Prisoners of Style: Slavery, Ethics, and the Lives of American Literary Characters

Jamie Parra

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2016

ABSTRACT

Prisoners of Style: Slavery, Ethics, and the Lives of American Literary Characters

Jamie Parra

This dissertation reconsiders the relationship between fiction and slavery in American literary culture. "Prisoners of Style" shows how writers from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, including Hannah Crafts, Mark Twain, Charles Chesnutt, and William Faulkner, wrestled with enslavement. They found it not only a subject to be written about, but also a problem of characterization. Slavery and the ontological sorcery through which it produced a new kind of individual—the individual who is also a thing—led these authors to rethink basic formal assumptions about realist fiction, especially about what constitutes a literary character. The writers I discuss did not set out to argue for the slave's humanity or to render her interiority, but instead sought to represent the systematic unmaking of black personhood perpetrated by the laws and institutions that governed chattel slavery in the US. They set out to reveal the ideological violence perpetrated against enslaved blacks, and they did so by writing characters who embodied the categorical uncertainty of the slave, characters who were not allegories for real, full people. The tradition of writing I describe does not represent the fullness of enslaved "persons"; instead it renders something far more abstract: the epistemology that undergirded enslavement—those patterns of thought that preconditioned slavery itself.

The authors I study understood fictionality as a thorny ethical, epistemological, and political problem. In my chapter on Crafts, for example, I look at *The Bondwoman's Narrative* alongside a set of non-fiction texts about Jane Johnson, the slave who preceded her in John Hill Wheeler's household. Reading the novel against legal documents, pamphlets, and histories about Johnson and her escape from Wheeler, the chapter explores what fiction could do that

these other modes of writing could not. In moments of sleep, amnesia, and daydreaming, Crafts resists the normative logic of subjecthood and individual rights that underpins the representations of Johnson. In the second half of the project, I demonstrate the significance of fictionality to American literary realism's evolution into modernism. The final chapter, on Faulkner, places two of his Yoknapatawpha novels within the context of his interest in modernist painting and sculpture. Work by Picasso, Matisse, and other visual artists inspired his concern with surfaces and flatness, leading to a meditation on artifice that runs throughout his major novels. I argue that his flatness—his insistence on the non-referential quality of fiction—is crucial for understanding his characterization and philosophy of history history, in particular the history of Southern plantation slavery.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The initial idea for this dissertation came out of an afternoon of conversation with the inimitable Kara Walker, earning her my deepest gratitude. My committee members have been unfailingly supportive of this project from the start. Jonathan Arac's acute insights and belief in my ability to contribute something to the field of literary studies kept me working through periods of self-doubt. Saidiya Hartman has been a superlative interlocutor for the last seven years, pushing me to become a more rigorous thinker and, at crucial moments, giving me license to be more speculative, more "wild." Brent Hayes Edwards's generosity is well known at Columbia, and I am not the first student to take him as a model for my future teaching and mentorship. His close, insightful readings and long conversations about my work are hidden throughout these pages.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many of the other students in my graduate program at Columbia, including Lindsay Van Tine, Tim Donoghue, Nijah Cunningham, and Lucy Sheehan—all of whom read drafts and lent me their wonderful insights. I presented two of the chapters in the department's Americanist Colloquium, and both of those discussions made the work of revision easier. I am especially grateful to Katherine Biers, who gave me her draft from one of those meetings, where she had scribbled an outline that made me see chapter two in an entirely new way. Branka Arsić provided valuable commentary on chapter one. Danny Wright deserves a special thank you for seeing potential during the earliest stages of writing and for being an all-around wonderful colleague. He was also a member of an ACLA seminar organized by Anne-Lise François and Anahid Nersessian on "Critical Divestment" that was very generative for me.

Leon Hilton and Gillian Young are ideal writing group members.

Thank you to my remarkable friends, who provided all manner of support: Michael Stamm, Graig Morris, Danny Jasnow, Dave Reilly, Kaitlin Jessing-Butz, and Kristy Callahan.

Christine Smallwood and Marci Kwon continually astonish me by being so giving of their time, encouragement, formidable intellectual powers, and friendship.

Finally, I have dedicated this dissertation to my parents. For so many reasons I could not have written it without them.

for my parents

INTRODUCTION

The Poetics of Evasion

And we may, as poets, wish to impersonate and imagine situations of extreme captivity for reasons that are not merely selfish; wanting to ask questions of horror, to know where it begins and how it might end, we may have a compulsion to touch, with respect and terror, the zero-degree instances of desubjectification that remind our fingers of the possibility of frost.

–Wayne Koestenbaum[1]

Readers of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have long wanted to help free Jim. Many have found his treatment in the novel (and by the novel) troubling, especially his incarceration at the end of the book, where he finds himself stuck in a shed, waiting for Tom Sawyer to plan and execute an excruciatingly complex emancipatory plot. The episode stretches on for long chapters, which unnecessarily extend Jim's captivity for the sake of what appears to be merely a game. Tom hijacks the plot of the novel from Huck's control and all the gravity of the situation drains out of the text; it becomes just another one of Tom's beloved adventure stories. Those final chapters appear to relinquish real-world moral seriousness in favor of a game of make-believe and draw the novel's fictionality to the surface. The distance between the reader and the

[1] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), 135.

characters stretches too far, leading critics to wonder whether those pages have anything to tell us about the non-fictional past of slavery or the present of its aftermath.

During a pause in their scheming, Huck asks Tom, why, when Jim could be freed with little effort, they are using huge amounts of time to concoct an escape plot worthy of an adventure novel. Tom replies, "When a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion."[2] What Tom means is not immediately clear, in part because there are at least two distinct ways of reading the sentence: Jim is a "prisoner of style" both in the sense that he is being imprisoned in or with style, that is, stylishly, and in the sense that he is imprisoned *by* style, to the extent that he is being treated like a literary character in a story authored by Tom. Twain brings Tom back at the end of the novel in order to introduce an authorial avatar who can bring to our attention the ethical problems of writerly power, or the ways in which the novelist aspires to a God-like control over the world of his making—including over the characters who populate that world. To be a prisoner of style is the condition of all literary characters for whom there can be no escape from the bounds of the text. Thus, the novel forces the reader to confront the falsity of the fiction and consider the ethical implications of being a reader—of being a kind of witness to another's enslavement. Twain is, after all, asking us to be entertained by, to take pleasure in, prolonged scenes of Jim's oppression, raising questions about the ethical status of fiction. Do we have ethical obligations to fictional characters? And if we do, what are those obligations? How do characters hail us? Does it matter when we put a text down and abandon a character? Or find pleasure in his pain? Or dominate him through our obsessive desire to know him better than he knows himself?

[2] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Penguin Classics, 2002), 282.

Tom's alternative to escape, the literary character's perpetual evasion without the promise of freedom, allows us to confront freedom as an impossible and even dangerous concept in the context of the history of slavery in the US. Evasion, in other words, levels a critique of freedom by offering an alternative framework. It understands and throws into unmistakable relief the utopian quality of absolute freedom and posits itself as a conceptual alternative. Forgetting the emancipatory fantasies of "freedom," evasion becomes the fraught realm in which action negotiates discourse, in which the subject becomes, is always becoming, intelligible as a subject. Another name we might give "evasion" is "subjectivization."

"Prisoners of Style" makes the argument that for us to think about the ethics of novel reading, we must first define the relationship between readers and characters in terms other than those of sympathy or identification. Like much of the work that I read in this dissertation, the evasion sequence in Twain's novel questions the contracts forged between author and character, and reader and character; a triangle whose apex is the fictional character's body, the entity on and through which certain powers of manipulation and domination meet and overlap. For Twain and the other writers I discuss—Hannah Crafts, Charles Chesnutt, and William Faulkner—characters are abject figures subject to the creative forces of both producer and consumer—but they are not powerless. I use the term "contract" precisely to emphasize the strange sort of agency characters possess. If as critics we honor the phenomenology of novel reading, we must acknowledge that characters are just like real people in that they call for our attention, we form affective bonds with them as if they were human subjects and often mourn their loss. We can insist on the limits of this resemblance to "real people"—characters approximate people in the "real world," but they end with a text or set of texts—yet we still suspend our disbelief, as we must in order to care as deeply as we do about the fictions we study and read. Instead of

attempting to resolve the ontological paradox of fictional beings, this dissertation takes the ambiguity of the status of characters as a given, a starting point for a critical method that attends to characters as complicated points of identification that confuse the distinctions between objecthood and subjecthood. This leads to my distinctive claim: I find a structural affinity between literary character and the slave as a legal entity, because both closely resemble persons while at the same time failing certain fundamental tests of real humanity.

What is sayable in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* changes over the course of the evasion episode. Here is Huck's assessment of the evasion after all of the facts have come to light about Jim's legal status: "The first time I catched Tom, private, I asked him what was his idea, time of the evasion?—what it was he'd planned to do if the evasion worked all right and he managed to set a nigger free that was already free before?"[3] Even though the evasion does not "work," a new form of paradox and a new question become possible in the world of the novel when Huck speaks of a kind of freedom from which one may yet be freed—a freedom that retains its name while remaining entirely incomplete. Much of the criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* has focused on the utopian or emancipatory possibilities suggested by the novel's scenes on the raft, making the river the site of Twain's formulation of a kind of radical politics that puts pressure on the logic of the law, but I think, in contrast, that the most radical formulation comes during these lines that Huck speaks to Tom, where Huck suddenly utters a new grammar of freedom: His question distinguishes between degrees of emancipation instead of intermixing two senses of freedom, which we might call *absolute* and *liberal individualist*. A discourse other than the discourse of legal freedom distinguishes itself in the wake of evasion, providing

[3] Ibid., 306.

that platform for critique on which Huck might stand in order to speak of freedom differently than he could before, to speak of it as something more complex than as a right or set of rights one does or does not have. His paradox, spoken twice, suggests that certain forms of domination persist after legal emancipation and in fact *inhere in* the freedom of the freed slave and in the rights he wields as a (partial) citizen-subject. Legal freedom presupposes other forms of "unfreedom" that exist beyond the purview of the law. Put simply, Jim's captivity in the shed dramatizes the unfinished quality of emancipation and points to the need to remake the meaning of freedom in light of formal emancipation's realities. Saidiya Hartman describes the historical context for the text's destabilizing of the concept when she writes that

> [t]he nascent individualism of the freed designates a precarious autonomy since exploitation, domination, and subjection inhabit the vehicle of rights. The divisive and individuating power of discipline, operating in conjunction with the sequestering and segregating control of black bodies as a species of body, permitted under the guise of social rights and facilitated by the regulatory power of the state, resulted in the paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy and the preservation of a racial order on which the white republic was founded.[4]

Twain draws our attention not only to these continuities between bondage and freedom, but also to the conditions under which that continuity becomes apparent, sayable, and (to the reader) intelligible. Evasion makes possible a new way of speaking about the liberal subject of rights and disturbs the narrative structure of emancipation.

I aim not simply to historicize Huck's statement about "setting a nigger free that was already free before," to make a claim about how the novel comments on its historical context, but also to suggest that when we read Huck's interpretation of Jim's incarceration, the novel presents

[4] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.

its own fictionality as problematic by offering two competing readings. On the one hand, the paradox of the free slave who can still be freed makes sense because of the distribution of knowledge in the story: Huck and Jim simply do not know that Jim has been freed in law, so they continue to act as if Jim's enslavement is legally salient. On the other hand, the meaning that makes sense in the realm beyond the text has less to do with the world of the fiction and what characters know and more to do with the historical world of the newly emancipated subjects who are hugely burdened subjects of rights—the world in which Twain found himself writing (and we find ourselves reading). When Twain calls attention to their contrasting truth conditions, the world of the *fabula* and the "real" world where the reader encounters the *sujet* pull apart and the stability of the ontological status of characters begins to disintegrate. The evasion episode puts pressure on the text's fictionality by appearing to distinguish characters from their discursive origins.

In this sense, the "prisoner of style" names a certain problem of the aesthetic theory of character—specifically, that literary characters are both functions of a text and mimetic figures, that they are imprisoned by text and, at the same time, seem to exceed the bounds of textuality rather easily.[5] For example, when a novel's narration turns its attention from one character in a room to another in the same room, the first character does not simply disappear from our imaginations but instead persists, continues to exist in the imaginary space. Moreover, at least since Greek tragedy, literary characters have displayed a tendency to leave their original texts, finding their way into sequels, prequels, adaptations, fan fiction, and so on.

[5] John Frow's recent book, *Character and Person*, is in part devoted to this duality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

"Prisoners of Style" argues for the significance of fictionality and fictional character to the projects of four authors who grapple with the aftermath of slavery. By introducing the role of US racial history in fiction in new terms, "Prisoners of Style" reveals the ways American literary culture did and does wrestle with slavery's legacy not simply as a topic, or something to be written about, but also as an aesthetic problem. It draws out the ways in which enslavement is integral, in theory, to the history of the Western novel and, for this dissertation in practice, the American realist novel. It examines the political and ethical status of literary characters in the period, and considers what it meant (and means) to reflect on slavery and its legacy by reading about fictional people. Through readings of novels depicting slavery in retrospect—one written by an author who escaped enslavement, the others composed after legal emancipation—I develop a method for looking afresh at what has been called "the afterlife of slavery." As readers, we have certain ethical obligations to characters. They make certain demands and have certain rights within the text, and Twain like the other writers I discuss wishes to explore those claims as an alternative to the legal and moral discourses surrounding enslavement. Huck would have us believe that we are given a choice between two systems: heaven and hell, citizen and outlaw, morality and immorality. But this dichotomy is false, and there are good reasons why the novel continues on so long after his choice to "go to hell." The language of the law conditions Huck's notion of freedom, and when he exclaims, "Tom Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free nigger free!" he reminds us that "freedom" was not Tom's preferred word to begin with; as textual functions, literary characters know no conception of freedom for they are always already bondsmen. *Evasion* is the condition of characters. They know no life beyond their texts. Under Tom's direction, the plot gives up its aspirations toward

emancipation, abandons the motor propelling it toward an ahistorical utopian freedom, and transforms into a study in radical fugitivity—unending evasion without the promise of escape.

***

As scholars such as Bryan Wagner and Colin Dayan have recently shown, the nineteenth-century slave of US law is less a person transformed into a thing and more accurately a being suspended between those two states, a body held in wait between personhood and thingliness.[6] Slavery relied not merely on the transformation of persons into objects, but upon the irresolution of a paradox written on racialized bodies which were legally granted certain characteristics of both classes, a situation that was sustained by a perpetual and ritualized process of making and unmaking that continually reconfigured what forms of sentience, affect, willfulness, consciousness, embodiment, and so forth could be alchemized to justify the institutionalized abjection of enslavement. Slavery occasions an ontological crisis that must be perpetually managed, kept alive and unresolved, through the epistemological acrobatics of racist legal interpretation. In Virginia on the eve of the Civil War, for example, "what most occupied the thoughts of lawyers and judges in cases about personal rights…was not to affirm the slave as property, but to articulate the personhood of slaves in such a way that it was disfigured, not erased."[7]

The broader context for the legal alchemy of slave law is, as Dayan shows, an increasing anxiety in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over the significance of legal fictions within

[6] Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

[7] Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog*, 140.

both the system of the US law and the British common law that serves as the American system's roots. Whereas William Blackstone wrote in the *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1764-1769) that "arbitrary fictions and expedients" are "troublesome" but not dangerous, Jeremy Bentham spent much of his career railing against this very aspect of common law: "A fiction of law may be defined a willful falsehood," he explained, "having for its object the stealing legislative power, by and for hands which durst not, or could not, openly claim it; and but for the delusion thus produced, could not exercise it."[8] Legal fictions, he worried, are the sleight-of-hand that makes the law vulnerable to becoming a tool of injustice. "In Bentham's critique, the history of the common law was evidence of a world gone spectral, with laws and language obscured by 'the pestilential breath of Fiction.'"[9]

Despite Bentham's cultural influence, the necessity of fictionality in legal discourse would only appear to escalate in the nineteenth century due to the need for increasingly abstract notions of what counted—and therefore could be legislated—as property. As Martin Sklar puts it, the second half of the century in the US saw "the conversion of capital from fixed tangibles into fluid intangibles" as the economy transformed into one grounded in a collective belief in credit as an imaginary quantity.[10] Stephen Best writes,

> All inference and immateriality, prognostics and predictability, promise and obligation, property lost reference to actual goods and use values and, arguably, acquired the characteristics of a set of "instruments" and securities central to an emerging speculative market capitalism: of contracts or "options" that granted the "privilege" to buy (a "call") or sell (a "put") a commodity at a future date; of hedges for and against the anticipated price of a commodity ("futures"), which either over-valued (selling "long") or

[8] Quoted in ibid., 14.

[9] Ibid., 15.

[10] Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 50.

> undervalued (selling "short") the commodity in question; of the setting of a floor and ceiling to rates of return on the wager either that futures rates would exceed the established limits (a "straddle") or remain comfortably nestled within their confines (a "collar").[11]

As Best goes on to show through a series of readings that shuttle between legal and literary texts in *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Posession*, the vast economic and technological changes that occasioned jurists' revisions to the definition of property are also deeply entwined with notions of personhood. Crucially, in the case of *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1883), the US Supreme Court deemed corporations legal "persons" under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution. The personification of the corporation illustrates if nothing else dominant legal doctrine's continuation of the work of slave law to the extent that personhood became further estranged from the material bounded corporality of the human body. The body's allegorical function—its ability to correspond to a person—loses salience in decisions such as *Santa Clara*, and this loss of thingliness marks an amplification of personhood's status as a legal fiction. Along with Best, I emphasize that the crisis of personhood is not unique to slave law but persists long after in other corners of the discursive field of jurisprudence, including copyright and contract law. And these legal conditions help to give rise to literary experimentation with fictionality and personhood—the combination that produces inventive strategies of characterization.

***

As post-bellum novelists sought to represent the enslaved, who stood outside or on the border of the privileged realm of personhood, the question of literary character took on a special

[11] Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 32–33.

urgency. Thus, a legal, political, and ethical problem became literary. For all of the novelists in this dissertation, literary characters hold interest in part because they replicate the necessary failures of immanent personhood that concentrated and cohered on the bodies of real slaves. Not fully "there" and without the constancy of embodied selfhood, literary characters reveal the exclusionary force through which modern selfhood was and is made.

Critics have usually discussed literary characters without any attention to the historical development of slavery. Arguably, that line of thinking reached its apex the last time a number of aesthetic theorists gave the topic a significant amount of attention, during the height of structuralist criticism. In Roland Barthes's earlier writing, as in the work of Hélène Cixous, Colin MacCabe, and Michael Riffaterre, character was a "myth" or a "cog in the literary machinery."[12] Alternately, attempts to historicize character have, as Deidre Lynch points out in *The Economy of Character*, collapsed the developments in characterization with the establishment of modern selfhood, only reifying the idea that characters are simply mimeses of persons and making "a variety of disparate practices appear as versions of a singular form."[13] "What happens," she asks, "if we do not assume that the history of character and the history of the individual are the same thing?" My own answer to this question leads me conclude that the history of literary character in the US and the history of slavery should be thought together without being collapsed. The writers I discuss respond to particular moments in the history of legal and political personhood often by reimagnining the figure of the human through their black

[12] Hélène Cixous, "The Character of 'Character,'" *New Literary History* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1974): 384.

[13] Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

characters. "Given the histories of slavery, colonialism, segregation, lynching, and so on," writes Alexander Weheliye, "humanity has always been a principal question within black life and thought in the west."[14] Because of the historically vexed relationship between blackness and humanity, he argues, when placed in the context of that history, universalized "Man's conditions of possibility lose their ontological thrust because their limitations are rendered abundantly clear." Because literary characters depend upon a mimesis of the epistemological and perceptual conditions that make the human intelligible, they are uniquely suited to representing these limitations. The fictional black bodies that I focus on dramatize through a play of aesthetic figuration and disfiguration the discursive processes that make any body human, parahuman, or non-human. And in this way, the texts I examine flaunt their fictionality.

These texts are emphatically implausible. Faulkner, as many have noted, does not write "rounded" or even plausibly human black characters. Instead, his Yoknapatawpha novels, like the other fictions I read here, give us a critique of the very desire for plausibility among readers of anti-racist literature.

When the novel *Archy Moore, the White Slave, or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* was first published in 1836, Lydia Maria Child compared it to the recently published memoirs of Charles Ball, a former slave:

> It is said in your paper that some think Charles Ball equal to Archy Moore. The extracts I have seen from Charles Ball are certainly highly interesting; and they have a peculiar interest, because an actual living man tells us what he has seen and experiences; while

[14] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014), 19.

> Archy Moore is a skillful grouping of incidents which, we all know, are constantly happening in the lives of slaves. But it cannot be equal to Archy Moore![15]

While Charles Ball's work succeeds on the basis of its particularity—the fact that it is of "peculiar interest" because of its status as non-fiction—*Archy Moore* remains the better book. For Child, the fictionality of the latter matters far less than its ability to be representative of slavery in general and, more importantly, *plausible*. It gives us what "we all know" already to be "constantly happening." Paradoxically, at the same time that it purports to be the Northerner's window into the unfamiliar world of Southern plantation slavery, it confirms her expectations about that world. By 1861, Child was the editor of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where she proclaimed the authenticity of the narrative and vouched for its author's trustworthiness.

At that point plausibility had become encoded in the strict generic conventions of the slave narrative. As James Olney has shown, "[t]he conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline," which includes a portrait signed by the narrator, a title page that includes the words "Written by Himself," and so forth.[16] Olney goes so far as to map out the twelve distinct parts common to most slave narratives, illustrating the genre's rigid laws as well as the fact that abolitionist readers were not searching for novel information as much as they wanted somewhat standard descriptions of familiar scenes. Ostensibly, the photographs, portraits, signatures, and authenticating documents buttress the

---

[15] Quoted in Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore, the White Slave: Or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (New York ; Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), xiv, http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011609784.

