used for heating, sealing, and storing food for preservation. The particular methods of use for mason jars thus became classed. Drinking out of them was bad manners and thus, “low-class” behavior, worthy of admonishment by mothers and aunts before a young man could embarrass an upwardly aspiring family by doing so in public. While a young male

³⁸ Zeledon, 2018

relative may occasionally be found popping the seal on a jar of canned tomato juice and drinking it directly, it would have been akin to drinking milk directly from the carton.

Both the trendy use of mason jars as tableware and my aunt's humorous admonishment of it gesture at different versions of the past and attempt to construct a preferred image of the present and future. The restaurant acts as a heterotopia³⁹, a space which, through meanings and gestures conveyed in everything from the décor to the menu to the serving staff of entirely young White women, projects the designers' imaginings of a utopic Southern identity. The imagined past to which it gestures is in tension with Aunt Loretta's lived experience of that past, and this tension generates a discomfort which is expressed as humor. The processes of memory-keeping, and selective alterations of memory through these processes, are generative. They construct a desired past out of which to integrate a personal, familial, and regional identity upon which to build a desired present and future.

The restaurant was gesturing at a desired image of "The South" in which to situate its marketing aesthetic. Its market niche was trendy yet familiar, modern but culturally legible to its target audience of mostly White, middle-class Southerners. The motivation here is fairly transparently financial. This is a space which will use cotton as décor and will resolutely *not* unpack the social and historical ramifications of cotton as a racialized commodity because doing so would be counterproductive relative to the goal of attracting an audience which is largely uncomfortable addressing that history. There is a more

³⁹ Vidler et al, 2014

complex motivation, however, in spaces devoted to showcasing history and culture which also perform this kind of silencing maneuver.

The Delta Heritage Center in Brownsville chronicles the history of the Upper Mississippi Delta region from music to commerce to the wildlife along the Hatchie River. It consists primarily of one modern-built visitor's center with museum exhibits dedicated to West Tennessee musicians, the wildlife of the Hatchie River, and the history of cotton production in West Tennessee. Outside sits the final home of Blues musician Sleepy John Estes, empty except for a few bare furnishings and signs on the walls providing information about his life. Next to that sits Flag Grove School, the one-room childhood schoolhouse of Musician Tina Turner. It is partially outfitted as a schoolhouse, and partially dedicated to displays of her iconic costumes. The museum is operated officially by the City of Brownsville as a space in which to represent their history and culture⁴⁰.

Part of my initial roadmap for my research involved seeking out institutional perspectives on racial history to see how official channels spoke about historic violence and how these accounts compared to more colloquial remembrances. Like my conversation with Mr. Folger, my visit to this site confirmed that my inquiry should rather be into the silencing of conspicuous absence. I had visited the Dunbar-Carver Museum in Brownsville and the Alex Haley Museum in Henning, both institutions with a dedicated eye towards Black history. I had visited Fort Pillow State Park, a site most famous for the egregious act of racially motivated violence that had occurred there. All of these institutions had been willing, even eager, to engage with a painful and difficult

⁴⁰ West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center, 2023

legacy. The Delta Heritage Center, positioning itself as representing local culture and more than happy to present examples of local Black excellence like legendary musicians Tina Turner and Sleepy John Estes, was unwilling to portray our community's more difficult past.

Before I visited any of the public institutions I had an interest in, I sent the staff an email letting them know about my thesis and asking a few preliminary questions, mostly about any limitations on documentation like taking photos. The Alex Haley museum and Fort Pillow are both state-run, so I was only allowed to take photos as a means to record signage for my own reference, not for publishing or inclusion here. When I sent a similar email to the staff at the Delta Heritage Center, I was told I was welcome to take whatever notes or photos I wanted, but that they were unsure why my research would relate to their exhibits at all. The museum's exhibits include a room dedicated to the ecology and history of the Hatchie River, a place the curators at the Dunbar-Carver Museum had informed me had a reputation for historic lynchings. It also included a room dedicated to the history of cotton production. Aside from a single sign denoting an object's identity as a "plantation bell," the history of violence that I knew was present in this community was entirely absent from this space which aimed to represent the community's identity. I spoke with a member of the staff at the Delta Heritage Center, told her about the purpose of my research, and asked about the goals of the museum, at times to her confusion. Again, I was told that they were unsure how their exhibits might relate to my work. She did not seem hostile in her questioning of my visit, but genuinely curious, entirely

confused by my assumption that there would at least be some discussion of these facets of history in a museum dedicated to the heritage of a community deep in cotton country.

She told me the museum is focused on communicating the things that bring pride to the community, that the residents want to identify with. They are proud of Tina Turner and Sleepy John Estes, but not of the fact that they had been the children of sharecroppers⁴¹. When I asked if the center ever discussed those aspects of these artists' lives, she again seemed confused. They were deeply proud of the history of agriculture, and particularly cotton agriculture as the area's main industry, but not of cotton's inextricable link with the historic exploitation of Black labor. They were proud of the natural beauty of the Hatchie River, but not of the bloody violence which had been enacted there. I stopped pressing the subject at this point as the employee was visibly uncomfortable. She did tell me that the center prioritizes what the community deems relevant. Thus, the museum functions not to document history as it occurred, but to construct and present a preferred heritage and cultural identity. Anything which conflicts with this favorable, flattering self-identification is erased. Identity is a continuous, inherited substance. What our ancestors were, so we are as well. It is a powerful motivation to imagine our ancestors in the best possible light.