[16] James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo*, no. 20 (1984): 50.

narrative's truth value, its authenticity, but the generic sameness of slave narratives themselves evinces the way that readers came to these texts not wondering whether they were true but instead whether they were *believable*. The question was less "did these events really take place?" and more "do these *kinds of events* really take place?" This is to say that the issue of authenticity was inextricably entangled with the narrative's plausibility, meaning, the body in the engraved portraits and photographs that served as the fronticepieces of the mid-nineteenth-century slave narrative would not have been meaningful as an individuated or particularized body but as a representative body. This idea about the representative function of the slave narrative is often rehearsed in the literary criticism of the period, but what I am trying to get at is something more specific about the representation of black embodiment: the way that authenticity attaches to the black body at the expense of individuated, subjective experience. As Olney notes, the slave narrative is distinguished from other autobiographies by being almost entirely episodic (besides some final reflections on slavery in general) and containing fewer second order reflections on the nature of memory itself than other forms of autobiography: "it is assumed to be a clear, unfailing record of events sharp and distinct that need only be transformed into descriptive language to become the sequential narrative of a life in slavery."[17] A discussion of authorial memory in Augustine, Wordsworth, or Thoreau "makes both memory itself and the narrative it surrounds fully symbolic," and thus reveal the writer to be *imagining*, a function that is necessarily jettisoned by ex-slaves in exchange for the reader's absolute belief in the events described.[18] Without minimizing the massive importance of the slave narrative as *the* primary

[17] Ibid., 49.

[18] Ibid., 48.

source of political energy for the abolitionist movement in the US, we should also attend to the ways that the field of abolitionist literature constructed blackness as to some degree opposed to imagination, defining and curtailing the horizons of possibility for black cultural production. This helps to explain why early black fictions like *Our Nig* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* failed to find an audience.

It also helps to explain how authenticity itself came to be further inscribed on the black body, a phenomenon that has persisted across centuries into our present moment.[19] At this point it will be useful to distinguish further between the authentic and the plausible as categories. The authentic presents itself as self-evidently so. The slave narrative begins with "I was born" because the narrative requires an existential claim before it can commence, before it can make any claims about what truthfully happened to its author. It begins by establishing the subject's "natality," to use a term from Hannah Arendt, in order to locate the "I" within the real world of the reader, establishing the ontic materiality of the authorial body.[20] (This is what Charles Twitchell Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. are referring to when they states that literacy afforded the black slave "one giant step up the Great Chain of Being; the 'thing' became a human being.")[21] The reader either believes that the author actually exists, or she doesn't.

---

[19] See, for example, recent discussions of the controversy over the conceptual poetry of Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith: Ken Chen, "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show," *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, accessed July 30, 2015, http://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/; John Keene, "On Vanessa Place, Gone With the Wind, and the Limit Point of Certain Conceptual Aesthetics," *J'S THEATER*, May 18, 2015, http://jstheater.blogspot.com/2015/05/on-vanessa-place-gone-with-wind-and.html.

[20] For her definition of "natality," see: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

[21] Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxix.

Plausibility, in contrast, demands a different kind of thinking. To say whether something is plausible or not requires that the reader take a skeptical, speculative posture toward the object in question. As Catherine Gallagher has written, the novel as a genre is unique in that it calls for a consumer well trained in an incredulity that other genres do not necessarily require. "Novels," she states, "seek to suspend the reader's disbelief, as an element is suspended in a solution that it thoroughly permeates. Disbelief is thus the condition of fictionality, prompting judgments, not about the story's reality, but about its believability, its plausibility."[22] In Gallagher's view, the novel reader's ability to stand in judgment of the fiction's plausibility, its resemblance to the real, affirms the reader's sense that, unlike the characters in the novel, she possesses the durability, vividness, and immanence that characterize non-fictionality. Contrasted with the partial, flimsy qualities of literary characters, she experiences the wholeness of an embodied subject who constitutes the phenomenology of the real. If the authentic body demands belief on the part of the reader, the plausible character demands disbelief. Gallagher's primary point here is that fictionality's rise to prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to readers' desire for the feeling of their own immanent subjectivity. Fiction is one technology for policing the boundaries of the real and ensuring that the reader is always on the right side of that boundary.

Perhaps the best illustration of this from the canon of abolitionist literature is Harriet Beecher Stowe's follow-up to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which included

[22] Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 2006), 346.

"*FACTS AND DOCUMENTS UPON WHICH THE STORY IS FOUNDED*."[23] Stowe retroactively shored up the plausibility of her fiction by producing a non-fiction text that assured readers of their sense that what they had read in the novel was indeed what slavery was like. And later, Josiah Henson would write a narrative that was promoted as being by "the one from incidents in whose life Mrs. Stowe drew some of the most intensely interesting and thrilling scenes in her world-renowned story of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"[24] These texts show the anti-slavery novel's capacity to summon not a different, alien territory where slavery was instituted but the reality-effect of the reader's own subjectivity, her ability to correctly assess the believability of abolitionist claims. The fictional slave's body becomes the thing against which a norm-creating consensus about slavery as an institution established itself. And more importantly, the fictional slave's body easily corresponds to other real-world bodies. The autobiographical slave narrative depended for its plausibility on the reader's belief in the authenticity of the author's particular body; in contrast, novels about slavery were tasked with presenting readers with plausible fictive bodies, which could potentially stand in for many other actual black bodies.

This dissertation about implausible bodies starts chronologically with Hannah Crafts, because around the time she was writing *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (probably in the 1850s) a shift was taking place in US letters whereby the romance began to equate conspicuous fictionality with prestige. Unlike what were then called "novels," romances urged readers not to focus on the literal truth of the story, encouraging them instead to admire the narrative's other,

---

[23] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (John P. Jewett & Company, 1853).

[24] Quoted in Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2000), 21.

more abstract truths about the human condition.[25] There is, as Jonathan Arac has noted, a significant generic distinction to be drawn in mid-century American prose fiction between what he calls "national narrative," which directly engages the socio-political issues of the contemporaneous reader's world, and the romance's "literary narrative," which focuses on more insular imaginary spaces that establish their discontinuity from the social realities of the time.[26] Literary narrative—like the work of Melville and Hawthorne, and unlike that of Stowe—is more self-consciously fictional, argues Arac. Unfettered by the obligation to create realistic mimeses of people, writers of romances experimented with literary character and used language to remake the corporeal and psychic contours of personhood. By representing what Sharon Cameron calls "impersonality," they applied pressure to notions of the self, the human, the citizen, and the person in ways that were impossible for earlier generations of American writers.[27]

The first two chapters of this dissertation, on Twain and Crafts, introduce the project's central concern: how characterization served as a way to explore the making and unmaking of black personhood that has been necessary for the establishment and perpetuation of legal slavery in the US. Chapter one lays out the major concerns of the project—the ethics of reading fiction and the ways that novels produce or fail to produce the bodies and subjectivities of literary characters. Along the way, the chapter builds an argument about the representation of Jim, in particular, the strategies Twain gives the reader for animating or vivifying him (or not). Reading several major commentaries on the evasion sequence as well as Twain's journals from the

[25] Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative: 1820 - 1860* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

[26] Ibid.

[27] Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

period, I claim that the novel critiques the readerly desire to both appropriate Huck and imbue Jim with the fullness of interiority. Chapter two continues to wonder what it means for a character to be present or absent, available or not, to a reader, but in this case I juxtapose a close reading of the novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, with a discussion of Jane Johnson, the slave who preceded Crafts in John Hill Wheeler's household. Johnson became a somewhat well-known figure for abolitionists of the period when she testified against her former master on behalf of William Still, who had helped her to escape. Examining both representations of Johnson and Crafts's novel, the chapter explores what fiction could do that these other modes of writing could not. In moments of sleep, amnesia, and daydreaming, Crafts resists the normative logic of subjecthood and individual rights that underpins the representations of Johnson.

In the second half of the dissertation, I demonstrate the significance of fictionality to American literary realism's evolution into modernism with chapters on Chesnutt and Faulkner. The third chapter, on several of Chesnutt's conjure tales, shows how their fantastical metamorphoses of characters into objects reimagine the contours of the figure of the human. The final chapter places two of Faulkner's novels, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, within the context of his interest modernist visual art, arguing that this interest inspired his concern with surfaces and flatness, leading to a mediation on artifice and the non-referential quality of fiction that runs throughout his major works. If critics are accustomed to thinking about modernist prose in terms of its disruptions of traditional narrative, I draw attention to the ways modernist literature disrupts the novel at the level of characterization as well.

Of course, there exists a much larger context for thinking about fiction and captivity, a longstanding intimacy between illusion and coercion in the West, and one could begin tracing such a genealogy with Plato's cave-dwelling prisoners, or with Pliny's account of man's first

mimetic efforts (an attempt, he claims, to mitigate the disturbing unpredictability of other humans coming and going in and out of our perceptual world). One could also speak of Freud's imaginary child, captivated but struggling with the same frustration: the swing from *fort* to *da*; or our habit of incarcerating hallucinators; or about Marx's camera obscura; or for that matter a whole slew of theories of ideology. The Western imagination has—and of course many have contributed to the writing of this history—a longstanding uneasiness about the possession of imagination—and about imagination's possessions and dispossessions. My dissertation tells the story of this preoccupation as it gets expressed in American fiction on either side of the turn of the century.

My writing about character in particular draws on a wide range of theoretical sources from Aristotle to Jacques Rancière. Among the literary critical works on character from the last two decades, I am especially indebted to those of Lynch, Blakey Vermeule, and Alex Woloch, all of whom connect the aesthetic with the political in ways that have been formative to my own linkage of post-bellum characters to the history of slavery in the US. However, beyond periodization and nation, the readings in "Prisoners of Style" are distinct from those other texts in method. For example, Vermeule has asked, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, finding her answer in the realm of cognitive science. She argues that we care because there are evolutionary benefits to performing the mental functions necessary to in some way believe in fictional beings. Just like when we gossip about real people behind their backs, we suspend our disbelief and give of our attention and in return we get lots of social information about intentions

and interests, which is precisely what we need to be able to do to be good social competitors.[28] Among the reasons I think Vermeule is drawn to cognitive science is the difficulty of historicizing the problem of fictionality. Thinking about the problem in the deep time of human evolution provides a way to write the history of our affinity for the fictional by placing the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century within the frame of humans' longstanding reliance on gossip.[29] I want to shrink this historical frame and change its focus. While Vermeule's argument is compelling, if the answer to the question, "Why do we care about literary characters?" is, "Because we are evolved to do so," then I am more interested in *how* we care about literary characters—and how writers use our cognitive predisposition for fictional beings in order to illuminate the ethical demands posed by the possession of such a mind.

Indeed, unlike Woloch and Lynch, who make arguments about the relationship between literary and political representation, my larger claim is about the *ethics* of reading fiction. The writers I look at respond to their period's theories of aesthetic politics that emphasize sympathy for characters (based upon their resemblance to humans) by pointing to the epistemological violence enacted by readers' inevitable desire to transform a character into what Riffaterre has called "a truth conquered."[30] Character here is less a question of representation and more one of relationality or how readers use characters to understand and fashion themselves as ethical subjects. As one theorist describes this relationality,

---

[28] Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 14.

[29] Here she draws from Catherine Gallagher's account of "The Rise of Fictionality."Ibid., 8.

[30] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 20.

> What is at issue is character as an effect of desire, understood not as "someone's" desire but as a structure forming the imaginary unity of objects. To say this is to argue that there can be no separation between an objective textual construct and something (desire) brought to it by a reader; rather, "character" is an effect of the self-"recognition" of a subject which is not preconstituted but which assumes a specific identity in the identification of an, hence, identification with the identity of a character.[31]

Throughout I emphasize "ethics" rather than "morality." This is because I want to shift focus, following Michel Foucault, away from morals (the social code of acceptable conduct) and toward the readerly subject, or "the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves" as subjects.[32] Hopefully at this point it has become clear that my argument does not privilege any one character as a (good or bad) moral actor; rather, I am interested in the way the fictions I examine reproduce the conditions of ethical thinking. Indeed, Chesnutt's point is never that any one of his characters learns to be a good (moral, political) person either within the conjure tales or as a result of hearing the tales; morality merely imposes a set of rules that the subject chooses to follow or reject. The ethical realm, on the other hand, takes into account the productive side of subjectification—the paradoxical freedom (to choose how to live within the bounds of subjecthood) that is produced in and through subjection. Foucault refers to the practice of ethics as the "aesthetics of existence."[33]

In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Stanley Cavell writes about the experience of seeing a tragedy unfold from the darkness of the theater audience: the strange status of the spectator who,

---

[31] John A. Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 238–39.

[32] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 5. The connection I make between character and ethics is also influenced, throughout the dissertation, by Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1984).

[33] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 11.

despite being absorbed in the action on stage, knows not to intervene to save the tragic hero no matter how strong her desire to assist, to avert catastrophe. "We cannot approach him," Cavell writes, "and not because it is not done but because nothing would count as doing it. Put another way, they and we do not occupy the same space; there is no path from my location to his."[34] To rush down the aisle and leap onto the stage would only have the effect of pausing the fiction, not dissolving it, since one univocal speech act cannot survive the jump from the realm of the spectator into the universe of the play. The conditions for action to become meaningful as speech, for action to matter and be intelligible and accounted for by other actors, are so different in these two spaces that there is no form of translation capable of carrying an audience member genuinely into the presence of a character in the play. It seems to me that something similar can and should be said about reading novels and short stories, because there too the fiction shuts us out from its circle of action, resisting realism's continuities and keeping us in the knowledge that fiction is "there" in our imaginations and we "here." Cavell goes on: "Their fate, up there, out there, is that they must act, they are in the arena in which action is ineluctable. My freedom is that I am not now in the arena. Everything which can be done is being done. The present in which action is alone possible is fully occupied."[35] To not intervene in the face of a character's suffering or even the threat of her extinction is the foundation for a form of freedom that, like all modern freedoms, relies upon what he calls "the final fact of our separateness," the originary splitting that forms the ground of subjectivity.

---

[34] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 334. Of course, Cavell is also aware of the myth of the spectator who, for example, is moved to rush onto the stage and save Desdemona. His point, however, is that *fulfilling* this salvific wish is impossible.

[35] Ibid., 338.

To extend Cavell's point one step further, the position of the reader initially appears to be amoral, to be separate from the ethical fabric of the fiction seeing as there is ostensibly no room for choice and moral freedom, for care or assistance, in the audience, but it is more accurate to say that the spectator and reader are affirmed in this schema as *the* ethical subject. Fictional worlds, with their constant game of proximity and distance—holding us at once in their thrall and at an ontological distance—recapitulate the possibility of ethical thought. Fiction forces me to acknowledge an experience of suffering that is recognizable but elsewhere—suffering and action not of my own.[36]

***

Scholars of African-American Literature tend to justify reading about fictional slaves by placing them in the service of a historiographical project. That is, they search for the historical "truth" embedded within a novel by focusing on the real event that likely inspired its fictional counterpart or by treating the fiction as a set of clues about the more general realities of slavery and its aftermath. In this way, critics usually subjugate the fictive to the historical, the fantasy to reality, and treat these texts as screens to be punctured or obstacles to be moved aside.

Why and how have African Americanists' ethical and political commitments to historicism suppressed or devalued fabulation? And at what cost? I want to argue that by rearing away from the fictive, the critical conversation about fictional portrayals of slaves has neglected a literary tradition defined by its demurrals from, and outright rejections of, historiography's imperatives to contribute to an official, collectively-held story about the past—

[36] The problem of fictional character has often been connected to questions of freedom, as in Harvey, William J., *Character and the Novel* (Cornell University Press, 1965).

by a reluctance to make the past present.[37] As Best has asked in a recent essay about the history of black critical thought, "Why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between that past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study the past is somehow to intervene in it?"[38] He goes on to show how equating remembrance with political redress has occluded implicit assumptions underlying both—assumptions about what remembering entails and about what types of action constitute redress.

We should not mistake Crafts's escape into imagination, for instance, for escap*ism*, with its connotations of resignation and complicity; instead, we ought to view it as her means of *distancing herself from the structural impossibilities produced by racialization and enslavement*. A novelist herself, Hillary Mantel never considers Crafts's retreat from reality into fiction as a retreat from material history and politics, for her argument in a 2002 review holds that Crafts's excursions into literature's dream life evince a writer longing for absent political possibilities and mourning her alienation from the knowledge of a fuller freedom.[39] Mantel is one of the only writers to ask why Crafts would choose to write a work of fiction in the first place. If the book comments on social and political life, Mantel suggests that the commentary cannot be understood apart from the story's gothic and sentimental extravagances. When critics avoid fictionality or make excuses for it as though it indicates a writerly compromise (as if all language isn't just one infinite set of compromises, anyway), they presume that nonfiction engages more directly with

[37] Doris Sommer makes a similar observation about certain writers' resistance to making their characters fully knowable. Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

[38] Stephen M. Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 453–74, doi:10.1215/00267929-1631478. PAGE

[39] Hilary Mantel, "The Shape of Absence," *London Review of Books*, August 8, 2002.

politics because—the argument goes—fictional worlds at best only provide a mimesis of political action, an imitation cut off from the realm of actual politics. In this way, the fictive highlights everything taken to be politically irresponsible about the whole of the aesthetic: its resemblance to ideology's falseness and its tendency to atomize or remove the subject from the "real" of everyday social life, of which the perceptual stuff of the ink-stained page is part. Perhaps more than any other kind of encounter with an object, being absorbed by a piece of literary fiction dramatizes the Kantian argument that the aesthetic carries us elsewhere, away from the perceptual material and categories in which it is grounded.

Therefore, rather than trying to reclaim Hannah *Bond* (her real name) as a historical subject in chapter two, my aim is to revive the extra-aesthetic meaning of the text's fictionality—to show that Hannah *Crafts* understands the withdrawal from everyday experience to be political and social in ways that are less intuitive to twenty-first century critics. In other words, the readings throughout this entire dissertation start with a familiar version of the aesthetic realm—protective, homogenous, and at best vestibular to the world of "real politics"—and expand outward into a theory of aesthetics in which even the most intensely autonomous aesthetic experiences are instrumentalized by the author for far more radical political ends than establishing the normative subjectivity of a writer or character. The novelists I focus on illustrate how these experiences can instruct readers to assume certain social orientations by training them to preserve the object's alterity and to discourage the more aggressive impulses of demystification.

Huckleberry Finn, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels rewards readers who embrace worlds of fantasy for their potential to disperse the rationality that had systematically divested black bodies of

selfhood and sentience. Reading a novel (especially a literary narrative), an ostensibly solitary and inward activity, becomes a way of accessing the dream life of a racist legal code along with other institutionalized instantiations of white supremacy. Crafts, Twain, Chesnutt, and Faulkner uncover the unexpected sociality of those racist fantasies that clung to and structured public life on the eve of the Civil War and then in its wake.

In order to clarify the methodological arguments that unfold in the pages that follow, let me take up a brief case study of the criticism on Crafts. All of the contributors to *In Search of Hannah Crafts,* the first major collection of critical essays on *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* take the imperative of the volume's name very seriously in one way or another—usually by historically contextualizing the novel or situating Crafts within either an Anglophone canon or American generic tradition.[40] This is not to dismiss any of the essays, all of which are excellent. Rather, my point is a meta-critical one concerning what kinds of scholarship appeared most urgent and necessary for an emergent body of commentary during the first decade after the manuscript's publication, and which were not. What are the ethical stakes of this type of historicism and generic stabilization? What does it mean to be "in search of" an author, real or implied, who comes to us—who becomes a minor celebrity—by virtue of her fugitivity? And why do the methodological possibilities appear to be only two: on one side, an over-investment in Crafts's identity and body, and, on the other, a facile version of post-structuralism's dismissal of the author?

Gates closes his introduction to the first edition of the novel with a set of questions about the historical person who penned the manuscript, followed by a statement of purpose: "Only

[40] Henry Louis Gates and Hollis Robbins, eds., *In Search Of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays On The Bondwoman's Narrative* (Basic Civitas Books, 2004).

further research can determine the answer to these questions. To facilitate that process and to restore Hannah Crafts to her rightful place as the author of the first novel written by a female fugitive slave, I have decided to publish this fascinating novel."[41] These sentences assume the reader assents to three things: that authorship is a "right," that such a right ought to be enforced, and that it is the duty of literary scholars to be the enforcers. When the *New York Times* broke the news in 2013 that the mystery of Hannah Crafts was "solved," this idea surfaced again in scholars' comments about the finding.

> "I think there was some suspended judgment because we didn't have a traceable historical person," said William L. Andrews, a professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. "We had leads. We had all sorts of interesting inferences. But we couldn't talk about the book with any confidence of authorial intention if we didn't know who the author was."[42]

Prior to the "discovery," the possibilities for reading the novel were curtailed by the archival absence of the woman we now know as Hannah Bond. To use Gates's term, Bond's nonappearance indicated that she was being denied her "right" to authorship—in which case we, the critics, were authorized to "restore" and enforce this right—and now that we have reestablished this right that inaugurates all other rights, we have also proven our critical sovereignty, or the authority to "talk about the book with…confidence." This is a heroic notion of critique in which the critic must continually produce his own indispensability for the text's survival.

---

[41] Ibid., lxxxix.

[42] Julie Bosman, "Professor Says He Has Solved a Mystery Over a Slave's Novel," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2013, sec. Books, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/books/professor-says-he-has-solved-a-mystery-over-a-slaves-novel.html.

The critical consensus formed around the desire to seek a "reality" behind, beneath, latent in the text functions only by suppressing the truly remarkable fact of the novel's fictionality, easily leading one to forget what is most manifest, that Hannah Bond disguised herself and her life through fiction. Fictionality was—and remains inextricable from—the artistic expression of her disenfranchisement and fugitivity. As difficult as it may be to define fiction positively, readers often know it when they see it because of its shadow-like negative relation to the real, which is easier to speak about than the fictive itself. This reliance on the oppositional relationality to the real is not a problem to be solved by critics but an indication of the fictive's essential removal from an inhabitable reality, its otherness or resistance to any attempt to fully integrate it into the space and temporality of reading. Fictional characters resist the attributive impulse, then, insofar as attribution always asks, What is real about this fiction?—a question that functions as an invitation to violate the text in the name of an external truth. And even if one fails to see such a violation as an ethical problem (it's just a book), it must be conceded that the attributive project contains a logical conflict insofar as it claims to uphold the rights, historicity, and intentions of the author at the same time as it ignores her desire to represent a world where she herself does not fully exist. Even semi-autobiographical fiction effaces the author, and without this effacement there can be no fiction, so to ground criticism in the authority of an attribution—to draw the "confidence" required for "judgment" from, as Andrews would have it, the traceability of the historical person—is to violate the very rights and intentionality one claims to protect. It is to grant Crafts a right to compose an autobiography at the expense of other positive liberties, including the right to express fantasy or unreality, the right to a form of publicity that is not also an expression of selfhood. It is to disregard her claim to the title of novelist and reinstate the impossibility that such a right could ever be hers, and to some extent to

return her as a novelist to the shadowy realm of inconceivability, where she composed the manuscript and where it remained virtually unnoticed for over 150 years. My own reading of the book relies on certain biographical facts about Crafts, so clearly I am not trying to do away with attribution or biographical criticism altogether; I am more interested in the way that her characters defy attempts to exactingly equate fiction with history or to ground all critical judgement in the authority of historicity and identity.

What makes it possible for Gates to write of a "rightful place" in the narrative of American letters? And if it is the duty of the critic to restore her to the realm of rights, what other forms of critique does such a project foreclose? Jacques Derrida poses very similar questions of attribution and artistic rights in his well-known essay on a disagreement between Meyer Shapiro and Martin Heidegger about the ownership of a pair of shoes painted by Van Gogh. Refuting Heidegger's argument in "The Origin of the Work of Art" that the shoes belong to a peasant woman working in a country field, Shapiro marshals several historical sources to support his claim that the boots are actually Van Gogh's own and that he lived in the city at the time, not the country. When Derrida weighs in on the disagreement, he rejects both arguments as misreadings, and more significantly, he shows them to be misreadings of a kind, both seeking "restitutions," he points out; they both want to fill the empty shoes with a wearer, tying them back onto the body of an owner that the painting has purposefully displaced. He writes,

> In order to do this, [Heidegger and Shapiro] both have an interest in *identifying*, in identifying the subject (bearer or borne) of these shoes, in tying up, tying back together *stricto sensu*, in their right sense, these objects which can't do anything about it—in identifying and reappropriating (for themselves), in using in their turn this strange out-of-use, this product productive of so much supplementary surplus value.[43]

[43] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 282 second italics mine.

Because the painting permanently and conspicuously displaces the wearer/owner/subject from its frame, identifying the bearer of the shoes—the absent subject—treats the boots as objects of property and utility, and violates the painting's divestiture of the wearer. In the process, Derrida also identifies a more central claim in "Origin," a line of argumentation *against* restitution which Shapiro misunderstands: Heidegger claims that the painting shows the shoes to be doubly *un*-wearable, doubly useless—both because they lie discarded and unworn within the mimesis and because they are merely a painted representation of the real thing. They remain unavailable and unassimilable to reality both at the level of the image and at the level of the picture. As Derrida puts it, the painting's "interlacing" of one kind of uselessness or unavailability with another reveals the "usefulness of the useful": the ground upon which the user and used, wearer and worn, subject and object distinguish themselves.[44] The painting presents to the viewer a pair of entities as they cross over the threshold into epistemological frameworks of utility, possessiveness, and even particularity, as they are lifted out of the absolute freedom of formlessness and solidified into discrete and knowable objects for the taking.

Derrida's essay resonates with Gates's formulation when he (Derrida) dissects the logical structure of restitution, a structure that ultimately only makes sense within the terms provided by possessive individualism. "Without even looking elsewhere or further back," he states, "*restitution* reestablishes *in rights or property* by placing the subject upright again, in its stance, in its institution."[45] The language of rights proves neither insignificant nor incidental in Gates's call for restitution. The conditions of the rights-bearing subject (the "right to have rights," as

[44] Ibid., 345.

[45] Ibid., 260.

Arendt puts it) has already been structurally embedded within the restitutive project.[46] Historical narratives are fortresses built to protect a subject of rights who is always under attack.

Yet, if modern historiography works by transforming the past into a lost object to be found and carefully wrapped up as a gift for the present, then the aesthetic reveals a counter-tendency to resist the "hypostatization" or objectification of the past.[47] The shoes, after all, are neither anyone's to wear nor anyone's to lose. By virtue of its counter-facticity, the aesthetic situates the past before us without allowing anyone to claim it as her own, for it belongs to no one and exists altogether outside of the possibility of belonging.

When Gates legitimates *The Bondwoman's Narrative*'s publication by presuming Crafts's "rightful place" and demanding her return, he assumes the truth-value of authorship at the expense of the novel's irreducible untruth: its fictionality. He empties the past of its alterity in the name of literary history by circulating a literary historical artifact that can only remain stable as long as readers forget both its literariness and its historicity. "Searching for Hannah Crafts," elaborating a system of authorial rights, and feeling relief over her supposed restitution all seem like very good ways of excusing ourselves from the difficulty of formulating sufficiently elastic critical methods. What I want to demonstrate instead in the following chapters is a replacement of the duality of history and fiction with a textual negotiation of form and formlessness at the level of character, a criticism that may be best described as an account of the object relations involved in novel reading—or novel reading as a crisis of object constancy.

---

[46] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 296.

[47] Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," 461.

Revisiting assumptions about how and where we locate enslavement in American novels suggests a different account of post-bellum fiction's ethical dimensions. Fictionality has a history, too; the chapters of this dissertation reconstruct the context in which the novelists Crafts, Twain, Chesnutt and Faulkner experimented with a mimesis rather than the real thing, with characters instead of actual people. These writers respond to the period's dominant aesthetic discourses about realism and sentimentalism by resisting the ideas that fiction ought to be a perfectly transparent window into other, more abject worlds and that sentimentalism has moral authority because it cultivates sympathy for characters. They emphasize instead the epistemological violence of readers' desire to know characters better than they know themselves, to transform characters into conquered objects. Ultimately, "Prisoners of Style" sees authors' and readers' mastery over characters as an ethical problem. The readerly conquest of characters may be a condition of realist fiction, but I suggest that certain fiction writers understand it to have affinities with the discursive apparatuses that keep slavery and its legacy of incomplete emancipation alive. And indeed the pairing of characters and slaves lasts long past the turn of the century; an American writer as late as Vladimir Nabokov called his characters "galley slaves."[48] "Prisoners of Style" attempts to recover one of the historical conditions that make this metaphor possible.

[48] Herbert Gold, "Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction No. 40," *Paris Review*, Summer-Fall 1967, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov.

CHAPTER ONE

How to Have Style in an Emergency: *Huckleberry Finn* and the Ethics of Fictionality

Imagination is the freedom that reveals itself only in its works.
—Derrida, "Force and Signification"[1]

For readers disappointed by the final chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—and they are legion—the first, better part of the book is about the possibilities and costs of acting morally in an immoral system; of choosing, as Huck does, to assist an escaped slave despite the legal and social realities of his time and place. "And then," as E. L. Doctorow puts it, "something terrible happens—terrible for Huck, terrible for American literature."[2] Tom Sawyer returns and commandeers the plot to "free" Jim; all seriousness drains out of the narrative; and the whole thing, in Doctorow's words, turns to "doddering shtick." For Doctorow, the novel unravels both politically and aesthetically in these final chapters.

Without a doubt, the episode fails to "work" both in the sense that Tom's efforts to liberate Jim actually extend his incarceration and in the sense that those chapters feels as though they could be the orphans of a different novel. However, to dismiss them as "shtick" is to overlook a crucial part of the novel's ethical critique. "When a prisoner of style escapes," Tom

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 7.

[2] E.L. Doctorow, "Jim and the Dead Man," *New Yorker*, June 26, 1995, 132.

Sawyer explains to Huck, "it's called an evasion."[3] What readers have always found disturbing about this episode in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is Tom's cavalier hijacking of the plan to "free" Jim, a strategy that effectively turns the former slave into a character from one of Tom's adventure stories. The action becomes a set of tropes and scripts authored by the boy, and, in the process, the fictionality of the novel itself rises to the surface. To be a prisoner of style—subject to the absolute powers of author and reader—is the condition of the literary character, Tom reminds us. Twain brings him back at the end of the novel at least in part to introduce an authorial avatar and draw our attention to the ethical stakes of writerly power, especially the God-like audacity required for a novelist to call a world into being and declare himself sovereign. To be a prisoner of style is the condition of all literary characters, who wander within the bounds of textuality without any promise of escape. The evasion sequence, then, marks the culmination of something that runs throughout Twain's masterpiece: a complex meditation on the ethics of reading about a world other than our own filled with people who don't actually exist; and the frustration many feel over the ending is better understood not as an aesthetic appraisal (Is this a success or a failure?) but as the aesthetic experience of reading a realist novel that abruptly and deliberately abandons its aspirations to verisimilitude.[4] Beneath Twain's fascination with deception, disguise, and trickery lies an uneasiness about the form of the novel's mimetic aspirations, about the ways that it produces or fails to produce the bodies and subjectivities of literary characters. I want to reexamine the representation of Jim in particular and consider the strategies Twain provides the reader for animating or vivifying him as a

[3] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 282.

[4] T.S. Eliot, "[An Introduction to Huckleberry Finn]," in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Norton, 1962), 320–27.

character—as well as what Twain withholds. I show how the novelist's own evasions disrupt the smooth functioning of characterization. And more fundamentally, I argue that those disruptions denaturalize the notion that a literary character is a mimesis of a person. The text frustrates the reader's longing to fully saturate Jim's imaginary body and imbue him with the fullness of interiority, and in doing so, it dramatizes the limitations of realism's representations of normative personhood.

Nearly every critic of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has weighed in on the debate about Twain's characterization. In the second half of the twentieth century the issue was taken up by a list that includes Louis Budd, Bernard DeVoto, T. S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, Leslie Fiedler, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Earnest Hemingway, Leo Marx, Toni Morrison, and Lionel Trilling. Despite the diversity of their treatments, at one point or another each of them comments on whether or not the novel's characters are sufficiently real—whether they are as psychologically complex or capacious, as round or deep, as ambivalent or conflicted as actual human beings. For Marx, Huck and Jim sadly "become comic characters" in the ending; for Ellison, the novel succeeds when we observe "Jim's dignity and human capacity" from "behind this stereotype mask"; Fishkin examines what Trilling and many, many others see as the novel's overriding achievement, Huck's narrative voice, arguing that the boy speaks with the "cadences," "rhythms," and "attitudes" of people Twain knew in real life.[5] Marx, Ellison, and Fishkin provide very different readings and conclusions, to be sure, but they also share an investment in

[5] Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and 'Huckleberry Finn,'" *The American Scholar* 22, no. 4 (October 1, 1953): 428; Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (Random House LLC, 2011), 104; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? : Mark Twain and African-American Voices: Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

the real. In Marx's and Ellison's view, the novel rises or falls based on how plausible or believably human the characters are, while Fishkin connects Twain's vernacular experiments to real-life conversations. Indeed, Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?* helped to usher in a wave of new historicist critiques of *Huckleberry Finn* that still continues, and while it has become unfashionable to assess whether Twain succeeds as a realist, literary scholars keep looking for the reality hidden behind the fiction. As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have written about the turn to new historicism in general, "We wanted to recover in our literary criticism a confident conviction of reality. […] We wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent."[6] Historicists want to know who are Huck and Jim, *really*?

This chapter is an attempt to reverse the subjugation of the fictive to the real. Instead of anchoring Huck or Jim in the firm ground of materialist history, I show the novel's most powerful ethical exploration to take place at the level of fantasy, of mimesis. That is, by calling attention to the *im*materiality of the Jim produced in our minds, and by undermining the solidity of his body and the fullness of his interiority, *Huckleberry Finn* denaturalizes the notion that a literary character mimetically refers to a person.[7]

---

[6] Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31. Audrey Jaffe addresses the relationship between realism and new historicism when she glosses Gallagher and Greenblatt's statement this way: "New historicism's claim on the real—or at least some portion of it—constitutes no small part of its allure; the suggestion that one can borrow from the authority of the historical and at the same time remain true to one's sidestepping, evasive, literary critical nature has, for many critics, rendered the offer irresistible." "Introduction: Realism in Retrospect," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 310–11.

[7] This argument echoes to some extent Jane Thrailkill's emphasis on "realization" over "realism" in "Emotive Realism," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 3 (2006): 365–88. For instance, we agree that "prevalent understandings of literary realism…associate it with 'cognitive value' rather than aesthetic experience"; but our interest in the category of the aesthetic takes us in two

Scholars of US literature tend to write about American realism in terms of its inability to reproduce reality, often describing it as a "failed" aesthetic. [8] "With imperial relentlessness," Eric Sundquist writes in the introduction to *American Realism: New Essays*, authors of the period between the Civil War and the First World War "sought to master a bewildering society that seemed always, in turn, to be mastering them." However, defining realism as an impossible ideal indicates, first, that every realist text is conditioned by a dream of mastery and, second, that the story of realism always ends in authorial defeat. *Huckleberry Finn* exemplifies a somewhat different version of this story, one less about mastery and aggression. The novel demonstrates why it may make more sense to describe some realist experiments not as aesthetic failures but in terms of their aesthetics *of* failure: a form of aesthetic experience through which one longs for—feels one's distance from—"the touch of the real."[9] For when Twain's characterization doesn't

---

different directions. She looks at how realism affects the phenomenology of embodiment, or how reading a novel "entails being 'moved' in the dual sense of emotionally engaged *and* repositioned with respect to the world" (366). I, too, am interested in the reader's relationship to her own sense of selfhood, but whereas Thrailkill examines how it seeks to reorient the reader's experience of her own material existence, I focus more on how the novel effects certain imaginative operations. (I don't disavow cognition in favor of the body.)

[8] Eric J. Sundquist emphasizes this term in *American Realism: New Essays* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 7. See also Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (University of Chicago Press, 1996). Among these major works, the claims of this chapter are perhaps closest to Kenneth Warren's. He states that "in the 1880s…the implications of realism's political critique outstripped the capacity of editors, society, and realists themselves to absorb the full political import of their literary practices." *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

[9] I want to make clear that, to my mind, this chapter's argument is not at all in conflict with any of the other writing about American literary realism that I reference. Instead, I am arguing for a method of reading that might open up additional insights into what kinds of political critique were possible in the period.

produce believable persons, something is still represented. As in the experience of seeing a photographic negative of "reality," the reader glimpses the exclusionary force through which any political regime establishes personhood's primacy. Put another way, if the drive to historicize has led many to examine what is political about the novel's aesthetic, I am arguing that the novel presses us to consider what is aesthetic about politics. Twain throws into relief what novelistic description and politics share in common: a need to distinguish persons from nonpersons and to establish the conditions upon which personhood is predicated.

The Neat Plot and the Stylish Plot

In his classic essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'n Huck, Honey," Leslie Fiedler writes about *Huckleberry Finn*'s "myth" of homoerotic intimacy as a fantasy of racial healing: Jim "will fold us in his arms saying, 'Honey'…he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real*."[10] The river serves as a liminal world where Huck and Jim may slough off the sediments of racial history, turning the novel into the fulfillment of the reader's post-racial wish. The novel becomes essentially anti-historical, rendering life on the raft in all the optimistic colors of liberal equality, the work of anti-racist politics becoming less pressing because, in this narrative, racial healing already exists as part of our manifest social destiny. There is no real need for action of any political or ethical consequence during the chapters that take place on the raft; the novel moves forward in time not because Huck or Jim *do* anything to propel the plot forward toward any kind of telos, but by virtue of the river's steady and inevitable force. What makes the evasion sequence worth revisiting is the fact that, back on

[10] Leslie Fiedler, *A New Fiedler Reader*, (Prometheus Books, 1999), 11.

land, the question of action reemerges with a special urgency as Huck and Tom disagree over what actions should lead the book to its conclusion. The sequence and its conflict between Huck and Tom is a study in different ways of conceiving of moral action and the epistemological prerequisites for such action. In literary critical terms, they disagree over how emplotment should unfold and what logic should guide it.

The issue of how one ought to plot action arises very early in the novel, also on land, when Tom tries to teach Huck to make believe and scheme "with style," which Huck never fully masters. After he escapes to the river, Tom's absence hangs over nearly every episode on the voyage as Huck finds himself moving through the world without much style at all: "I reckon Tom Sawyer couldn't a done it no neater himself," Huck reflects after he devises his plan to expose the fraudulent Duke and King.[11] "Of course he would a throwed more style into it, but I can't do that very handy, not being brung up to it." If stylishness represents one ideal of action epitomized by Tom, and Huck lacks style, his schemes have their own admirable quality, "neatness." With regard to the plot to keep the King and Duke from stealing Mary Jane's inheritance, neatness signifies a minimizing of risk and collateral damage, a commitment to truth, and a particular calculus of justice. A neat plan produces a consensus among all involved: a truth is revealed and through that revelation all disagreements over identity or rightful ownership find resolution; the King and Duke are exposed as the villains that they really are. Guided by neatness, punishment comes only to the deserving while the innocent remain unscathed. The neat plot, therefore, requires an unquestioning belief in the unambiguous nature of goodness and badness and of the regimes required to make such a world legible. In other

[11] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 207.

words, Huck's famous proclamation of "All right then, I'll *go* to hell" is not a rebellion against the moral system he inherits, but rather the opposite, a formal pledge to the structures of that system.[12]

Neatness, moreover, has its own logic of meaning, its own way of producing entities as morally significant. Consider Huck's response to Tom after he suggests that case-knives are not only the best (slowest, most inefficient) but also the most *moral* tool for digging a hole into the shed where Jim is held prisoner:

> I don't care shucks for the morality of it, nohow. When I start in to steal a nigger, or a watermelon, or a Sunday-school book, I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What I want is my nigger; or what I want is my watermelon; or what I want is my Sunday-school book; and if a pick's the handiest thing, that's the thing I'm agoing to dig that nigger or watermelon or that Sunday-school book with; and I don't give a dead rat what the authorities think about it nuther.[13]

Neatness requires a commitment to the use value of the material world: Huck replaces morality in this passage with an ethics of efficiency, the ability to accomplish one's goal through the least amount of labor. The question of neatness versus style proves to be a contest between different ways of intervening in the material world, of how one ought to understand labor as a moral force. Neatness, as opposed to style, bestows meaning retroactively: the pick, rather than the case knife, becomes the better choice after the fact, in retrospect, because of its efficiency in performing the task at hand. Neatness dictates that one chooses one's tools or strategies for entering the realm of the social by attempting to predict the utility of these tools, or by calling upon inherited knowledge about use value. There is no room for improvisation, for practice, within an economy of neatness: the outcome is already defined. Thus, it seems hardly a coincidence that

[12] Ibid., 228.

[13] Ibid., 260.

here Huck so easily places Jim in a catalogue that includes a book and a watermelon. His world is in every sense a world of objects to be utilized, acted upon, and acquired. His moral awakening belies an intensely narcissistic form of subjectivity in which entities in the world exist entirely *for* him and enter his consciousness as objects solely by virtue of their "handi[ness]."

Now, it would be easy to suggest that neatness and style are opposed in *Huckleberry Finn*, but this would trample the nuance of the distinction that Twain makes between the two. More accurately, neatness is itself a style even as it masquerades as its absence or dearth in the same way that minimalism, with its refusal of adornment, considers itself both a style and lack of or resistance against it. Neatness accomplishes its function without calling attention to its own machinations and stylistic maneuvers, occluding the fact of its ideology.

In his 1956 essay on the novel's indebtedness to landscape conventions, Leo Marx argues that the book's greatest achievement is its vernacular style, which allows Huck as narrator to integrate two observational positions: knowing the object of description and taking sensual pleasure in it. "In this person," writes Marx, "Clemens reaches back to a primal mode of perception undisturbed by the tension between art and science. It does not occur to Huck to choose between beauty and utility."[14] In both his schemes and his narration during the bulk of the river journey, Huck collapses the aesthetic with the functional—but I would add that the episode with the King and the Duke begins a transition that entails a departure from this integrated form of seeing and narration. After coming ashore and resolving to depart from the more excessive, ornamental aspects of Tom's style, Huck abandons the generosity with which he imbibes the "gloriously imperfect actuality" of the world and begins to advocate a staunch

[14] Leo Marx, *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 140.

scientism, a calculus of cost and benefit in which there is no place for beauty.[15] Thus it is left to Tom to revive what has been cast off by Huck—an investment in beauty and in the aesthetic as a whole—and to in turn initiate the tension between the previously integrated observational poses.

As is probably become clear by now, Tom's understanding of style has very little to do with what we normally conceive of as style—narrative language—and much more to do with the dynamics of plot. Indeed, while, as Marx shows, style on the river is very much a matter of language and the possibilities of language to bridge the divide between subjectivity and objectivity, back on land, the narrative no longer performs such feats. Style does not simply disappear, though. Rather, we might even say that a concern for good style gets sucked out of the narrative and *made material within the world of the fiction*; style turns into the stuff of plot. It ceases to be Huck's concern as narrator because Tom takes over the role of stylothete the only way he can, in a medium other than language: "evasion." Tom's plan produces a profusion of materiality: silverware, shirts, food, a sheet baked into a pie, rodents in bags, snakes dropping from the rafters, and more. As a result, in these chapters, style reveals its unique material character, accreting an effusion of objects whose only purpose is to manifest style. Style is ornamental, inessential, but still very much part of the "furniture of the real world." It creates new abundances, but, as I will discuss at length in the next section, it also leaves holes in the fabric of the everyday, and, as a result, the absence, just as much as the presence, of objects and individuals vexes the adults in the story.

Neatness requires an ethic of efficiency; it is motivated by its end goal, and it organizes events or actions in relation to that end goal. We might see it as subtending plot, as the

[15] Ibid., 141.

operational principle of emplotment. Style, in contrast, requires a very different relationship between the end goal and the middle. It has a more oblique relationship to the end and instead takes a round about route toward any terminus, producing a disorganized, overly expansive middle that resists our desires to get on with it and move forward. One way to conceive of these apparently contradictory operational principles might be to see them through the conceptual frame of the "double logic" of narrative.[16] Peter Brooks describes the duality this way:

> …prior events, causes, are so only retrospectively, in a reading back from the end. In this sense, the metaphoric work of eventual totalization determines the meaning and status of the metonymic work of sequence—though it must also be claimed that the metonymies of the middle produced, gave birth to, the final metaphor.[17]

Plot makes possible two different readings that move in opposite directions: one forward, in which the middle is an accumulation that makes the ending possible, and one backward from the totalizing telos that is the end.