Much like Ms. Willy Hare framing the photo of her granddaughter, my grandfather keeps a hinged photo frame on his mantle. On one side is one of my childhood photos. On the other, is an image of my great-great grandmother at the same age. She was my great grandma Ruth's mother, and I bear her first and middle names. These photo

⁴¹ Turner, 1986

displays carry a social meaning within the context of inheritance and kinship in this space. The children in these two photos bear little physical resemblance, yet they are the same. I am her, and she is me, not in the sense of reincarnation but in a continuance of being and shared identity which justifies inheritance. Because we share this kernel of familial being, I can make certain claims to her: her name, her mannerisms, her home. I lived the first seventeen years of my life an hour and a half south in Memphis, and the next seven years several hundred miles away. Yet, I am a Griffin, so Plum Tree is my home.

Beyond blood, there is a kinship with all those who find some measure of home in Haywood-Lauderdale. Every person that asked my last name as part of the social ritual of introduction was attempting to ascertain where I weave into the fabric of our community. Furthermore, they were determining how and where the thread of my social identity connected to theirs. Charlene did not simply ask which family I represented; she asked how I specifically related to those family members to whom she had an existing social connection. Mr. Dave Folger was friends with my father, so he and his family automatically and enthusiastically welcomed me home. The Folgers are friends with the Griffins, and particularly with Frank. Of *course* Frank's child will inherit some measure of this relation. This extended kinship between the Griffins and the Folgers also carried with it an additional layer of social enforcement.

The kinship of the two adopted McLaurie boys was contested because they threatened the social identity of the McLaurie family. Their kinship is contestable because of their adoptive status and the lingering belief that these valued traits are at least

on some level genetically heritable. That being said, Beth's status as a Folger was not contested despite her marrying into the family. The Folgers liked her, and thus her traits were acceptable representations of the broader family. Beth was also from Haywood-Lauderdale and carried existing social ties from this residence which her nephews, being adopted in another state, did not. Thus, their legitimacy as kin to the McLauries was less sturdy than her status as a Folger.

I have a blood relation to this community as a Griffin and thus am less socially contestable than the McLaurie boys. My transgressions must be reckoned with more intimately. Social corrections, at varying degrees of subtlety, took a deeply familial, parental tone coming from neighbors, and particularly female neighbors. The practice of kinship behaviors as an in-group activity within the community⁴² facilitated much of this tone. The indirect comments Mary made to her husband to ward me away from further questions are a more subtle expression of this behavior, but just as frequently older women took advantage of the social exceptions allowed by their age. Mr. Dave's aunt, a lively and good-humored woman in her early 90's, once tapped the tattoo on my wrist and asked, "does that thing wash off?" to the amusement of the pastor nearby. Tattoos, extraneous piercings, and dyed hair, all of which were commented on over the course of my time in Haywood-Lauderdale, are not a part of the accepted identity of the community, and the women making these comments were letting that be known out of a sense of kinship and shared social interest. They did the same when they felt I was prying too much into unacceptable subjects for the sake of my thesis.

⁴² Shirinian, 2018

The Southern identity represented by trendy farmhouse décor and sweet tea in mason jars is a false one. So too is any identity requisitely maintained by silencing, by confining uncomfortable realities to the unspeakable. This thesis has always been much more about the present and future than it is about some real or imagined past. I had set out to understand how White memory functioned to alter a violent past and instead came to know how my community uses the past to make sense of ourselves in the present, and to decide who we may be in the future.

A few weeks after my initial meeting with Ms. Davis at the senior center, I again sat in her cluttered yet comfortable office and discussed the presentation I was to give the seniors. She had asked if I had any previous projects I could present, so I suggested a historical term project from the previous semester⁴³. The presentation was much more about the research process than the project's results, but something about the webpage I showed Charlene puzzled her. She asked me if my work would always be about race, again subtly correcting this impolite interest. I said perhaps, and that there were a lot of directions my work could go. She told me she did not agree with arguments for reparations. It felt like a complete non-sequitur, but she said it as if it followed perfectly from the previous subject. Her tone was somewhat conspiratorial. It was just the two of us in her office, and I understood that she would not have been so forward with such an overtly political statement in a larger group, or if we had not both been White. "I think all those activist types focus too much on the past," she told me, "We need to move on already."

⁴³ Griffin, 2023

I had not any point in any of my conversations with Ms. Davis mentioned reparations prior to her disavowal of it. As previously mentioned, the language of the South is one of subtext; Charlene was talking underneath herself here. The topic of reparations flows naturally from any mention of race in this conversation because she understood any discussion of race and racism as moving towards a demand that something be done about it. Her comment about reparations communicated her belief that nothing needed to be done about it, preceding her lament that American society needs to “move on” from race. Like Beth, her desire for color blindness comes out of a desire to avoid the uncomfortable reality of the current and historical state of race in America, and from anxieties about how any attempts to meaningfully address racial disparities may affect their personal lives⁴⁴.