Neatness makes perfect sense in this light, and Huck demonstrates his mastery of the dual logic of endings and middles when he provides what could be read as emplotment's guiding principle: "I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done."[18] The thing done makes the "how" of it meaningful while the "how" produces the only thing that matters, has meaning: the end. To say that he is not particular is, in a way, to say that he is especially particular about the arc of succession that appears only in light of completion, that he comprehends the distinctiveness of plot as more than a series of events, as an intentional structure weighted toward

---

[16] Jonathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 178.

[17] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Knopf, 1984), 29.

[18] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 260.

the future, an "operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time."[19]

Huck points toward the relationship between desire and plot—the desire *for* plot as well as plot's ability to generate desire when his plots curtail it. Not only do we (along with Huck) need and want plotting in order to make sense of the world and in order to manipulate it, we also engage in plotting to produce and magnify our desires by lending duration to a series of events that would otherwise only exist in a structural, non-durative relation to one another. As Brooks argues, plot locates the horizon of satisfaction elsewhere and so makes desire possible. Neatness, however, in its drive toward efficiency minimizes the space between here and there, between the initiation of desire and its fulfillment; it shrinks duration, action, imagination, and force to a minimum without being rid of them.

Style, or what Twain calls "style" in the evasion episode, works differently. Tom, our paragon of style, forestalls the end of the novel for several chapters so that he can insert new actions. Though he still moves toward the end that both readers and Huck have in sight—Jim's escape—he performs a complex dual operation of approaching and moving away from that end point. Style expands plot from the middle, self-consciously postponing Jim's escape, moving the beginning and the end further and further apart while still moving in the same direction. It attempts to maximize duration and, in turn, desire and imagination. It transubstantiates action into stylization, an aesthetic effort that only reveals Tom's freedom—a freedom purchased at Jim's expense.

[19] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 12.

Always possessing a strange power over the material, style both expresses and suppresses authorship. For example, the letters written as part of the evasion are signed, "Unknown Friend."[20] Part of Tom's strategy for dissemblance is to make *visible* the *absent* center of the sequence. Roland Barthes's and D. A. Miller's theorizations of style echo this characteristic of style we find in the novel. Barthes, for his part, places style on the side of particularity, pinning it to the writer's material existence. He writes that it springs "from the body and the past of the writer and gradually" becomes "the very reflexes of his art."[21] But while style may be an emanation of the authorial body, while it may reproduce the author's body in the text, D. A. Miller reminds us that it effaces her identity as well. In his book on Jane Austen's style, Miller writes that, to call a fictional economy into being, style undertakes a "renunciation of the world" by repressing what is external to the text, including the author, all in an effort to deny the "linguistic fluidity that endangered the possibility" of style's authority in the first place.[22] What he terms "the melancholy of Austen Style" bears similarities to the theory of style we find in *Huckleberry Finn* in the sense that Twain's notion of style (as exercised by Tom) also labors to deny the world beyond, and then to efface that labor, establishing its own "extraterritoriality" beyond history. Miller describes Austen the stylothete as simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, as the god-like "No One." Though I do not mean to suggest that Twain, Barthes, and Miller all share the exact same notion of style, all three seem to agree on one thing regarding style's materiality: the fact that style exists only to produce a kind of hole in the world of the

[20] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 283.

[21] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Macmillan, 1977), 10.

[22] D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 67, 84.

text, a conspicuous absence in the shape of the authorial body. This, of course, results in much of the evasion sequence's humor. Style wants to have it both ways: to be everywhere and nowhere at once, to be everything and nothing for the reader. If the neat plot makes legible the truth of identity, revealing, for example, the King and Duke's deception, the stylish plot throws representation into crisis, blurring the divide between Tom and Huck, imprisonment and escape, presence and absence.

Fugitive Objects

Twain was fascinated by the formation and deformation of imaginary individuals. After working on *Huckleberry Finn* on and off for years, he took up the manuscript again in the summer of 1883 and finished it in a flurry of productivity. In a notebook entry from a few months prior, he wrote the following story idea:

> A dozen young people privately agree that during a whole evening they will deceive one of their numbers by pretending they see & hear nothing which he sees & hears—& they will glance wonderingly at each other & seem to make furtive comments. An hour after he goes to bed they (the males) slip up & peep into his room & find him avoiding imaginary creature—a staring-eyed maniac.[23]

Versions of this prank appear throughout Twain's work, but this example from the period just prior to the novel's completion is especially useful as evidence of his interest in the social production of the real.[24] (The entry directly beneath this one refers to an idea that he eventually

[23] *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*, ed. Frederick Anderson, Lin Salamo, and Bernard L. Stein, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 2:510.

[24] Richard E. Peck gives an overview of research on the construction of the novel's ending and offers some interesting revisions to that earlier work in "The Campaign That... Succeeded," *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910* 21, no. 3 (1989): 3–12.

incorporated into chapter twenty-three of *Huckleberry Finn*.)[25] I take the notebook entry about the prank as a parable about the limits of visuality and the interpellation of subjects through spectacle, and it prompts two possible readings. In the first, the victim of the prank finds himself excluded from the visible world inhabited by the rest of the characters, and his subsequent insanity dramatizes what Martin Harries calls "destructive spectatorship"—the fantasy that certain spectacles, instead of triggering the Althusserian scene of subject making and remaking, have the opposite ability to destroy the subject.[26] Confronted with his inability to join the group's consensus about what is visible, the man is violently ejected from the realm of good subjecthood, making him insane and transforming him from a viewer into the object of surveillance who shores up the spectatorial power of the tricksters. "A staring-eyed maniac," he becomes a bad visual subject. In the second reading, we might just as easily take the tale to be an illustration of interpellation's power to enfold everything it touches into a singular reality. From this perspective, the scenario is about the absolute coercion that produces the visible world and forms good subjects. Even though the initial visions (what the victim sees and the pranksters deny seeing) are "really there," the communal scene of viewing and their attendant pressure to assemble consensus about what does and does not exist leads the victim to bend his perceptual world to match the socially agreed-upon reality. The political pressure to see what others see remakes the subject's visual field to align with the others.' If in the first reading the "maniac" represents the bad subject who must be excluded from the privileged realm of the real, in the second he proves the perfect and sufficiently plastic raw material for subjectivization. In Slavoj

[25] *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*, 2:510. See footnote 260.

[26] Martin Harries, *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Žižek's words, he "enters the subject's fantasy frame" in order to share its relation to the real.[27] Through both of these readings—and one ought to give them equal weight—we see Twain tying together aesthetic practices ("pretending" and making an "imaginary creature") with political concerns about consensus and coercion (whether one is part of the fragment's initial "agreement").

Aesthetics, writes Jacques Rancière, "is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience."[28] It shares with politics a concern with "the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community" and with the distribution of what is visible in relation to what is understood as meaningful action.[29] Twain's notebook entry enacts this same connection between aesthetics and politics. It shows what fiction and any project of domination (or emancipation) have in common: the mapping of a "distribution of the sensible" that defines what is and is not intelligible to a community, what is and is not a "creature" worthy of regard, what is and is not contained within the landscape of the real. Further, the entire scenario highlights the liberal fantasy of sociopolitical life as a competition of disembodied voices that communicate otherwise unknown (interiorized) perspectives and motivations.[30] Indeed, the plot turns on a meeting of minds and a disregard for that which is physically present. Their collective action

---

[27] Slavoj Žižek, "Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real," in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 222.

[28] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 13.

[29] Ibid., 18.

[30] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues for this view of politics in his excellent *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

proves more effective than they anticipate because they take advantage of the political realm's preference for Cartesian subjects who suppress embodiment and prioritize precisely that which is absent or invisible: interiority. In both readings of the scene Twain describes, when wills, perspectives, and inner life cease to be knowable, fictionality becomes operative.[31] So, first the group refuses to share what they actually perceive, and this becomes the premise for their game of make-believe. Then the opacity switches to the other side, the maniac's mind becomes unreadable, and the group "sees" the "imaginary creature." Thus, the message that hangs over both readings is that situations where individuals will not or cannot make their interior experience known can only be represented as asocial, make-believe, imaginary—as fiction.[32]

Huckleberry Finn's most obvious variation of the same gaslighting trick occurs when Huck steals a spoon from Aunt Sally by alternately removing and replacing one from the set over and over until she no longer trusts her own ability to count, throwing her hands up with weary frustration. Huck remarks, "*Now* she couldn't ever count them spoons twice alike again to save her life; and wouldn't believe she's counted them right, if she *did*."[33] Like the prank in the notebook fragment, the game with the spoon scrambles the logic of accounting and even destabilizes the presence of objects by animating them, bathing them in the shimmering light of the uncanny, keeping them radically out of reach in the way things are unreachable when they

[31] Gumbrecht writes, "Playfulness and fiction…characterize interactions whose participants have a limited, vague, or no awareness at all of the motivations that guide their behavior." In play or fiction, "rules—either preexisting rules or rules that are being made up as the play unfolds—take over the place of the participants' motivations." Ibid., 84.

[32] Ibid., 84–85.

[33] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 267.

prove unassimilable to everyday patterns of thought.[34] And more specifically, the scene in the novel illuminates the constant machinations of memory—the belief in the persistence of objects from which we have averted our eyes—by disrupting the flow of the image-making process. Imagination becomes the subject of critical attention in the moment of its malfunctioning. The fugitive spoon interferes with Aunt Sally's "sense of something received and simultaneously there for the taking" that is vital to the veracity of both perceptual and imagined objects.[35] Her confusion marks a moment when imagination fails to round out a durable account of an environment, precisely because Huck makes any kind of consensus about the spoon's existence impossible. Indeed, Sally cares about the portable and recursive phenomenon of the spoon's existence, what Heidegger calls the "ready-to-handness" of "equipment": its appropriateness for a task and availability to circumspection, its visibility and solidity.[36] If the spoon were simply missing, escaped, it would still have a kind of stable presence signified by the shadow of its absence (she would know both that something is missing and what it is), but it "evades," instead of escapes, meaning, it refuses any mode of accounting that would offer it up as ready-to-hand. And as a result, she finds it impossible to make a claim to the object; she finds the world illegible, unstable, dispossessed, and unable to return her gaze. The spoon's evasiveness shows a

---

[34] Here I draw on Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[35] Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 34.

[36] The "ready-to-hand" object does not need to be solid or visible for Heidegger (wind can be ready-to-hand), but my point is that for a spoon to be available in this way it must be solid, otherwise it cannot offer itself for use. Moreover, though my understanding of absent entities throughout this section displays Heidegger's influence, I am aware that a similar argument could be founded upon a Marxian understanding of objects. I lean toward the former only because I find Heidegger more consonant with Scarry. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

resistance to human concern and an unwillingness to be knowable and available. Whereas the other spoons live to be counted and mimetically reproduced in the human imagination so as to persist in memory and affirm the specular function of the world, anchoring Sally's sense of locatedness, the evasive spoon foils that operation. Like the prank victim from the notebook, she experiences the outside of what, in a different context, Audrey Jaffe has called "exclusionary realism."[37] "The realist landscape, knowing how to give the subject (or native) what he wants (the return of his image), also knows how to refuse it," she writes. Jaffe's version of destructive spectatorship is "negative interpellation," and she contends that it always shows the bounded nature of the real: "if your surroundings can keep you out, you were never more than provisionally in."

Ultimately, the spoon trick is only one emblem of a much larger preoccupation with the presence and absence of individuals in *Huckleberry Finn*. Consider the difficulty both characters and readers have accounting for bodies. There is the search for Huck's body; Huck's and the reader's failure to recognize Pap's dead body; the confusion over how bodies are gendered in the cross-dressing episodes; the constant swapping and invention of names so as to divorce bodies from their "proper" identities; and, maybe most significantly, the question of what kind of body Jim inhabits—of who owns his body. The goal here is not simply to argue for the instability of identity; more to the point, characters and readers collectively struggle over the discursive

[37] Audrey Jaffe, "'Outside the Gates of Everything,'" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43.3 (Fall 2010): 384. Many of the critics I engage with here specialize in British fiction because fewer Americanists have written about fictionality. There are, I think, reasons for this that deserve exploration, but they lie beyond the purview of this chapter. Hopefully it will suffice to say I am trying to argue for a "use" of fictionality that is related to but certainly distinct from the British tradition, specifically because of its relationship to US slavery and its aftermath.

meaning of bodies—their status as present or absent, dead or alive, named, gendered, and so on—emphasizing the social making of human signification and the objectivity of identity.

By drawing so much attention to fakery and the limits of perception, Twain arouses the reader's wish to read "into" the text, to know more and more. Sacvan Bercovitch has written about the readerly stance taken toward Huck in particular, observing that we are initially driven by an urge to protect the boy from his own naiveté, leading us to "[reach] between the lines" of the narrative for a truer, more moral meaning: "he says, trembling, 'I'll go to hell' and we think 'he's saved!'"[38] Bercovitch continues: "And our act of protection is in turn a claim to ownership. It makes Huck *ours*. […] We adopt him; we take him into our hearts; we interpret him in our likeness; we rewrite his text."[39] The whole process of interpreting Huck quickly turns into a means of appropriating the character and remaking him in our own image, of always proceeding under Twain's guidance to symptomatically read and insist upon the submerged meaning beneath Huck's narrative—the meaning that returns us to ourselves. This hermeneutic process gives us precisely what we want. We come to the text expecting to find our reflection and the text dutifully complies. But as Bercovitch compellingly argues, the novel is openly critical of this kind of reading, giving us the opportunity to laugh at the narcissism of seeking "political resolution in the act of exposé" as the familiar models of symptomatic reading and ideology critique would have it.[40] *Huck Finn* renders visible the liberal ideological structures

---

[38] Sacvan Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny about Interpretation," *Kenyon Review* 24, no. 3/4 (2002): 117.

[39] Ibid., 118. Jonathan Arac's *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

[40] Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck," 126.

propelling the hermeneutic act, the driving fantasy of an ideology that presents itself as all ideologies do—reified through an apparent vulnerability to puncturing, to a demolishing critique, to transcendence and a vision of itself disguised as the "real." The readerly desire to appropriate Huck and nearly all the characters in the novel presents itself as the impulse to penetrate the exterior, the ironic, and discover an interior unknown even to the character himself, all in the service of a salvific sympathy. And as Bercovitch's analysis implies, Twain uses the novel to critique this form of critique, as it were, as well as this way of relating to characters. He estranges us from the topographical figuration of characters as psyches embedded within the plane of the page. The reader instead turns against her own impulse to pierce the surface of Huck's narration and make a claim to a deeper, more essential version of the character. Twain draws her up from the depths of some buried meaning toward what Huck manifestly says. Bercovitch's reading exemplifies what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have called "surface reading," and specifically, the "embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance."[41] This reading practice "involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects, and refuses the depth model of truth, which dismisses surfaces as inessential and deceptive." If, for Bercovitch and Twain, the reader's penetrating mastery of a character is a ruse of dominant ideology, then we might focus on the surface of *Huckleberry Finn* by returning to the scene of reception through a self-criticality that cuts through any absorption in the text. The reader catches herself in the act of appropriation, mitigating the epistemological violence of interpretation.

[41] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 10.

This insistence on manifest content or appearances comes through clearly during the evasion sequence when the boys sign the letters they write, "Unknown Friend."[42] The first one reads, "Beware. Trouble is brewing. Keep a sharp lookout." Part of Tom's strategy for dissemblance is to call attention to Jim's impending flight, to draw everything to the surface by announcing the future absence that propels the reign of terror he brings down upon Aunt Sally. If Huck makes legible the truth of identity, revealing, for example, the King's and Duke's deception earlier in the story, Tom's plan flaunts his lack of interest in the hermeneutic search for hidden truth. Tom replaces the logic of identity with the logic of presence and absence. And as a result, he throws revelation and representation itself into crisis, blurring the divide between Tom and Huck (who pose as each other during the evasion), imprisonment and escape, presence and absence. "Jim's *got* to do his instruction and coat of arms," Tom insists, convincing the other two that they need to write the history of Jim's captivity.[43] When it comes to actually recording the inscription, though, Tom uses a nail to first scratch the words into a grindstone before the illiterate Jim traces over them and carves a more permanent message into the stone. "Here a lonely heart broke," Tom writes, "and a worn spirit went to its rest, after thirty-seven years of solitary captivity."[44] Tom professes to write the history of Jim's evasion, but in actuality he proleptically records Jim's death. The hermeneutics of exposé would uncover the truth of what is "really there," make a presence when faced with an absence of manifest information. In contrast, Tom's stylish plot divulges a more immediate political reality right on

[42] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 283.

[43] Ibid., 272.

[44] Ibid., 273.

the surface of the story: the near impossibility that Jim's self-representation could be anything other than a reiteration of a script or the impasse of a character whose presence always takes the form of an inscription of his own absence.

Twain estranges the reader from Jim, calling attention to his fictionality. Because realist novels tend to take advantage of the reader's desire for omnipotence, they risk indulging the illusion that, if one just reads the right way, a character will become fully knowable. Twain reminds us how illusory this phenomenon really is. The point becomes clearer in light of another short example from the body of criticism that faults the evasion sequence for its representation of Jim, specifically, the way the critique understands character. Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep* is about the relationship between literature and ethics. Booth writes that *Huckleberry Finn*, "like the mischievous Tom Sawyer, simply treats Jim and his feelings here as expendable, as sub-human—a slave to the plot, as it were."[45] This one sentence contains a complicated set of critical moves. Booth implies that Jim, unjustly handled *by the novel*, ought to be represented otherwise, as a human and full of feeling. In other words, Jim has an emotional life, is in "reality" human, whereas the novel works to hide these facts from view. This reading seeks to reclaim Jim's lost subjectivity—as though the novel's discourse works like a keyhole, limiting the view of the story—tacitly forgetting the fact that, like all characters, Jim is not simply confined *in* the novel; he is *of* the novel as well. After the em dash, however, Booth rises to the level of form, to the discourse of the novel, to argue that the violence practiced on Jim occurs when it privileges plot over character. But if we agree with Aristotle when he says that character necessarily exists logically subsequent to plot (and I think we should), we know that this is

[45] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 466.

always the case: character unfolds through plot. While Booth would have us believe that Jim's subjugation to plot is a special instance and that other characters like Huck and Tom possess some kind of freedom from emplotment, in actuality none of the characters in the novel differs in this particular way, that is, in the structural relationship between character and plot. What *does* make the novel distinct, I think, is the fact that readers *care* for Jim as Booth does, as a slave to plot, and that they do so far more intensely and self-consciously than they do for other literary characters. In the evasion sequence Twain brings plot to readers' immediate attention, leading them to experience it as Booth does, as if it exerts a force upon character, as if Jim would exceed the stifling constraints of textuality and his subjectivity would expand if only form somehow fell away. Character and plot, then, cease to exist in a simple structural relation to one another, one supporting the other (as they do in the Aristotelian formulation) because of this addition of force. We begin to experience the interaction of plot and character as an exercise in power. But what does it mean to conceive of a character as contained and imprisoned within a text as opposed to understanding it as a mere textual function?

Huck's Voice/Jim's Body

In thinking about characterization as a relation of power—as though the reader is both witness to and participant in a play of freedom and subjection—I find a pair of sentences in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* helpful. In the first he states that "[characters] have their choices, but the novel has its end,"[46] and a couple of pages earlier, without too much

[46] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 140.

explanation, he asserts that if a character "were entirely free he might simply walk out of the story."[47] I bring up these passages not only because they seem to agree with my assertion that in relation to realist fiction we can at times feel the limitations of a character's freedom but also because they push us to wonder what makes it possible to talk about characters this way in the first place—as entities who walk about in the story with a certain amount of volition and freedom, until they come up against freedom's limits in the instant they are confronted by certain formal boundaries of the novelistic discourse. Think of Jim tracing over the text Tom prepares for him; form, that moment powerfully suggests, is a practice of confinement. For Kermode, endings vividly mark these boundaries because with regard to characters they practice a certain kind of ontological violence by constraining subjectivity, choice, the ability to amble out of the text or speak without its script. When we finish a novel, we abandon its characters and choose, at the suggestion of its form, to move on with our lives, carrying with us only memory's faded version of the reading experience. (But of course endings are not the only way in which novels guide our regard.) Kermode's attention to the limitations of characters' freedom proves provocative in a way he may not have intended when it leads him to suggest that novels take an interest in negotiating freedom and its curtailment, that we should attend to these negotiations, and, finally, that novels implicitly raise ethical issues about the treatment of characters *at the hands of their texts and their readers*.

Similarly, whereas critics are used to thinking about characters in terms of a "system" or a distribution of majorness and minorness, roundness and flatness, the Victorianist critic Alex Woloch has recently written about character as a "technology of attribution." Narrative portions

[47] Ibid., 138.

out its attention to different characters, who "jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe."[48] Far from inevitable, the intense visibility of a protagonist and the near invisibility of a minor character are matters of a social process enacted by the narrative's power to represent or suppress what it chooses. One could say that the final chapters' conflict between Tom and Huck amounts to a disagreement over discursive turf, with Tom attempting to evade the book's ending and Huck trying to bring it closer, Tom demanding more discursive space and Huck resisting. The narrative would conclude sooner, in other words, were it not for the insubordinate power grab by the formerly minor Tom, who insists on more representation—a move readers find hard to forgive because it is purchased at the expense of Jim's freedom and subjectivity.

While I agree with that account of how power works in the novel, I also want to reassess readings that view Jim's characterization as an arc from minor to major, or flat to round, before the evasion sequence flattens him again. By emphasizing his position as a literary character, Twain's representation of Jim serves as what Fred Moten has called "an improvisatory suspension of subjectivity, and of a certain desire for subjectivity, and of any prior understanding of subjectivity's differentiated ground."[49] I take Moten to mean that certain textual practices exist in which the question of individual narrative subjectivity gives way to questions about the possibilities that inhere in the *objectivity* of the narrative, or in our case the object*hood* of the enslaved character. Moten writes specifically about nonfiction texts in this case, like WPA narratives, where the speaking subject comes to our attention only through a process of translation that we might understand otherwise as a "predatory erasure" of originary subjectivity.

---

[48] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 13.

[49] Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 276.

But what if we didn't understand the narrative as an erasure, he wonders, and instead viewed it as "the echo of that already extant loss inherent in intelligibility, translation, and transcription, whose presence is and allows the meditational 'ethics' of ensemble"? From this perspective, the narration becomes a record of the gains and losses that mark every entrance into history, or the site where an "ensemble" of textual forces meet and negotiate the cost of becoming intelligible. While Moten's essay does not concern itself with fiction, I want to suggest that *Huckleberry Finn* dramatizes something similar to his "mediational 'ethics' of ensemble." Though fictive, the representation of a black slave still risks being read through the lens of identitarian politics as an erasure of subjectivity that occurs at the cost of Huck's narrative and Tom's hijinks. Alternately, thinking about the text as a practice of ensemble allows, as Moten writes, for an ethics to emerge. It makes possible questions about the relational stance we take toward Jim: what is at stake when a novel imagines the life of a fictional slave, brings an imaginary slave into being? And how should we think about ourselves as readers of such a novel, often taking pleasure as we witness his continued enslavement?

This last question is especially complicated because the nature of literary characters makes it difficult to say what we really mean when we talk about "witnessing" or "viewing" or being privy to a "spectacle" involving a fictional individual because, after all, strictly speaking, there is nothing to see when we are reading novels except for words on paper. Any account of the ethical encounter with prose fiction must consider the peculiarities of reading and the imaginative process undertaken by the reader under the careful "instruction" of the author, to use a term from Elaine Scarry.[50] As she points out, the verbal arts, "especially narrative, is almost

[50] Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*.

bereft of any sensuous content" beyond the black marks and the feel of the pages, meaning that the reader's encounter with character should be thought of differently from the encounter with a photograph or a painting or a theatrical performance.[51] Like other media, the text guides the creation of the representation, but unlike the others, that guidance serves a mimesis that occurs much closer to the consumer's imagination than to the work of art; novel readers "make" characters in a much more literal sense than other consumers of art, or at the very least they have more agency in the formation of fictional persons' "embodied" existence. In this way, the phenomenology of reading fiction sits closer to the experience of memory, of conjuring and vivifying a set of entities in the face of a near absence of sensuous information.

From this phenomenological perspective, we are able to speak of the "objectivity" of characters even while insisting that the issue of ontology is irrelevant or perhaps secondary to the experience of novel reading described by critics like Kermode and Woloch—the sense that characters walk around in the theater of imagination, which is a proscenium architected by the limits of the text's form. Literary character comes into focus as an ensemble formation, something other than merely, on the one hand, a product of reception or, on the other, something bestowed upon the reader. In most sympathetic critical appraisals of *Huckleberry Finn* the reader supposedly experiences Jim's sentience (focalized through Huck) and reassesses him as a character organized by the division between exteriority and interiority, a shift that gives rise to moral accountability. To have an interior is to be an object of moral thought, these readings propose. These interpretations rest upon "the received idea of the novel as devoted to the all-importance of interiority" and suggest that we read *into* Twain's characters as efflorescences of

[51] Ibid., 5.

psyche, treating consciousness as a place we can go and novels as if they are the vehicle that take us there.[52] While some novels do uncritically represent the "thingliness" of consciousness, Twain is interested in complicating the topography of the novel by resisting the critical posture that assumes fiction is organized by an inside and outside, a surface and its unseen depths.

My own strategy for reading *Huckleberry Finn* accords with Bercovitch's in that it seeks to highlight some of the ways the text frustrates the critical drive to access the invisible interior of fictional individuals, leading the reader toward a different experience from that of sympathy: something closer to what Kermode and Woloch get at when they write about communities of characters strolling around in texts that function as containers. I read "with an eye for [the] institutional erotics" of the novel.[53] This means giving an account of the encounter with a character as, in some way, an "embodied" individual who remains at a distance and to an extent unknowable rather than inhabitable; if characters have their freedom, they must have their secrets, too. Rather than orienting our reading along a vertical axis of individual subjectivity, the novel encourages a reading that skates along a horizontal axis of ensemble or institutionality.[54]

---

[52] David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2012), 21.

[53] Ibid.

[54] My argument that Twain's realism evinces a concern with persons *as well as the social processes through which personhood itself gets constructed and deconstructed* is supported by the reassessments of realism that have taken place in the last thirty years. In a review essay about a number of books, including *The Social Construction of American Realism* by Amy Kaplan, *American Realism: New Essays* edited by Eric Sundquist, and *Writing Realism* by Daniel H. Borus, John C. Hirsh writes, "Most American Realists maintained a continuing regard for biography, and a consequent disinclination either to trust unconditionally the exercise of institutional power, or to ignore the effect of class discourse and the requirements of readership. Still, as recent studies have emphasized, the critique of the forces which impinge upon person is informed deeply by the sense that certain forms of institutional power (economic, for example)

This way of thinking about literary character is probably most closely related to the theoretical paradigms of René Girard, Leo Bersani, and Sharon Cameron, who all think more horizontally than vertically as a means of establishing a clearer distinction between encounters with literary characters and encounters with real persons.[55] Cameron's work, for example, shows how a number of nineteenth-century American writers create characters lacking a clearly bounded and interiorized consciousness, thereby disrupting the metonymic operation by which readers link a literary character to an embodied and interiorized person.[56] This strain of literary scholarship reveals fiction's ability to lead a reader outside the normative frameworks of identity, subjectivity, individuation, and personality; it seeks a representational art severed from the violence of selfhood. It evinces character's *im*personality (a term used by both Bersani and Cameron).

---

were inescapable." John C. Hirsh, "Realism Renewed," *Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1991): 238.

[55] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966); Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2010).

[56] Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Susan Stewart states, "The body is our mode of perceiving scale and, as the body of the other, becomes our antithetical mode of stating conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and the disproportionate on the other. We can see the body as taking the place of origin for exaggeration and, more significantly, as taking the place of origin for our understanding of metonymy (the incorporated bodies of self and lover) and metaphor (the body of the other). It is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and, in fact, creates the illusion of the real." Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1984), xii.

And if there is a genealogy of American writing committed to impersonality, as Cameron suggests there is, *Huck Finn* belongs in that category. It is worth making this distinction because of the long critical tradition focusing on the politics of voice—both Huck's and Jim's. As Fishkin puts it, commentators "tend to concur on the question of how *Huckleberry Finn* transformed American literature. Twain's innovation of having a vernacular-speaking child tell his own story *in his own words* was the first stroke of brilliance."[57] Twain's realism pulls focus away from Huck's interior life, giving us a character who is constituted primarily through his speech, that is, in and through social language rather than within the confines of a private interiority. And many who criticize Twain's racial politics have noted the child-like quality of Jim's speech. In both cases, voice serves as the measure of personhood; a character's voice should individuate him sufficiently and be a kind of linguistic accretion of his humanity; voice signifies a character's capacity for political regard. It tells us how seriously to take him *as a person*. In contrast, I am trying to get at the novel's powerful critique of personhood itself, which raises a different set of issues about the kind of regard we lend in the *absence* of a fully developed voice and without the usual signs of political legitimacy. I would argue that *Huckleberry Finn* does not valorize voicedness as much as it asks us to consider the fact that we live within a sensible regime where certain kinds of voices earn the legitimacy of speech while others fail to do so—where certain voices are politically intelligible and others fall beneath the threshold of audible speech. Partly because the politics of voice and the politics of personhood are bound so tightly, in the essay's final section, I have chosen instead to dwell on Jim as a body by looking closely at several descriptions of him.

[57] Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 3.

Regarding the Solidity of Literary Characters

The struggle to reproduce the givenness of absent persons is Twain's larger concern. With this in mind, it is worth going over some very well-known territory in the novel for the sake of a reading that will then attend to some less familiar passages. Here is the famous moment when Huck lays down the letter to Miss Watson and decides to help "free" Jim:

> But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and suchlike times: and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.[58]

As moving and as compelling as many find this passage, a closer look at its representation of compassion shows Twain struggling, groping for something on which to hang his novel's theory of ethical and political thought.[59] He leads Huck along a string of carefully plotted moves from the narrator's hand on the paper—Huck's immediate physical environment—through a series of remembered encounters with the absent Jim, and back to an awareness of the paper. Jim first enters Huck's mind as a strictly visual presence: Huck suddenly "sees" Jim before he considers

[58] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 227–28.

[59] I agree here with Jonathan Arac's understanding of the scene in *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*.

the perceptual conditions of his memories—the daylight, the moonlight, the fog that clears and makes way for Jim's appearance. The narrative next takes that embodied image of Jim and animates it when Jim pets Huck. And finally it projects a small amount of interiority onto the enslaved man's body, which appears "grateful." However, that interiority—if interiority is the right word for such a vague rendering of sentience—does not lead Huck further into the inner chambers of Jim's mind, because it instead manifests a centrifugal force, pushing the boy outward into the context of "the world" and then to a survey of his own environment, to his embodied position and, thus, back to Jim's absence. To be sure, Huck projects himself into the "there" of imagination, but this only serves to return him to the "here" of his perceptual self. The point of this passage, it seems to me, is not to walk the reader through a kind of instruction manual for the structure of feeling that will generate responsibility and, ultimately, ethical action; instead, it frankly, even movingly, limns the impossibility of summoning the idea of another's consciousness without returning to one's own sensuous world, especially when the task of making a simple, durable, inert, consciousness-less image of another human body is already so difficult.[60] Twain understands moral thought, and specifically the regard for persons out of perceptual reach, as a chain of imaginary exercises: producing a mimesis of the other's body, animating that body, and projecting affect onto it. And the strain of this undertaking most concerns him. This is one of several moments in the novel when Huck's imagination falters before returning him (and us) back to the firm ground of the here and now of the story's present. "It was a close place," Huck remarks after he notices the paper, as if to emphasize the severe placelessness of his imagined Jim.

[60] I follow Scarry in using the term "image" in this context to signify the mimesis produced in one's imagination.

So how does the novel understand imagination's role in ethical thinking, or how does it figure imagination as a specific mode of attending to distant entities? How does the imagined world gain its optic, haptic, and aural coherence; its objectivity? And how does it remain coherent, memorable, for characters with a dearth of sensory information? What exactly happens in those moments when imagination fails to produce the real?[61] I argue that when image-making stops manufacturing recognizable objects, one confronts the flimsiness of the imagined things and bodies upon which we project subjectivity. Projection becomes nearly impossible, the question of subjectivity is suspended, and the objectivity of fictional entities rises to the level of our attention. In other words, Twain throws a wrench into the operations of the novel's mimesis in order to reveal its underlying structures or the means of producing fictional characters' subjectivity. He is interested in imagination as a space where the author, reader, and character enter into the contract that, paradoxically, vivifies the image of the character. To echo an earlier point, he is interested in the character as the reader experiences him: as simultaneously a product of and a participant in the fictional contract, as a willful object.[62]

Before coming back to the issue of readerly imagination, I want to return to the representation of Huck's imagination. Twain begins Huck's recollection of Jim through a curtain of fog for a very specific reason. That is, in producing an imagined body, the most

---

[61] It is true that, so far, when I discuss "imagination" I am often also referring to "memory." The reason why I hesitate to rely more on the latter term is that I want to emphasize the close relationship between memory and fiction, between the imaginary work of remembering and the imaginary work entailed in reading realist fiction.

[62] My analysis brackets the ontological issue of what *type* of object a character is. I begin from a different point of departure, the idea that characters are indeed objects while they also appear to have agency. This dual nature arises because, when we suspend our disbelief, we activate the following conundrum: characters are both logically antecedent and logically subsequent to the fictional contract, both "given" and a product of our reading.

difficult feature to reproduce from the perceptual world is solidity, and fog helps with the task.[63] Fog (like gauze or blurry rain) has "features that more closely approximate the phenomenology of imaginary objects," writes Scarry. "The four key ways in which light ordinarily exposes the structure of the material world—slant, reflectivity, intrinsic color, illumination—are absent or 'indeterminate' in fog; we might say that in fog the physical universe approaches the condition of the imagination."[64] Imagination (and literary fiction), Scarry contends, often takes advantage of one object passing in front of another to solidify both. "But unlike other instances of visually inferred solidity, such as a solid passing over a solid (my hand passing over my face), [fog] has the second feature of drawing on the imagination's own properties. It precisely capitalizes on, rather than disavows, the ordinary feebleness of the imagination."[65] When an author instructs the reader to imagine fog passing over a solid, the solid seems to have that feature more intensely precisely because of the fog's diffusion of light and lack of density. Twain draws on the properties of imagination and the very process of solidifying images in order to lay bare the workings of imagination as they occur in Huck's mind. The narrative moves deeper into Huck's interiority in order to represent the production of Jim's solidity by recapitulating the mental process that introduces density and opacity, the emergence of Jim as a solid object out of the undifferentiated thinness of imagination.

I discuss Jim's imaginary presence as a solid and opaque body at such length because those are the only material properties his body seems to have in the novel's instructions for

[63] Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 22.

[64] Ibid., 22–23.

[65] Ibid., 23.

imagining him. When Huck first sees Jim, he views him "setting in the kitchen door; we could see him pretty clear, because there was a light behind him."[66] Twain introduces Jim in silhouette, describing this vision as "pretty clear" despite the fact that the light emanates from behind his figure, as though to see Jim clearly means viewing him as an opaque, negative body without any positive visual features. His body is the only one in the novel to be introduced in this way. Usually characters' bodies are viewed through a window, a hole in the foliage, or behind a curtain of hair and lit from the front; the description places them at the center of an interior that the reader enters from the outside, passing through a threshold to get to the figure. Jim, however, stands on that threshold, blocking passage into the interior. And the descriptions of him consistently work the same way, carrying his body through the fictional environment without ever imbuing it with any real positive visual presence; he is all solidity without color, all density without reflectivity. In this way he resembles the landscape on the river, which also often appears to the reader in silhouette: "It was a monstrous big river here, with the tallest and the thickest kind of timber on both banks, just a solid wall, as well as I could see, by the stars";[67] "I rose up and there was Jackson's Island…big and dark and solid, like a steamboat without any lights";[68] "I see the moon go off watch and the darkness begin to blanket the river. But in a little while I see a pale streak over the tree-tops, and knowed the day was coming."[69] All of these negative images serve a vital imaginative purpose by ushering the reader's imagination out of

[66] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 13.

[67] Ibid., 95–96.

[68] Ibid., 45.

[69] Ibid., 51.

uniform darkness, carving out the first silhouettes that will serve as not only the visual backdrop for the action but also the stable walls that keep the entire visual and haptic world of imaginary objects from collapsing in on itself, delimiting an initial space where the rest of the world will come to life and reside, propped against these solid barriers. Inverting the characteristic visual trope of realism, the window, they emphasize the circumscription that establishes the real of the story. And it is as though Jim's body, cutting between formless light and Huck's gaze so as to situate the reader in the fictional space, serves as part of this imaginative shell, as another figure in the silhouetted landscape that creates the novel's interiority (in the more general sense of the word). Jim does not possess an interior life in any meaningful sense because he is the very ground upon which the novel's interiority establishes itself. He makes the world safe for the set of imaginative acts demanded by the novel. We invest our trust in him and almost literally build the world of the book on his back. He reveals the affective dimension of all fiction reading in which we feel thrown into a world of descriptions we hope to be solid enough to withstand the weight of our fantasies.[70]

But as Huck knows from his attempt to imagine Jim in the moment of his "conversion," all imaginary entities evaporate or evade us; novels have their endings. Thus, Jim exemplifies something true of all characters, that our relationship to them is one of "cruel optimism," to use a term from Lauren Berlant. With fictional people, one forms an attachment to an object optimistically in that the object "ignites a sense of possibility," but this optimism is cruel "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside [the] relation [are] sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is,

[70] See my discussion above of Bercovitch.

at the same time, profoundly confirming."[71] A reader lends fictional characters attention even though they are bound to disappoint, to escape her regard. The benefit of Berlant's formulation is that it links affect with politics by identifying the "affective structure" underlying political commitments to fantasies that are sustaining yet ultimately unsustainable, fragile, and costly. Imagining literary characters seems to me to be all of these things, and when fictional individuals ultimately fail us, as they inevitably will, we find ourselves at what she calls an "impasse."[72]

Those are the moments that interest me in *Huck Finn*—when the reader or a character has invested herself in an object that suddenly loses its solidity and givenness, becoming evasive, unaccounted for. In visual terms, it is not so much that a vision recedes as much as visuality itself recedes.[73] Consider Huck lying down in his canoe, looking straight up into the night without any horizon to anchor his gaze: "The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knowed it before. And how far a body can hear on the water such nights! I heard people talking on the ferry landing. I heard what they said, too, every word of it."[74] For Huck, this is a moment of vertiginous looking, of gazing upon a landscape that has depth but no bounds, that one can see and see into without seeing through because it lacks apparent boundaries. Looking toward the sky does not lead him to any visual point or boundary that locates him in the visual world. The visual recedes and he lives for the remainder of the paragraph in a world of pure sound. What is more, the reader, too, experiences this passage as a

---

[71] *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2

[72] This point is especially clear in the passage from Twain's notebook that I discuss above.

[73] Jaffe says something similar about Hardy (385).

[74] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 45.

recession insofar as the infinite depth of the sky explodes the haptic and optical ground of the mimesis by dissolving its solidity. Solidity "prevents not our further sinking downwards" (or, I would add, outwards) "but our further *sinking inwards*," Scarry writes.[75] It lets us perform "the projective act without vertigo or alarm, and thereby lifts the inhibitions on mental vivacity that ordinarily protect us." Imagining the sky through Huck's narration leads the reader not out into an imaginary abyss but inwards toward herself, imposing those inhibitions that keep her from activating the mimetic content of the fictional landscape. The encounter with the sky precipitates the dissolution of the imagined world of the novel and marks a readerly confrontation with the raw materials or "properties" of one's own imagination, and with the precarity of all imagined entities.

Similarly, in the fog, which Huck will later rely on for imagining Jim, the mimesis meets its match: "I couldn't tell nothing about voices in the fog, for nothing don't look natural nor sound natural in a fog."[76] Huck goes on:

> I kept quiet with my ears cocked, about fifteen minutes, I reckon. I was floating along, of course, four or five miles an hour; but you don't ever think of that. No, you *feel* like you are laying dead still on the water; and if a little glimpse of a snag slips by, you don't think to yourself how fast *you're* going, but you catch your breath and think, my! how that snag's tearing along. If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try it once—you'll see.[77]

The direct address to the reader at the end of this passage is significant. "You" must "try it" to understand, he claims in an attempt to overcome the insufficiencies of his descriptive power. And even then "you'll see" only to the extent that you won't see. But, in a way, the reader

[75] Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 12.

[76] Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 94.

[77] Ibid., 94–95.

already has had the isolating experience of a mimesis collapsing, of a fictional landscape shrouding itself in fog and refusing her "gaze," triggering a "sinking inwards." (Despite what Huck says, even the densest fog is easy to imagine.) What actually troubles him as a narrator is that, in approaching the condition of imagination, the fog entails a vivid mimesis of perceptual failure that undoes the prior work of making a world inhabitable by solid, weighty characters. This liquefaction is not a failure of the reader's imaginary powers but a triumph of readerly imagination over the narrator and the author's aspirations to omniscience, control, good style. "You'll see" marks an eruption of authorial vulnerability, a place where style breaks down. If most description relies for its success on the reader "suppressing awareness of volition"—forgetting the fact that she *chooses* to follow the author's instructions—the phrases "you'll see" and "you try it" unearth that volition.[78] "You try it" means that the author offers instructions and the reader may or may not agree to accept them; it means that a contract exists prior to the mimesis. Style normally disguises the reader's agency as authorial coercion, but "you try it" uncovers the truth of the matter.

If in fog we approach the conditions of our own imaginations, we also approach the unreality of the novelistic mimesis—that which keeps us ineluctably separate from literary characters.[79] Huck wants nothing more than "the touch of the real," but what he finds instead are the limits of his perception. Along with him we feel how impossible it is to act in any meaningful way upon what at the moment our senses have no access to. Because nothing would

[78] Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 31.

[79] This argument owes much to Stanley Cavell's well-known discussion of theatrical fictionality in his essay "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267–356.

count as action, and because action is the fundamental unit of politics, a political relation between a reader and a fiction cannot exist.[80] Instead, the separateness we experience is a relation prior to politics proper; it is the very condition of ethical life.

It is no coincidence that Jim has all but fallen out of our discussion at this point. What Huck desperately seeks in the fog, what we seek, is Jim's body, but he evades. He defies our wish for a "coherent, unified, describable self."[81] Characters compete for space in the discourse of novels and for our attention, but they also hide and aspire to fugitivity.[82] They dissemble or become too mimetically fragile; or we neglect them or put the book down. Characters have their freedom, but novels have their ends—to which I would add, characters have their freedom *because* novels have their ends. "Stealing," Huck's word for winning Jim's freedom, implies a possessive relationship to objects, needless to say. It relies upon a world of entities "for the taking." Even "stealing away" requires a possessive posture toward one's own body, the posture of personhood. The realistic novel can only imagine escape as a move further inward, deeper into the confines of "personal space"; it can only represent freedom as an intensification of subjectivity.[83] In contrast, to be evasive or aid in evasion in the way Tom Sawyer understands

---

[80] This is also part of Cavell's argument about theater.

[81] Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 214.

[82] My discussion of the poetics of fugitivity is indebted to Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[83] I draw on Stewart's discussion of the realist novel. She writes, "Thus the sign in the realistic novel leads not to the revelation of a concealed meaning uncovered but to further signs, signs whose signified becomes their own interiority, and hence whose function is *the production and reproduction of a particular form of subjectivity*" (my emphasis). And she explains the rise of exactness as an aesthetic value: "Exactness is a mirror, not of the world, but of the ideology of the world. And what is described exactly in the realistic novel is 'personal space,' the space of property, and the social relations that take place within that space." *On Longing*, 4–5.

the word is to imagine an alternative distribution of the sensible that renders the world of objects "for the taking" in terms other than those of ownership. Evasion replaces politics with an aesthetic practice, a practice of style.[84]

[84] This idea of ethics as a stylistic or aesthetic practice is indebted to Foucault and his theorization of an "art" or "aesthetics of existence" (see, for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1990]).