Not long before I left Plum Tree, I spoke again with Dan Folger while Beth played with their girls at the playset behind the church. He told me he was worried about how schools teach American history. “I don’t want my girls being taught to hate themselves.” I asked him why he thought they would be, and he said that the schools were going to tell his children that their ancestors did horrible things and that they should be ashamed for having privilege. “My daddy came up from nothing and worked hard every day of his life for what he has. I work hard every day to make sure they have a good life. If that’s privilege, I think we ought to be proud of it.” Dan’s family, like mine, arrived in the aftermath of the Civil War. They had purchased the land for their ancestral home in a time when Plantation aristocracy was selling excess acreage to recover the

⁴⁴ Bonilla-Silva, 2017

financial consequences of a Union victory. They had never been especially wealthy, but they had land that was passed down and conferred with it a social status, one that was anxiously defended.

Dan has an image of his family that he feels is threatened by shifting public discourses on race. The same way I share a being with my namesake, he and his girls share a being with their ancestors. Any acknowledgement of those ancestors' participation in atrocities like lynchings or the slave trade are received as an accusation on their descendants as well. Even if their direct ancestors had not participated in this violence, they share a substance with other old stock White families, and are thus still implicated by the participation of those families' ancestors. Both Dan and Charlene are strong believers in meritocracy. They have both worked hard to maintain their lifestyles. They also both react to the idea of structural inequality which denies others access to the opportunities they have worked to obtain as threats to the pride they take in that work. These ideas seem dangerous to them because they threaten the foundations upon which they have built their personal and familial identity.

There are sturdier foundations upon which to build an identity, both as families and as a region. A necessary first step would be to deconstruct any image of "Southern" which also exclusively presumes "White." In December of 2017, the nearby city of Memphis removed statues of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Jefferson Davis from two public parks, sparking intense public debate about the nature of heritage, monuments, and public identity⁴⁵. As the activists behind the removal argued, these public spaces

⁴⁵ de Velasco, 2019

belonged to Black residents as much as White ones, and the identification of the public identity of Memphis with such monumental symbols of anti-Black violence constituted a constant threat. It may be less on the nose than a cannon pointed at a water fountain, but it was a threat, nonetheless.

In *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*, Karen Cox argues that “heritage” as used by White pro-Confederate arguments is a placeholder for a less publically admissible desire. The statues do not represent White heritage so much as historic control over the narrative of racial history⁴⁶. The removal of the statues has become a signifier of all of the fears and anxieties already described here. The statues themselves, if they are to be taken as a token of heritage, tie White Southern identity intrinsically with anti-Black violence, a meaning that is deeply in tension with the fears of the White residents of Haywood-Lauderdale of being perceived as racist.

This is a region with a rich cultural identity that consistently denies the originators of its most distinctive features. The restaurant I visited with my aunt was staffed and visited by an almost entirely White crowd, yet its menu consisted of “updated” versions of iconic “Southern” foods like fried okra, fried green tomatoes, turnip greens, and black-eyed peas which trace their Southern origins to Soul Food, a uniquely Black culinary tradition which underpins the vast majority of Southern culinary subgenres⁴⁷.

The fight over monuments signifies the fight over who gets to narrate the past, and in turn steer the future. Public monuments function as a statement of community

⁴⁶ Cox, 2021

⁴⁷ Twitty, 2017

identity and intentions, who a community considers themselves to be and where they wish to go. The continued presence of Confederate monuments is a statement of desire for continued silence, of continued identification of Southern heritage and identity predominantly with Whiteness and, furthermore, with Black subjugation⁴⁸. Karen Cox has also argued that the nostalgic image of the Old South was constructed post-war amid reconciliation and deep anxieties about the state of their modernity in order to sell a culturally desirous New South⁴⁹.

We are once again on the precipice of a New South. There is still a lingering fear of the changes of the future, and of the need to reconcile the harms of the past. Haywood County is soon to be home to blue Oval City, a massive Ford production plant years in the making⁵⁰. This construction will significantly alter the physical, social, political, and economic landscape of Haywood-Lauderdale in ways that are still undetermined. The solution here is not to slide back into nostalgia for a violent past, but to embrace community mobilization in service of a brighter future. Increasingly, as motor companies unionize at the factory level, Robin D. G. Kelley's work on Alabama labor efforts is strikingly relevant to West Tennessee⁵¹.

There is a future in which we may develop an identity in acknowledgement of past harm, and in commitment to correcting it, in kinship with our Black neighbors as well as our White ones. It is painful, yes, to come to terms with the idea that the ancestors from whom we inherit our social identity have done lasting damage to our neighbors.

⁴⁸ Cox, 2021

⁴⁹ Cox, 2011

⁵⁰ Ford Corporate, 2024

⁵¹ Kelley, 2015

What is far more painful is the damage itself, damage which will never be healed by continued silence.

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