CHAPTER TWO

Disfigurations:
Description and Slavery in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

[One who is errant] plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. […] The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.

–Édouard Glissant[1]

I sell the shadow to support the substance.

–Sojourner Truth

When Jane Johnson escaped from John Hill Wheeler in Philadelphia in 1855, he sued the abolitionists who had assisted her escape in two nationally publicized trials that were among the first challenges to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. During one of the trials, Johnson testified against her former master, giving a statement that was transcribed and published in an abolitionist pamphlet that circulated widely around Philadelphia before it was reprinted in William Still's 1872 *The Underground Railroad*, a successful compilation of stories about ex-slaves' flights from bondage. Just before Wheeler died in 1882, the New York auction house charged with dispensing his library, Bangs & Co., discovered and catalogued a copy of *The Underground Railroad* among his books. Johnson and her two sons had won their freedom in the trial, and nearly two decades later she would be ensconced as an important abolitionist

[1] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20–21.

success for posterity. And yet, the presence of *The Underground Railroad* in Wheeler's library—an archive built with slave labor and full of books defending the institution—also highlights the commodification of ex-slaves' speech, the potential for certain kinds of political speech to be neutralized, robbed of their potential force and historicity. It presages, as I argue below, Hortense Spillers's reminder that "to rob the subject [of slavery] of its dynamic character, to capture it in a fictionalized scheme whose outcome is already inscribed by a higher, different, *other,* power, freezes it in the ahistorical."[2]

After Johnson escaped, Wheeler purchased another female slave to replace her, one who would escape as well; one who, remarkably, would also become a celebrated chronicler of American slavery and fugitivity: Hannah Crafts. Unlike her predecessor, Crafts failed to find fame in her lifetime. She remained nearly unknown until 2002, when Henry Louis Gates, Jr. published her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, for the first time, earning her celebrity for being the first known female fugitive slave novelist in the US. Scholars soon found myriad intertextual links with books in Wheeler's library (which they could reconstruct in part because of the 1882 catalogue). Whereas Johnson was illiterate, Crafts's work shows her to be a voracious and unconventional reader of an already idiosyncratic library, where she likely found fiction by the Brontës, Charles Dickens, and Walter Scott, in addition to scientific periodicals, compilations of "beauties" from Shakespeare, and treatises like John Gauden's 1662 *Discourse on Artificial Beauty*. Wheeler's library serves as a good starting point for this chapter about two very different literary figures, one whose story became fodder for the

[2] Hortense J. Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, The Jokes of Discourse, Or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 180.

anti-racist political movement throughout the second half of the 1800s and another whose work took a century to find an audience. In the first half of this chapter I discuss Johnson, and in the second I perform a reading of Crafts's novel. My purpose in organizing the chapter as a diptych is to explore the relationship between non-fiction and fiction, and, ultimately, to argue that Crafts's work would have posed an unusual challenge to contemporaneous readers. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* resists providing its reader with a coherent image of the enslaved body and, unlike the prevailing representations of slavery, counterbalances the imperative to recall the slave's story with a complex meditation on forgetting, withholding, and dissemblance. To adapt Spillers's words, it achieves a "reinvention of the discourse of 'slavery'"—"its horizon, its limits, its enabling postulates, and its placement in perspective with other fields of signification"[3]—through "a repertory of strategies that denote, that circumlocute, a particular cluster of discursive acts."[4]

This is a dissertation that is primarily about character. I am reluctant to say that it is about "characterization," however, because that term would imply that I am concerned with what characters do and think—how their actions, motivations, and inner lives are threaded together over time to produce coherent individuals who are believable analogues for real people. Rather than taking the category of "character" for granted—that is, rather than assuming that all characters are fully embodied in our imaginations as we read—I am interested in considering how certain texts, like Crafts's, emphasize the difficulty of producing a character's body in the mind of the reader. In other words, this dissertation is more concerned with *descriptions* of

[3] Ibid., 179.

[4] Ibid., 180.

characters, or the instructions we receive for imagining them. Description, as Gerard Genette puts it, "spreads out narrative in space."[5] It stalls or arrests the temporal movement of narrative in order to more fully render the world of the text or its inhabitants, producing "images," "places," "bodies" and so forth, as though the narrative's resources pool in one location; it is the narrative's way of organizing and defining the limits of fictional space, of miming "the figurative dimensions of history."[6] But as we saw in chapter one, description can also be a tool for unmaking or exploding the boundaries of the fictional world and fictive persons, spreading the narrative too thinly over too great an area. Bodies lose their visual and haptic coherence and dissolve in fog or sky or even sound. Or, as in Crafts's work, they disappear into darkness and defy description altogether.

I ended the last chapter with a lengthy discussion of fog, and I begin my reading of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by continuing that discussion in order to show how, like Twain, Crafts plays with the limits of literary description's figurative dimensions. I then turn my attention to Crafts's preoccupation with the fictive—her interest in the production of fantasies, visions, and hallucinations in the novel—in order to argue that the novel is deeply interested in its own fabulation and the possibilities that fabulation carries for redefining how we think of both the category of the slave and slavery itself. How does the novel ask its readers to imagine slavery as an abstract concept, as a unified institution inseparable but also somewhat conceptually divorced from the material practices that delimit it? Finally, I will circle back to the issue of the enslaved body and the fugitive slave body in an attempt to elaborate what I call Crafts's "poetics of

---

[5] Gérard Genette, "The Frontiers of Narrative," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 127–43.

[6] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11.

disfiguration," which draws attention to the horizontal play of form and formlessness: the forces that distinguish the legible from the illegible—how one comes to be figured both in the aesthetic sense and in the sense of being ethically accounted for. Instead of reading the novel as a scrim that obscures the truer history of Hannah Bond's life, I show how *The Bondwoman's Narrative* focuses the reader's attention on the conditions of entry into the historical record.

The Stranger Who Authenticates the Prayer

Still's version of Johnson's escape focuses on one of the two trials in which Wheeler sought to re-enslave Johnson, the case in which Still himself was one of the defendants. During those proceedings Johnson agreed to publicly testify after it became clear that the prosecution's argument stood on the idea that she had been abducted unwillingly and was therefore not a fugitive but stolen property. She entered the courthouse secretly by covering her face with a veil, and when her name was called, she calmly rose up and answered, stunning the entire room—and eventually all of Philadelphia. "It was indescribable," writes Still.[7] He describes Johnson delivering her story with a straightforwardness and honesty that "would have been sufficient to cause even the most relentless slaveholder to abandon at once a pursuit so monstrous and utterly hopeless" and claims that only Wheeler's special tenacity kept him from dropping the case.[8] Then in the penultimate paragraph of the section on Johnson, he writes, "Her title to Freedom under the laws of the State will hardly again be brought into question."[9] Each of the defendants

[7] William Still, *Still's Underground Rail Road Records: With a Life of the Author...* (William Still, 1886), 94.

[8] Ibid., 95.

[9] Ibid., 96.

in that suit was either acquitted or given a minor sentence for lesser charges, likely, as Still implies, thanks to the former slave's speech.

Still gives less attention to the second of Wheeler's trials, and the one that garnered more attention at the time, the trial of Passmore Williamson, which was far more complex. As a representational strategy, Still's triumphalism occludes some of the epistemological lessons otherwise thrown into relief when the archive is reexamined and history is written in the more encompassing context of Wheeler's two property claims (to the book and to Johnson). In *Wheeler v. Williamson*, Johnson's "title to Freedom under the laws of the State" became a complicated issue and the status of her body as well as her speech were thrown into a kind of categorical crisis. *The Underground Railroad* follows the slave narrative's paradigmatic arc from subjection to formal self-possession and self-narration, but to do so, it must excise the messier case in which it became clear that Johnson was easily relegated to a kind of legal purgatory where her speech was rendered unintelligible before the law.

In the *Williamson* case, however, the philosophical underpinnings of slavery were made unusually plain. What started as a complaint about stolen property swerved sharply when Wheeler asked the judge to issue a writ of habeas corpus requiring Williamson to deliver Johnson before the court. The remainder of the case, as well as the national controversy surrounding it, would become entirely about this one motion.[10] It was a problematic request to begin with because habeas corpus is normally addressed to the state in order to bring an

[10] See, for example, the coverage of the case in the *New York Times*, which published the text of Kane's resulting decision to hold Williamson in contempt for not complying with the writ. "The Wheeler Slave Case.—Passmore Williamson Committed for Contempt.," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1855, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40912FA355A1A7493CAAB178CD85F418584F9.

incarcerated person before the court system and judge the legitimacy of her imprisonment. Thus the court acts as a sort of self-policing arm of the state—and as a reminder of the sovereign power's legitimacy. Defying the common law tradition of both the U.S. and Britain, Kane granted the prosecutors' request and issued the writ to an individual. At first glance, Wheeler's strategy appears to be a massive concession to the defense, because it gives the impression that he was admitting to Johnson's personhood (the corpus protected by the action is presumably that of a person) and therefore admitting that the case was not a property dispute after all, meaning, Johnson could never be legislated as chattel. Even if Williamson *were* illegally incarcerating Johnson against her will, he still would not have *stolen Wheeler's property*. Wheeler would have no grounds for making any rights claim whatsoever, for the only rights violated in that scenario would be Johnson's. In short, Wheeler verges on arguing for Johnson's freedom.

But Wheeler's lawyers and the sympathetic Kane knew precisely what they were doing. Their reasoning—an Olympic feat of equivocation, truly—demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the law's ability to recapitulate and naturalize the logic of enslavement. On October third, 1855, Johnson's attorneys submitted a petition contesting Kane's use of habeas corpus: "Because, in truth and in fact, at the issuing of the said writ, and at all times since your petitioner left the company of said Wheeler…neither she nor her children have been detained or restrained of their liberty by said Williamson or any other person whatever."[11] And then striking at the heart of the judge's abuse of power, they reminded the court that habeas corpus "is a writ devised and intended to restore freemen to liberty when unduly restrained thereof," whereas "…Wheeler seeks to reclaim and recover your petitioner and her said children, and reduce them

[11] John Kintzing Kane et al., *Case of Passmore Williamson: Report of the Proceedings on the Writ of Habeas Corpus* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt & Son, 1856), 166.

again into slavery."[12] None of this mattered, Kane decided; none of it, including the so-called prisoner's sworn statement that she was never detained to begin with, could be taken into consideration, let alone taken as part of Williamson's defense. "Why cannot she be heard," Johnson's lawyer asked after issuing a long list of precedents supporting the idea that the ex-slave's petition was not only relevant to the issue at hand but that it *was* the issue at hand.[13] One line of Kane's reply stands out: "The very name of the person who authenticates the prayer [the petition] is a stranger to any proceeding that is or had been before me."[14]

The habeas corpus tactic accomplished two things: First, it introduced the idea that a free woman had been incarcerated (while remaining free)—that she could only be understood within the framework of an imagined imprisonment—and as a result freedom and captivity were made to appear indistinguishable. Kane emptied both concepts of their meaning. Second, while the court busied itself with the business of making freedom and incarceration the same thing, the meaning of habeas corpus metamorphosed in a very specific way that has significant consequences for our attempt to construct a narrative that includes both Johnson's archival presence and Crafts's archival elusiveness. The entire history of the writ supports the notion that it serves and takes for granted the value of freedom, but when that concept effectively dropped out of the case, Kane was left with a habeas corpus to which any question of "rights," "conduct," or "freedom" were totally irrelevant. It strictly meant that a body (a body that precedes any sentience, rights, will, or citizenship) must be made physically present in the courtroom—

---

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Ibid., 169.

[14] Ibid., 188.

period.[15] And because Johnson submitted her petition in writing, because the petition addressed the issue of her will, and because she was never physically present in front of the judge, she manifested as "a stranger" to the law.

How could an individual whose presence has been requested by the court simultaneously be "a stranger" to it? How does a court defend the rights of a subject that does not exist? And perhaps most vexingly: How did the court sustain its commitment to rescue a person who professed to not need saving? One cannot help but hear in this last question the echoes of another, the question Huck poses for Tom (a line discussed at some length in chapter one): What would it look like if one "managed to set a nigger free who was already free before?" The act of emancipation that is also a technique of enslavement, the freed person who is yet to be free—these are what Colin Dayan calls the "as yet improperly apprehended" legal categories that remain "sufficiently unreal to make claims on our habits of thought."[16] The seeming impossibilities spun by a racist legal equivocation deserve attention not in spite but because of their barefaced fictionality—their excursions into irrational ways of thinking. For, however unreal, these flights of irrational reasoning are, to quote Dayan again, only "the reasonable extension of unspeakable treatment into an unknowable future."[17]

In other words, when denied attention and cast aside as history's losers or outliers the predations of equivocators such as Wheeler and Kane pose a far greater risk of continuing to operate in the dark corners of "unreality," where we relegate them in order to release ourselves

[15] Ibid., 175.

[16] *The Law Is a White Dog*, 32.

[17] Ibid., 32.

from the obligations of ethical thinking. Furthermore—and I think this is Dayan's primary point—the nearly magical transformations they perform on the entities in question place them at an almost literal distance from those who enjoy the privileges of political and ethical salience. Turning Johnson into a "stranger" situates her in a world other than our own. It makes the realm of citizenship, the world of the living, uninhabitable to her. In his book *Distant Suffering*, Luc Boltanksi writes about the correspondence between distance and fictionality, arguing, "…when the spectacle of the unfortunate and his suffering is conveyed to a distant and sheltered spectator there is a greater likelihood of this spectacle being apprehended in a fictional mode the more the horizon of action recedes into the distance. The distinction between reality and fiction loses its relevance for the utterly powerless spectator forever separated from what he views."[18] Boltanski demonstrates how viewing suffering from a distance feels very much like viewing or reading a fiction. And I would argue that the inverse is true as well. Reading fiction to some extent recapitulates the experience of seeing an object or scene from a distance, and if fiction gives us an object as though it were far away (certainly not as near as our own imaginations), it places us, the readers, beyond the domain of action. Paradoxically, then, the power we feel and exercise over literary characters originates in a position of near total but nonetheless reassuring powerlessness, the comfort of not needing to make a decision about how to act on behalf of the suffering entity because action is impossible anyway. [19]

What I am trying to get at by juxtaposing *The Underground Railroad* with *Wheeler v. Williamson*—and what is hopefully becoming clear from the readings in these first two

---

[18] *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

[19] This echoes Stanley Cavell's argument about theater in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 2002.

chapters—is that certain modes of anti-racist historiography cannot accommodate some of the more irrational and indeed insidious techniques for violating black bodies and personhood, not just because the violence is discursive but, more specifically, because it takes place within a devalued and under-examined segment of the discursive field. Sometimes, I am suggesting, there are negative ethical consequences to posing history over and against fiction.

The etched portrait of Johnson in *The Underground Railroad* takes advantage of the fact that at that point Johnson had been reduced to a willful and free person whose racialized body still excluded her from full citizenship. In a way, her portrait depicts a corpus whose wholeness and visual presence cover over how partial her personhood still was. ("Her title to Freedom under the laws of the State will hardly again be brought into question.") The Still book rehearses Johnson's courtroom unveiling, strangely colluding with the law's barely-veiled (as it were) lie about the perfect fungibility of embodiment and personhood, of physical and civic presence. Both Dayan and Bryan Wagner have convincingly shown that the slave was understood in this period not as a person or a thing, but as an entity suspended between the poles of pure thingliness and personhood, between pure materiality and immaterial selfhood. Slavery relied not merely in the transformation of persons into things but upon the irresolution of this paradox.[20] Though originally the product of a kind of mysticism, the in-between-ness of Johnson's portrait—free but not, embodied and yet without the full rights of legal citizenship—gets mystified once over when Still states that unquestioned freedom is written on her body's surface, leading the reader to believe that a visual representation of that body serves as the evidence. By contextualizing Johnson within the Williamson case in addition to the Still case, it becomes apparent that her

[20] Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog*. Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*.

freedom was hardly manifest and that her body was easily re-inscribed by the court as an object of white ownership—that she could be transformed into a body so divested of will that any expression of volition transformed her into an irrelevant entity in the eyes of the court.

The Book of Gloom

In contrast to *The Underground Railroad*'s linkage of material presence with freedom—its assumption that willfulness and full citizenship and personhood are signified by the legally recognized body—what makes *The Bondwoman's Narrative* remarkable is its resistance to such a logic of material and visual presence— its conspicuous fictionality. The autobiographical slave narratives of Crafts's period were often described favorably by reviewers as "windows" and "mirrors," revealing the political and aesthetic imperatives for ex-slaves to write what could be read as an almost unmediated version of the reality of slavery. Of course, what read as "reality" was often that which aligned with those preconceptions about slavery that abolitionist readers brought to these texts. But what is important here is the fact that the intended public for these narratives sought descriptions that manifested a poetics capable of evoking the visual dimension of the represented scenes. As one reviewer of the *Narrative of James Williams* put it, "It seems as if our northern citizens had determined to resist all evidence respecting the practical concerns of slaveholding, until they are *ocularly convinced*…."[21] He goes on to describe Williams's text as a "graphical painting" prepared to do this work of convincing.

The Bondwoman's Narrative critiques this painterly discourse by descriptively distorting ekphrastic paintings, which I discuss at greater length later in this chapter. But before discussing

[21] Charles Twitchell Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1985), 9 my emphasis.

those paintings themselves, it is important to discuss the larger visual world of the novel, a world very different from a transparent window or spotless mirror. Crafts constantly unmakes the text's descriptive landscape by refusing to describe in visual terms and by cloaking much of what the reader "sees" in darkness and shadow. In this way, her literary aspirations are less like ex-slave autobiographers and more in tune with writers working in the emergent genre of what Jonathan Arac calls literary narrative.[22] Though she follows many of the slave narrative's conventions, Like Poe and Melville, she writes about slavery in ways that are less manifestly connected to "real" contemporaneous social conditions and debates, and refuses to comply with the imperative to "ocularly convince." Instead—and in this way she aligns with Poe and Melville, too—*The Bondwoman's Narrative* is concerned with race and visuality itself, and in particular shadow and darkness.[23]

For example, Crafts makes liberal use of the word "gloom" throughout the novel. In one passage, she writes,

> Gloom everywhere. Gloom up the Potomac; where it rolls among meadows no longer green, and by splendid country seats. Gloom down the Potomac where it washes the sides of huge warships. Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights. Gloom settling steadily down over the sumptuous habitations of the rich, and creeping through the cellars of the poor. Gloom arresting the steps of chance office-seekers, and bewildering the heads of grave and reverend Senators; for with fog, and drizzle, and a sleety driving mist the night has come at least two hours before its time.[24]

---

[22] I discuss this at greater length in the introduction. Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative*.

[23] For an extended discussion of race and the figure of the shadow in Poe and Melville—and in nineteenth-century US literature more generally—see Judith Jackson Fossett, "Discerning Shadows: Race, Representation and Difference in the Age of Slavery" (Ph.D., Princeton University, 1999), http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/304540274/abstract/C943D3B05E01492FPQ/1?accountid=10226.

[24] Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 162.

These sentences will be familiar because they borrow liberally from a famous passage in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, but here Crafts has replaced Dickens's famously omnipresent "fog" with her preferred "gloom." This subtle shift from one term to the other is telling insofar as it is a declension into further abstraction. If fog is easy to imagine because it approaches the properties of imagination through its near immateriality and diffusion of light, then "gloom" is too abstract, too difficult to imagine. By definition the term connotes an absence of light, the result of matter cutting through and intercepting photons, as well as something more diffuse and intangible, a feeling, a mood, or, as the *OED* describes it, "a state."[25] More so than fog, gloom is everywhere and nowhere. It is potentially also a state occupied by every object, cast over and shot through the following images, dampening the visual acuity of each thing it touches. This slight amendment to Dickens's language works to make the rest of the description less concrete, lending everything that proceeds the term the fuzziness of abstraction, making the reader's task of imagining more difficult. Two paragraphs later, Hannah states, "Just where the gloom was densest, and the muddy street the muddiest there was I, wrapped in a very thin shawl and carrying a very small box in my hand." Tellingly, just where the gloom collects with greatest "density"—where, paradoxically, the description has as little density as possible—stands our narrator. The shawl and the box in her hand are the only objects that lend her body any firmness, and even so it is as if the shawl is draped over a spectral body.

Earlier in the text, Crafts describes her escape into a dark forest with her mistress. "Gloomy, indeed, was our walk, but gloomier were our thoughts."[26] Gloom here slides from a

[25] "Gloom, n.1," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed July 16, 2015, http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/79084.
[26] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 67.

descriptor of their wooded environs into a state of mind, showing Crafts's awareness of the term's indeterminacy and tendency toward abstraction. Gloom also deforms and then reforms whatever lies within its reach: "Trees in the dusky gloom took the forms of men, and stumps and hillocks were strangely transferred into blood-hounds crouching to spring on their prey."[27] At another point, she describes slavery itself as a "thing utterly dark and gloomy."[28] It is not only shrouded in the proverbial darkness of terror; for Hannah, slavery as a knowable object is abstract, diffuse, and fuzzy—difficult if not impossible to "see" in one's imagination. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, then, writes against the discourse of the "window" onto the life of the slave, replacing the clear and hard transparency of glass with the suffusive, deforming darkness of gloom.

A Diseased Fancy

One of Crafts's most remarkable inventions is the character Mrs. Wright, a former critic of slavery who has been imprisoned for trying to help a slave named Ellen escape the country. When we meet her, Mrs. Wright has been incarcerated for so long that she "strangely enough believed that these miserable cells were palace walls, in which she acted the character of hostess and received [Hannah and her mistress] as guests" when they are relegated to the same prison cell.[29] Mrs. Wright's hallucinations are compensatory mechanisms which allow her to survive the near total social death she experiences within the cell's walls, where she is separated from a

[27] Ibid., 53.

[28] Ibid., 62.

[29] Ibid., 82.

husband, friends, and her children—all of whom have died, leaving her unspoken of "even by those who has experienced the most of her kindness."[30] Hannah finds herself fascinated by the "grand or beautiful semblances her diseased fancy has given to the hard coarse stones."[31] Interestingly, Mrs. Wright displays a fleeting but distinct awareness of her own delusions, telling Hannah that she at first "couldn't see" the necessity of her own imprisonment, "but after a time I—I—grew more reconciled. And now I call it my palace, and that man, who comes in once and awhile is my groom of the ceremonies, and I have guests occasionally as I have now." "I used to hate slavery," she explains, and "I could see no beauties in the system. Yet they said it was beautiful, and many thought me a fool for not seeing it so, but somehow I couldn't; no I couldn't." Hannah responds by asking her if she sees its beauty now, but Mrs. Wright rebuffs the question because it would involve "a great deal of trouble," saying, "I have learned what all who live in a land of slaver[y] must learn sooner or later; that is to profess approbation where you cannot feel it; to be hard when most inclined to melt; and to say that all is right, and good; and true when you know that nothing could be more wrong and unjust."[32]

Mrs. Wright oscillates between believing in her hallucinations and seeing through them to the harsh reality of her imprisonment. She draws the issue of fictionality to the surface of the text, and in doing so, raises questions about both the aesthetic and political dimensions of representation. What does it mean to "see" and to "hate" slavery?[33] What would make it

---

[30] Ibid., 86.

[31] Ibid., 83.

[32] Ibid., 86–87.

[33] Significantly, as Gates's edition of the novel notes, Crafts appears to have some familiarity with Kantian aesthetic theory, and in Kant "hate" grows from the sight of "stiff regularity," which disallows the "imaginative scope for unstudied and purposive play." Immanuel Kant,

possible for one to speak of the "beauty" of the institution? Wherein lies that (phantasmatic) beauty? And how does the realm of the social pressure individuals to adhere to or enter into a regime of the sensible, into a certain aesthetic relation to slavery in order to produce a consensus about the "system's" supposed benevolence and political necessity? In order to think slavery, Crafts suggests, one must be able to aestheticize it, to cathect it into a knowable and even visible object, and this means having a phenomenological relation to it in which one either "hates" or sees the beauty in it. These aesthetic experiences of slavery are social; they make slavery into a discursive presence. But what is most intriguing about the chapter on Mrs. Wright is the way that she passes in and out of the knowledge of her own fabulation, the way that she can speak of both the prison and the palace. Tavia Nyong'o writes about such scenes of fabulation in his essay "Unburdening Representation": "The inauthenticity of the fabulist is of particular value," he states, "insofar as his or her speech is not contained by a correspondence to its particular context, but carries over concepts, precepts, and affects from one regime of representation into another in a manner that is neither up-to-date nor out-of-date but truly untimely."[34] Crafts's interest in drastic slippages of memory and hallucination call into question not just the "goodness" or "badness" of slavery, but the representational regime that establishes the ground for any debate about slavery whatsoever. To speak about slavery's goodness, badness, beauty, or ugliness requires one's belief in an authentic image or set of images of what slavery is and is not, and Crafts's fabulations relieve us of this burden of authenticity, the need to know what "really" happened.

Critique of Judgement, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73.

[34] Tavia Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (April 2014): 74–5.

This relief we experience is not, however, that of escapism or of an infinitely multiplying relativism, as I began to argue in the introduction. As Mrs. Wright surveys the extravagances of her hallucination, she also says, "but misery dwells in palaces."[35] She is visited by the melancholy that follows from knowing that even one's fantasies are colonized, are never truly disconnected from the technologies of oppression that organize the landscape of the social. She is not an escapist nor has she transformed into a supremacist. She instead chooses a form of evasion when she communicates in what Édouard Glissant calls "errantry's imaginary vision."[36] Errantry, Glissant writes, "is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for freedom within particular surroundings." Indeed, Crafts is interested in fiction because of its inherent possibilities for errantry, for wandering away from non-fiction's impulse to possess the real, away from the animating desire to capture whatever is essential about the represented object. To "live in a land of slavery" one must "be hard when most inclined to melt"—and melt the hard facticity of the real is precisely what Mrs. Wright appears to do. As does Crafts. We know solids to be melting when they begin to *run*. Crafts's turn to fiction rather than autobiography evinces not an absolute freedom, nor does it express her *de jure* freedom once she escaped from Wheeler; rather, the fictive is her fugitive *search* for freedom within the confines of the literary. Drawing upon Saidiya Hartman's discussion of black counter-historical narratives, Nyong'o writes about something similar when he discusses "critical fabulation," noting that it "is not a genre or a discourse but a mode by which both genre and discourse can be set into oscillating tension, through the upsetting of a key

[35] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 83.

[36] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 20.

demand of representational mimesis: the demand that a representation be either true or false, either history or fiction."[37]

On Being an Ignorant Thing

At several crucial points in the novel, our narrator and protagonist, Hannah, describes her master's gallery of paintings, a collection organized into heterosexual couplings that visualize the family genealogy. At one point, the oldest of them ominously falls off the wall and onto the floor (very much like the portrait in *The House of Seven Gables*). In her commentary, Hannah imagines a "stately knight in his armor" hanging the painting of this long-dead ancestor, Sir Clifford. She fantasizes that the knight "breath[ed] anathema against the projector of its removal" but "dreamed not of the great leveler who treats the master and slave with the same unceremonious rudeness, and who touches the lowly hut or the lordly palace with the like decay": Time.[38] And later she returns to the house to find "that Sir Clifford's portrait and its companions of both sexes, had been publicly exposed in the market and knocked down to the highest bidder."[39] It is difficult to read the latter quotation without thinking of the scene of the slave auction. For Crafts, the portrait sale enacts a symbolic revenge, a fantasy of white slavery, whose power relies on the logic of the collection. The "knight" who initiates the collection by hanging that first painting fails to foresee decay's effects on the object because of the narrative produced by the portrait collection's innate logic. Even in that first portrait, before a second hangs alongside, the gallery asserts a certain narrative wherein the fact of kinship and lineage—

[37] Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation," 77; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."

[38] *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 30.

[39] Ibid., 199.

generational teleology—displace any other ways of marking time. As Susan Stewart has written, the collection discloses "the replacement of the narrative of production by the narrative of the collection, the replacement of the narrative of history with the narrative of the individual subject—that is, the collector himself."[40] The auctioning off of the portraits in Hannah's imagination, the collection's phantasmatic dispersal, manages to reverse this logic, replacing the narrative of the collector or the scion of the family with the narrative of production. Paradoxically, at the moment when they are most obviously commodified "in the market," the portraits are returned to history because they no longer abide by the inward-facing logic of the collection. If, as Stewart puts it, the collection presents its contents as a set of objects that do not refer to anything except each other, "replac[ing] history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality," then Crafts imagines a return to the firm ground of temporality.[41] And in breaking apart the normative ties of white kinship, she remakes the relationship between these aesthetic objects and history.

The mimetic artifact's objecthood—the fact that it is subject to the universal entropy of decay—is crucial to Crafts's aesthetic philosophy. After Hannah spends too long with the portraits, Mrs. Bry, the housekeeper, comes looking for her. Finding her in front of the images, she scolds the slave not for dallying or ignoring orders, but instead for spending time with the paintings and making an effort to interpret them, what the housekeeper considers a white privilege. Hannah, she says, has no business acting as though "such an ignorant thing as you are would know anything about them." The novel reminds us of the slave's thingliness at the same

[40] Stewart, *On Longing*, 156.

[41] Ibid.

time as it asks: Who may or may not interpret; how are different modes of reading tied to the reader's ontology; and what is it to "know anything" about a work of art when one is an "ignorant thing"? Crafts suggests in this moment that Hannah's own experience of objectification as an enslaved person allows her to see an alternative narrative to the one offered by the collection. Perhaps because she lives with the constant threat of being "knocked down to the highest bidder" herself, she is able to imagine another way of looking, an alternative to the aesthetic experience that is specific to the collection.

It's evening when Hannah first stops to look at the paintings earlier in the novel. As she stares and as "the golden light of sunset penetrating through the windows in an oblique direction set each rigid feature in a glow," the pictures begin to move:

> Movements like those of life came over the line of stolid faces as the shadows of a linden played there. The stern old sire with sword and armorial bearings seems moodily to relax his haughty aspect. The countenance of another, a veteran in the old-time wars, assumes a gracious expression it never wore in life; and another appears to open and shut his lips continually though they emit no sound.[42]

Next a bride dons a "halo of glory" and another figure's hair begins to "float over the child she holds," while yet another smiles and dimples her cheeks. Here we see Crafts' s indebtedness to the gothic tradition, of course, and a very specific trope within that tradition, and writers such as Russ Castronovo, Karen Sanchéz-Eppler, and Christopher Castiglia have given compelling accounts of the novel's ekphrases.[43] While scholars have noted the novel's ekphrastic experiments, there is still more to say about Crafts's place within the field of ideas about portraiture in nineteenth-century America. In that instant, the paintings make themselves

[42] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 16–17.

[43] See their contributions to Gates and Robbins, *In Search Of Hannah Crafts*.

available to Hannah with a wholeness that was previously inconceivable in the narrative; they present their two ways of being—as objects and as images—with a striking simultaneity, concordance, and dependence. That is to say, the depth and motion clearly result from the encounter between, on the one hand, the translucence and movement of the shadows and, on the other, the solidity, opacity, and stillness of the objects' surface.[44] So, it is not precisely that the paintings come to life as it is that liveliness and what Descartes calls "extendedness" *happen to*—are produced upon as well as by—the material surface of the paintings, that liveliness and extendedness lodge themselves in the very unlively and durable two-dimensional plane of the paintings. The shadow activates the surface and reveals a *depth contained within flatness*. In a very Heidegerrian way, the painting reveals itself as a painting.

Through this embedding of depth in flatness, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* bestows a special prominence and signification upon the physical phenomenon of the shadow. More than simply animating or lending an excuse for uncanny portraiture, shadows carry both a theory as well as a history here. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans, especially those living in cities, began to experience shadows differently than they ever had before. As Roberto Casati notes, a variety of new and affordable lamps entered the market between the twenties and the eighties, and these newer lamps burned coal or natural gas instead of oil or wax. Once the older forms of lighting that used a flame for illumination were replaced by gas-fueled lights, which contained a chip of fireproof material warmed to incandescence by flame, artificial light stopped flickering. And so did shadows. "The nineteenth century didn't just vanquish shadows," writes Casati; "it created *new* ones. They were frozen shadows produced by a fragment of material

[44] My discussion of this passing of a film over a still solid—which follows Elaine Scarry—begins in the previous chapter of the dissertation.

heated to incandescence. These were new shadows: static shadows had never existed in nature, nor were they ever before produced by man."[45]

The invention of the static shadow counts as a vital piece of the text's historical context because the one other prominent portrait in the book takes the form of a photograph, and photography as a medium was understood (more so then than now) as the child of this innovation in illumination and shadow.[46] Not only did photography require stable light and shadows; it also stabilized them both in a way other media can only simulate. Because realist portraiture required more time to complete, the movements of the sun had long posed an obstacle to image-makers' desire to represent a temporality unmoored from the inevitable cycle of diurnal time. Photographic technology's relative speed eliminated the issue, not to mention the much-commented-upon fact that the medium indexes, basically fixes, gradations of actual light instead of giving the illusion of illumination through pigment.

The photograph in the novel appears during an embedded narrative of passing, where Hannah's mistress, who goes unnamed, describes how she learned of her own slave ancestry and how the sinister Mr. Trapp instrumentalizes the knowledge of her kinship by blackmailing her (eventually to the point of insanity). Trapp "drew thence a portrait" from a secret drawer.[47]

> … "Well now I wish you to look at this."
> I did so.
> "Do you know it."
> "It resembles me" I answered "though I never sate [sat] for my likeness to be taken."

[45] Roberto Casati, *Shadows: Unlocking Their Secrets, from Plato to Our Time* (New York: Random House, 2007), 22.

[46] Casati, *Shadows*.

[47] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 43.

> "Probably not, but can you think of some one else whom it resembles?"
> ["]The slave ~~Charlotte~~ Susan.["] [her mother]

Photography functions exactly as the painted portraits do not. The paper records the mistress's lineage and, despite not even being an image of her, it "resembles" and serves as a "likeness." It has an irrefutability or evidentiary quality. If the paintings display animation, the instability of representation, a failure of indexicality, and the loss of kinship to time, then the photograph represents the reification of history and representation's conquest over time. Like other authors in the period, Crafts uses photography to express her concern about the consensus gathered around "realities" that have been coopted for the purposes of greed and violence.[48]

But the painted portraits stand out as a unique alternative, even if they are merely a refusal of photography's imperatives to reality, normative kinship, and stable identity. The force of this negating gesture best comes through when we read the ekphrasis alongside the history of shadows, for only then do we reclaim the ideological work of stillness in the photograph, and perhaps see how the paintings' instability allowed them to resist a visual regime that was rapidly enlisting photography in the service of more insidious forms of racialization that would fully take hold a few years later, after the formal end to slavery.

Crafts associates shadow—and especially moving shadows—with fictionality. Both fiction and shadows create a kind of radical dissemblance which altogether opts out of thinking structured by dichotomies of person and thing, freedom and enslavement, reality and imagination, and even presence and absence. Indeed, Trapp speaks one of the novel's most chilling lines when he says, "Freedom and slavery are only names attached surreptitiously and often improperly to certain conditions. *They are mere shadows*[,] the very reverse of realities,

[48] Again I am thinking in particular about *The House of Seven Gables*.

and being so, if rightly considered, they have only a trifling effect on individual happiness."[49] Freedom and slavery lose their meaning to the point that they might as well be the same thing, and we are left with "reality," a realm "always already" conquered by Trapp—a world he naturalizes to an even greater degree a moment later when he calls it "circumstances." Through Trapp, Crafts suggests that when freedom and slavery look the same, and both take on the appearance of "mere shadows," one must learn to train one's attention on the most elusive and flickering ones—away from the direction of reality and toward the gossamer spectrality of "names attached surreptitiously and often improperly" to illusions. That is, toward the fictive.

Trapp is not ignorant of history, as he knows that there are real "conditions" or "circumstances" that determine actual lived experience. More accurately, he misunderstands and perverts the relationship between the "names attached" to those conditions and the conditions themselves by believing in a historical reality in which names bear no reliable relation to the materiality of existence, where words are overwhelmed by the force of their own indeterminacy —where language, bereft of its materiality, becomes only an absence mistaken for the presence of the real. This is ideology-as-false-consciousness. The contradiction at the bottom of Trapp's philosophy, then, is that, on the one hand, he claims to know of a realm of "conditions" and "circumstances" where "real" speech is possible, a place unlike the shadow-world of language, which is purely and arbitrarily symbolic; but, on the other, his act (of renaming the mistress as a slave) occurs within language and has more than a "trifling effect" on her circumstances. While Trapp claims that language is too indeterminate to exert any force, he exploits that same arbitrariness precisely for its absolutely coercive force. The danger of language, for Crafts, is not

[49] *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 101; my emphasis.

that we have too much faith in it (and don't notice how restrictive and coercive it is); rather, the greater peril is that our enthusiasm for relativism has gone too far toward depleting our faith in language. In her view, this instrumentalization of language's arbitrariness is the more likely incitement to violence. Trapp does not vanquish shadows with truth or reality. He isolates the shadow from the object that casts it and then declares the former relation to be incidental.

As we have seen, this is not how Hannah understands shadow. For her—and for Crafts—shadow does not distort or obscure a pure, penetrating vision of reality, but instead it introduces the contrasts in color and transparency that condition the visual and its contribution to the experience of the real. As Deleuze writes of perspectivism, "It is not a variation of truth according to the subject, but the condition in which the truth of variation appears to the subject."[50] If, for the novel's villain, shadows only reveal the infinite relativity of truth, Crafts proposes instead that we see shadow as the form that thwarts the split between visibility and invisibility—and that precedes the linkage of, on the one hand, visibility to the real and, on the other, invisibility to the fictive. She warns the reader against materialism's tendency to valorize a fully illuminated, demystified, shadowless "reality." And in the place of this tendency she offers a visible world distributed into degrees of presence and absence by the play of light and shadow. Regardless of whether he actually believes what he tells his victim about the indeterminate relationship between shadows and objects, between language and the world, Trapp's trap proves as immobilizing as his name suggests only because he ushers Hannah's mistress into a "fantasy frame" (to use Zizek's term) where the one hope for social life is a world

[50] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 20.

of names that have been generated by and for capital's obsessive arranging of a world divided into only two functions: a consumer function and a commodity function: master and slave.[51]

I want to stress that *The Bondwoman's Narrative*'s championing of shadow and its warning against the aspiration to luminosity is not only a metaphor for seeking truth. I take Crafts literally to the extent that I see her making an argument for the ethical value of attending to shadow as an aesthetic category. For, as Jonathan Crary has recently written—and like her, he is being literal here—a world without shadows is not a vision of truth but a "mirage of post-history…an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change."[52] By emptying the visual of alterity and nullifying the possibility of any perspective that is not exactly this one, a shadowless visuality collapses into a singular vision: the hell of an infinite and infinitely homogenous present. Or: a world in which the only thing that may be said about fiction is that it is a lie.

Reading for shadows allows for a greater attunement to what the novel has to say about identity, fugitivity, and reading. As we saw in her treatment of the painted portraits, Crafts resists the structural logic and stability of identity, for she is interested in the possibility of the viewer or the reader's failure to properly identify a figure. Russ Castronovo calls the photograph of Susan an example of Crafts's "ghost-writing"—a text "in which the departed, the vanished, and the disappeared return to flout any possibility of amnesia, aesthetic objectivity, or other type

[51] "Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real," Matthew Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism* (Wiley, 2007), 222.

[52] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), 9.

of disconnection as they lay claim to their bearing on the present."[53] He argues that in ghost-writing "the Emersonian pretension that art will 'over-power the accidents of a local and specific culture' finds itself overpowered by a rather specific set of material considerations, namely, the interconnections of black and white identities within American slave culture." When we return to the passage in question, however, this reading looks less convincing. "I read and re-read but by degrees the mystery unfolded," the mistress recounts to Hannah.[54] "I perceived the worst and what I was, and must ever be. Then I fell to the floor without sense or motion," and with that she trails off into silence. On the one hand, Castronovo is correct; this moment of racialization serves her self-possession and self-knowledge, and firmly, forcibly, situates her within American slave culture ("what I was, and must ever be"). But, on the other, it releases the mistress from the bodily sensorium (leaves her "without sense"). When Trapp places the image before the mistress, it "unfolds" the mystery of identity both in the sense that it reveals identity's true structure and in the opposing sense that it reverses the perceptual folding in on one's self, the reflexivity, that makes the speaking "I" possible in the first place. Crafts is deeply ambivalent about identity, in other words. Castronovo doesn't notice that passing out "without sense or motion" is actually a rather good example of an amnesiac "disconnection" from the "present." And he ignores that the character most exemplifying the anti-Emersonian position is Trapp, whose villainy derives from a perverted form of ideology critique—a philosophy of "circumstances," which relies on the supposedly deeper, truer "material considerations" connecting black and white identities. Trapp views those connections and the ties of kinship as

[53] "The Art of Ghost Writing: Memory, Materiality, and Slave Aesthetics" in Gates and Robbins, *In Search Of Hannah Crafts*, 199.

[54] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 48.

both his means and justification for terrorizing Hannah's mistress, and so the primary search for identity in the novel serves a racist political agenda.

Hannah becomes abstracted; she forgets her own self. Her consciousness escapes the reader's reach. And Hannah, too, runs the risk of forgetting herself, as we see when she discusses certain states of confusion that escalate into existential problems—"I soon lost all recollection of where and what I was"—or when she cryptically states, "I almost doubted my identity."[55] Identity comes into view as a consideration at crucial moments only to recede, and in those moments, the character's subjectivity leaks out of the text.

These questions of coherent selfhood run through the entirety of Crafts's novel, threatening to destabilize its mimetic ability at every turn. At one point Hannah finds herself spying on a fellow slave, Charlotte, who is plotting to escape with her husband, when the narrator suddenly has an attack of something like conscience or prudence: "…I began to question the use, or necessity, or even the expediency of my instituting an espionage on the actions of one every way my equal, perhaps my superior. Wherefore should I attempt to unravel a mystery that did not concern me, or to interfere in affairs, of which I should only be an observer."[56] She decides to retreat and wait for Charlotte to come to her. Throughout *The Bondwoman's Narrative* the novelistic necessities of focalization and narration collide with the ethical need for privacy. What cannot be represented here and what she attempts to write around is the very real possibility of violence that attends accumulating information about those whose safety requires secrecy. When freedom becomes synonymous with the absenteeism and clandestinity of

[55] Ibid., 55, 118.

[56] Ibid., 140.

fugitivity, any normative representation automatically contains the possibility of betrayal, coercion, and bondage, and therefore poses an ethical dilemma. Description turns into an instrument for surveillance. This is precisely why Hannah indicates her reluctance to describe any people whatsoever when she states, "…it is not my intention to draw their portraits. I could not do so if I wished. I might, indeed, describe their size and figure, might enlarge on the color of their eyes and hair, but after all what language could portray the ineffable expression of a countenance beaming with soul and intelligence?"[57] This exaggerated display of modesty actually illustrates how serious of an ethical problem description is for Crafts. She remains unwilling to draw anyone's portrait because her skill supposedly comes up short, but far more interesting is the subsequent notion that, even if she possessed the talent, then language—any language—would prove too impoverished to do more than catalogue features detached from a countenance and disconnected from anything quite so essential as a soul. The body of the passage degrades into a mere figure and then disperses into parts. Her authorial fantasy supposes the alternative to traditional characterization to be a mode of description outside the logic of metonymy, an art of description that, rather than aspiring to convey identity, undoes its structure by decathecting essence and labeling it "ineffable," unrepresentable. The narrator's performances of diffidence contain and control what would otherwise be a paralyzing artistic ambivalence toward the mechanisms of mimesis and narrative. They signal an impulse to undermine the reader's inclination toward metonymy. If the body is the site where we first perform the metonymic operation—where we learn to draw together a diffuse and

[57] Ibid., 128.

undifferentiated non-entity into a discrete figure—the dis-figured (not *re*membered, but *dis*membered) character undoes the corporeal allegory in some small way.

Critics often argue for the psychological complexity of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, because psychological complexity is a sign of "good" modern Literature. But I think Crafts is far more interested in the challenge of writing a romance without fetishizing the conflicts and paradoxes that signify a consciousness requiring excavation and the reader's understanding. Motivations are not her subject. No one in this novel really knows what she wants, including Hannah, who hates slavery and moves to escape it, but never gives a sense of what she imagines to be on the other side. From the very beginning she knows only that what she wants is impossible: "something higher and better than this world can afford." The reader is hard pressed to see her behaving toward something, to see her behavior as properly political *action*. Through its disfigurations the narrative unsettles the category of the subject and, in turn, normative conceptions of what constitutes political action performed by a subject.

When one portrait in Crafts's imaginary gallery opens and closes its mouth without making a sound and another assumes a "countenance" that it "never wore in life," the novel represents aesthetic objects that in some way refuse to be read or drawn into the spectator's present. But the more remarkable thing is that by withdrawing into a fiction of Hannah's making, they also release her from remembrance's burdens:

> I was not a slave with these pictured memorials of the past. They could not enforce drudgery, or condemn me on account of my color to a life of servitude. As their companion I could think and speculate. In their presence my mind seemed to run riotous and exult in its freedom as a rational being, and one destined for something higher and better than this world can afford.[58]

[58] Ibid., 17–18.

By revealing the past's inability to re-enslave Hannah, the shadow-world of the fictive grants her a kind of freedom: a liberty that can only be inferred from the experience of being ineluctably separate from the past, or the understanding that she and the dead could never act upon one other. Fictionality is often understood to be an evasion of history and sometimes even a form of negligence practiced upon the deceased. But it could also be a gift that the dead give to the living—the one benevolence granted to us by an otherwise tragic history.[59]

[59] I draw on Roland Barthes, *The Neutral : Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)* (New York: Columbia University Press, n.d.), 41.

CHAPTER THREE

Persons and Things in the "Curious Realism" of Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

What sort of political speech is this that
transgresses the very boundaries of the political,
which sets into scandalous motion the boundary by
which her speech ought to be contained?

—Judith Butler[1]

In an 1888 letter to Charles Chesnutt, Albion W. Tourgée praised Chesnutt's conjure tales for breaking with the realism of popular writers like William Dean Howells. Tourgée expressed admiration for the stories' imaginative, often fantastical aspects and wrote that they were more "true to nature" for flouting the "fettering ideas" and "narrow rules" of northern realists like Howells, which, in his view, produced the "falsest and sorriest" literature.[2] Tourgée had made a similar distinction earlier that same month, though with more subtlety, in a piece for the *Forum* entitled "The South as a Field for Fiction." There he singled out Chesnutt's "curious realism" as an example of the emergent Southern literature that was rapidly turning the South into "the seat of intellectual empire in America" and transforming "the African [into] the chief

[1] Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

[2] Joseph McElrath Jr, Robert C. Leitz III, and Robert C. Leitz, eds., *"To Be an Author": Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 45 note 2.

romantic element of our population."[3] In predicting where the next great American literary works would originate, he quickly dismisses the northern tradition, as in the letter, this time disparaging Howells alongside Henry James. "Southern life," he writes, "does not lend itself readily to the methods of the former. It is earnest, intense, full of action, and careless to a remarkable degree of the trivialities which both of these authors esteem the most important features of real life. Its types neither subsist upon soliloquy nor practice irrelevancy as a fine art; they are not affected by a chronic self-distrust nor devoted to anti-climax."[4] To Tourgée's mind, the fiction of Howells and James attends to a scale of action ill suited for representing what he thought distinct about Southern life and the racial conflicts that plagued it. Moreover, these realists' obsession with the inner ambivalences of their characters led them to write novels with anti-climactic structures and an insufficient amount of action, offering a model of literary representation that necessarily valued the world of human interiority over the realm of politics and the interior world of the fiction over the world beyond the text. As an alternative "The South as a Field for Fiction" envisions a form of "curious realism" more in line with the traditions of the Homeric epic and the sweeping historical romances of Walter Scott. Writing about the cultural impact of the Confederate defeat, Tourgée states, "The downfalls of empire is always the epoch of romance."[5] While Chesnutt would go on to become more of a realist once he left the short story form behind and began writing novels, his early work exhibits a romanticism that

[3] Albion W. Tourgée, "The South as a Field for Fiction," *Forum*, no. 6 (December 1888): 406–7.

[4] Ibid., 406.

[5] Tourgée, "The South as a Field for Fiction," 412.

supports Tourgée's hypothesis about the inability of the period's dominant mode of literary realism to address important facets of the historico-political reality of the Jim Crow South.

Chesnutt's early work has often been written about as a desperate and to some degree politically suspect bid for literary celebrity. Certain critics deem problematic his invention of Uncle Julius, a former slave who tells his white Northern employers fantastical tales about Southern life under slavery, sketching Chesnutt as a writer too willing to pander to Northern tastes and too quick to strategically forget the political commitments he espoused beyond his artistic work. As Richard Brodhead writes in his Introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, "The 1890s were…the heyday of disenfranchisement acts, segregation laws, and the vicious breed of racial phobia that found issue in the lynching of black men. Seen against this reality, the cultural preference for the reminiscences of old black Uncles was a preference for a *fiction* of racial history."[6] Like many others, Brodhead demonstrates an ambivalence about the politics of the conjure tales, noting that they can perhaps too easily be taken as nostalgic or primitivizing looks back at the ante-bellum past.[7] In the best case scenarios, they are politically "subversive," which is to say, underneath their apparently reactionary surface they conceal an underlying anti-racist ideology, giving the properly initiated reader a more radical political

---

[6] Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Duke University Press, 1993), 14.

[7] Other important treatments of the conjure tales that have influenced my own discussion include: Houston A. Baker Jr, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 43–47; Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt's Diasporic Regionalism," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 313–36; Robert Stepto, "'The Simple but Intensely Human Inner Life of Slavery': Storytelling, Fiction, and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius Stories,'" in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, ed. Gunter H. Lenz (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1984), 29–55.

message about the horrors of slavery, Reconstruction, and their aftermath. While it is true that the stories carry with them the history of their form and echo many of the conventions of the genuinely nostalgic Uncle Remus stories in particular, the critical assumption that these works at best smuggle their true politics in through the back door ignores how *overtly* radical they are.

Brodhead implies that the conjure tale is necessarily escapist and thus unethical by virtue of its fictionality. His logic would have us believe that the consumption of Chesnutt's tales is a form of negligence or willful blindness practiced toward those who experienced the all too real violence of Jim Crow America. In this chapter I take a different approach to four of Chesnutt's short stories in particular— "The Goophered Grapevine," "Po' Sandy," "Lonesome Ben," and "Dave's Nekliss" —arguing that they are not in fact opposed to history. Instead, their "curious realism" dramatizes the insufficiency of both the northern realism that flourished around the turn of the century as well as realism in the broadest of senses, underscoring their inability to represent the modes of epistemological violence or patterns of thought that were the very condition of possibility for slavery in the first place. Chesnutt's realism, as Tourgée understood, has the benefit of representing the workings of racist politics because it focuses on a different scale. Whereas for Brodhead what counts as "reality"—what counts as the appropriate subject for black literary culture—is the contemporary maelstrom of racist laws and physical violence, Tourgée sees that there are other forms of violence that require representation in American literature. I want to argue that, in Chesnutt's hands, the form's conspicuous fictionality actually allows for some of the most radical political insights that he would make at any point in his career—insights about the difficulty of representing the slave as a figure without recapitulating the originary violence of her objectification.

My own reading of the conjure tales, like many others', is indebted to Eric Sundquist's landmark discussion of Chesnutt in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. There Sundquist draws a correlation between the art of conjure and narrative or signifying, which he sees as acts "of figurative metamorphosis."[8] "Chesnutt's fictive seizure of the image," he avers, "is itself an act of cultural conjure that reclaims and transforms its significance." I agree entirely with this reading, which conceives of conjure as a metaphor for linguistic practices, but I would also point out how such a reading—which much of the later criticism on Chesnutt takes for granted—emphasizes the importance of the frame narrative over the content of the embedded tales. My own reading, in contrast, rather than suggesting that the the frame narrative mirrors the tales, distinguishes them from one another and shows them to be politically and ethically disjointed. Like Matthew Taylor, I "examin[e] the tales' exploration of the conjure cosmology without recourse to the hermeneutics of depth or symptom," and in doing so, show how conjure "denatures the metaphysics of white privilege."[9] Whereas Sundquist begins his chapter of Chesnutt with a long discussion of dialect that emphasizes Julius's voice along with the competing white voices of the frame, I want to take seriously the tales' metamorphoses not as narrative acts but as reconfigurations of the imagined material world of the stories.

Because (as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation) literary critics tend to make the fictive subservient to the real, to material history, Chesnutt's stories have been primarily

[8] Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 381.

[9] Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 119.

discussed as realist and regional fiction. Critics have argued for and explored with great insight their ethnographic function as well as their resistance to an ethnographic impulse in the form of their "culturalist orientation."[10] They have contextualized the stories within sociological, anthropological, political, and legal discourses as well as cultural histories of minstrelsy, exhibitions of plantation life, panoramas, Afro-American music, and of course writing in dialect. And while this commitment to the "real" of historical materialism, which motivates these contextual efforts, is important, it also often has the effect of dampening some of Chesnutt's insights by making his work analogical to these other discourses and forms. In Sundquist's work, for example, the history and politics of the cakewalk serves as a model for the history and politics of the short stories, which also means that the cakewalk ultimately defines and determines the cultural orientation of Chesnutt's work. And while, again, I agree with and admire that assessment, I want to suggest that it may blind readers to the stories' attempts to explore or think beyond the limits of contemporaneous political discourse and diasporic subjectivity. Through their apparent anachronism—and this is the major way in which they depart from the rest of the local color tradition—they offer a critique of some of the normative categories that define the field of politics, in particular, personhood, agency, and the punctual temporality of the category of the event.

Chesnutt turns to the conjure tale at the start of his writing career not only because it is a familiar form to his white readers, and not solely because he is capitulating to white taste at the

[10] Michael A. Elliott, *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2002); Neil Matheson, "History and Survival: Charles Chesnutt and the Time of Conjure," *American Literary Realism* 43, no. 1 (October 1, 2010): 3. Matheson supplements Elliott's reading by pointing to "the presence of the uneven time of cultural evolution in Chesnutt's writing" and its insistence upon the "persistence of the history and culture of slavery" in the modern world (4).

expense of his true racial politics, but also because the realism that dominated the literary world he wanted to enter was insufficient for the political project that he had in mind. Through the subject of conjure or "hoodoo," he turned his critical attention to the readerly subjectivity that realist writing (in the broadest sense) fostered as it rose to the level of literary hegemony in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the emergence of the novel.[11] In this realism there is a sense that the reader is like a character—that there is some continuity between the world of the reader and the world of the novel. This is a major break, as Ian Watt teaches us, from the allegorical reading that predominated prior to the novel's rise.[12] But the scenes of reading (or, more precisely, listening) that Chesnutt gives us are not scenes of reading realism; in the conjure tales he is interested in scenes of reading that are very emphatically not realist. They involve the supernatural and surreal transformations; they clearly distinguish the world of the story and the world of the reader. They offer not a mimesis of the past but a mimesis of the past's ineluctable alterity. This may seem like an obvious point to make, but it remains important because realism always poses questions about exactness or plausibility—about whether something happened "like that" or *could* happen like that, or whether things "like that" happen in the real world. There is, as Susan Stewart remarks, a kind of mapping of one world upon another world that happens in the reading of a realist text—a mapping that the listeners find to be either difficult or impossible in the conjure tales.[13]

---

[11] For a discussion of Chesnutt's self-fashioning as author see chapter six of Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 177–210.

[12] Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (University of California Press, 2001).

[13] Stewart, *On Longing*, 4.

Finally, as the title of this chapter suggests, "things" such as plants are crucial to the way that the stories orient their readers toward the past of slavery, and so I have chosen to focus many of my readings on their representation of the lives of objects. Whereas the previous chapter was most concerned with the legal status of the slave, the present one focusses on the financial status of things, including enslaved bodies, in the Southern plantation economy. This chapter is about cultivation and commodification. In the vines and trees of Chesnutt's fiction—which mingle with the slave body in curious ways—there lies a theory of ethics unmoored or at least distanced from normative categories of the human, agency, and event. The conjure tales reorganize the relationship between "our world" and the world of the past, as well as the human world and the non-human world.

The Man Who Was a Tree

"Po' Sandy" (1899) is the story of an enslaved man weary of bondage and its rootlessness—of his master's ability to hire him out at a whim and sell his wife at any moment, to dispossess him of both his body and his affective ties. "I wisht," he tells his lover, Tenie, "I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile."[14] Sandy gets his wish and morphs into a tree. However, this tale about a strange kind of emancipation quickly reveals itself to be a tragic love story when Tenie is too late in attempting to stop plantation hands from chopping down her beloved and sawing him into lumber for a new kitchen. She arrives only in time to see the saw rend the tree into pieces, a gruesome spectacle since the tree resists and cries with pain: "mighty hard wuk," Julius comments, "fer of all de

[14] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 47.

sweekin', en moanin', en groanin.'"[15] Like many of his early stories, "Po' Sandy" reveals Chesnutt's understanding of the ontological paradoxes created by slavery and racism—the overlap of persons and property, human and inhuman—by imagining a world in which persons literally morph into animals and things, and indeed sometimes *wish* for such objecthood in order to exercise otherwise forbidden forms of agency or, in Sandy's case, to preserve the sovereignty of his desire by firmly locating himself in space and time. With the help of the conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, Sandy invents a form of fugitivity that would, paradoxically, keep him in place on the plantation but release him from the violence and indignity of enslavement there. By quite literally setting down roots, he expresses a sovereignty that is otherwise impossible for him to imagine. He exercises his own desire for locatedness in a way that would be otherwise impossible, since traditional fugitivity, running away, is in fact a negative expression of the fugitive's desire, a wish to be "not there," as opposed to what Sandy illustrates by becoming a tree, which is something more like a desire to remain "here" without the ever-present threat of displacement. His flight from one type of embodiment to another is clearly an ontological fugitivity.

But of course Chesnutt makes clear that such sorcery is not without its own perils. The tree has its strange form of freedom by virtue of being misrecognized (by everyone but Tenie), and yet along with that freedom comes another danger. The tragedy of the story lies in the fact that even as Sandy escapes one form of commodification by turning into a tree, he finds himself subject to the violent forces of capital again when he is transformed into a commodity once more as lumber. In the squeaks, moans, and groans of the tree as it is cut down, and in the material

[15] Ibid., 51.

resistance of the wood against the saw, Chesnutt registers the violence that is inherent to the practices of commodification, which, as Marx suggests, robs the object of its thingliness in order to make room for its exchange value.[16] He literalizes what is an otherwise abstract practice, emphasizing the magical quality of the fetish's coming into being. In another register, the story dramatizes the habit of mind by which a tree becomes its flesh, a source of raw material awaiting formation through external forces, and thus vulnerable to cultivation through fragmentation. Michael Marder identifies this same habit—"the regrettable identification of vegetal life with mute and inert matter"—as the impetus for taking "the first tentative steps toward acknowledging that this elusive vitality is the embodied limit of the metaphysical grasp," that is, the basis for an expansion of metaphysical thinking.[17] Chesnutt's wailing tree is both an index of the slave's objecthood and an opening up of that objecthood's possibilities in that it philosophically reorients us, asking us to see the tree not as raw material but as a vital and discrete being—a mode of being from which it is all too easily violently separated. This kind of thinking, which evokes rather than suppresses the tree's vitality, not only remakes the object-world of the story; it also potentially disrupts the hermeneutics we bring to literature about plantation life: how we read for evidence of the slave's subjectivity, how we read the relationship between subjectivity and embodiment, how we identify and categorize violence. The slave *as a figure* is dismembered.

[16] Karl Marx, "Capital," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McClellan (New York: Oxford, 2000), 472–73.

[17] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 31.

The slave's personhood is all but erased in "Po' Sandy" and his commodification is made complete by Sandy's transformation into lumber. The sentimental and humanist affirmation of the slave's personhood, the idea that he can be represented as a full person without losing sight of his structural position within the political and economic system of the time, meets an alarming critique in Chesnutt's short stories. To represent the personhood of the slave as "reality" does nothing to illuminate the epistemic conditions that produced and reproduced the institution. Traditional realist characterization has nothing to say about those patterns of thought and representational practices that naturalized enslavement. Those who cut Sandy into pieces of wood obviously do not hear human cries, nor do they imagine that the tree has a mind; they do not think in allegories or metaphors. They only experience Sandy as flesh. It has often been noted that realism usually tends toward demystification, but Chesnutt's curious realism is about keeping intact and examining the mystifications, the seemingly irrational beliefs, that constituted slavery's ideological underpinnings.

The question that comes up again and again in the frames of the conjure tales—where Uncle Julius is telling the stories to white Annie and John, who have arrived from the north in search of an investment opportunity and temperate weather to treat Annie's depression—is the question of belief. In what sense are Julius's stories true to life or in Tourgée's phrase "true to nature" when they involve magical curses and people metamorphosing into objects and animals? Built into the structure of each of the stories, as part of the framing narrative, is a reflection upon the embedded tale's fictionality. On the surface, these exchanges between Julius, Annie, and John may appear to be simply a competition between rational empiricism and magical or superstitious folk traditions, but there is something more complex happening there having to do

with the ethical dimension of fictiveness.[18] In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," for example, Julius tells of an enslaved woman (Becky) who is separated from her baby when her master trades her for a racing horse. Through the art of conjure, Aunt Peggy works to reunite mother and child by sending a hornet to sting the horse's knees and cripple it while at the same time she leads Becky to dream (and believe) that her child is dead, casting the young mother into a debilitating depression that leaves her unable to work. With both the horse and Becky incapable of labor, the slave owners reverse the original transaction, returning the baby to Becky's care. While John calls the narrative "a very ingenious fairy tale," Annie disagrees with her husband, exclaiming, "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did."[19] John then wonders how she can think the story true given that it includes an "episode" in which the baby, Mose, is transformed into a humming bird and a "digression" in which he morphs into a mockingbird, but Annie disregards these as "mere ornamental details and not at all essential." "The story," she explains, "is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war." Usually the more sympathetic and generous listener, Annie strips the tale down in her mind, shearing off the ornamentation in order to hold up the "essential" truth of the story, the *plausible* part of the story, which is of course the portion that aligns with our knowledge of the history of slavery in the US, the story of an enslaved mother who is separated from her child**.**

[18] Chesnutt famously disavowed and discredited the belief in fetishism and animism in his essays. See for example Charles Waddell Chesnutt, "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 155–60.

[19] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 92.

However, Chesnutt does not necessarily suggest that the reader should take Annie as a model for how to consume Julius's tales, for the exchange between the couple only makes those fantastical "ornaments" all the more conspicuous; we leave the story with a reminder of its fictionality. John's use of the term "digression" and Annie's use of the term "ornamental" to describe Mose's transformation into a bird are especially telling here because they raise the issue of the hierarchization that takes place through any practice of realist narrative. For John, that is a moment where the story lingers on a detail unnecessarily, circling an object (the bird) as though it presented a detour, a forestalling of narrative closure. As Stewart writes, "narrative digression articulates the narrative voice, its control over the material, and consequently its control over the reader's passage toward closure. Instead of offering the reader transcendence, the digression blocks the reader's view, toying with the hierarchy of narrative events."[20] What John objects to, in other words, is the lack of power he experienced in that moment in the story—his sense that Julius was not only telling a story but also constructing a world, and indeed an ideological vision of the world whose hierarchy of details and events do not line up with his own experience. He registers the loss of control that follows from the listener's subjection to the teller, the embedded tale's capacity to establish the pace with which he experiences the passage of one event to the next.

Similarly, Annie's disregard for the "ornamental details" reveals her wish to shake the fantastical elements loose from the story and discover the historical reality that is the "essential" core of the tale. Annie, who we know is a reader of novels, listens for that which is true to her knowledge of history and dismisses the rest as ornamentation. Novelistic realism has trained her

[20] Stewart, *On Longing*, 30.

to read for the continuities with her own experience of the world. As Stewart puts it, "There is no *point* to the details in bourgeois realism aside from its function within the world of signs, its message that it is the trace of the real. *The ornament does not dress the object; it defines the object.*"[21] Annie understands that the story as a whole cannot be judged by the usual metrics of realism, but she expresses a longing for the realist essence hidden beneath the trappings of the conjure woman's magic.

Ambiguity lingers after the couple's exchange, ambiguity regarding where, then, one should draw the line between the ornamental and the essential detail, or what is considered part of the plot and what is considered mere digressive or unnecessary description—description that distracts from the tale's attempt to establish the texture and rhythm of the real, what Barthes famously calls the "reality effect."[22] This ambiguity hinges on whether one sees the mockingbird as an object or as a metamorphosed character—whether one believes in the magic of the conjure woman. For the skeptic, the detail is a matter of style: it dresses the object rather than defining it. For the believer—and it is not clear whether Annie is a believer or not—the mockingbird is Mose and thus he is an individuated actor who is defined against the backdrop of the tale's object-world scenery. By failing to clarify this ambiguity, Chesnutt suggests that the tale presents a problem of how to read, for here the usual distinction between realism and fantasy does not hold. In bourgeois realism's semiotic system, where the use of descriptive language

[21] Ibid., 28 My emphasis.

[22] In "The Reality Effect" Barthes demonstrates that "the 'real' is supposed to be self-sufficient, that it is strong enough to belie any notion of 'function,' that its 'speech-act' has no need to be integrated into a structure and that the having-been-there of things is a sufficient principle of speech." Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989), 147.

defines the world of objects, "the material object is transformed completely to the realm of exchange value," and as characters move through this realm, they are individuated through their relations with the landscape of objects. The space of realism is personal space, the space of possessive individualism. In contrast, Chesnutt's fantastical realism troubles the line between world and character, between ornament and object, between the essential and the dispensable. Chesnutt's "digressions" are never clearly digressive—never apart from the main action of the plot—and his "ornamental details" are never distinctly ornamental—never entirely pointless. The exchanges between John and Annie about the "truth" of the stories are not just a competition between two readerly paradigms. More than that, they call attention to the ways in which enslavement, on the one hand, and characterization as it occurs in bourgeois realism, on the other, are incompatible. After all, in a semiotic universe in which individuals are defined over and against a context of objects—a series of material "details"—how can the slave, who is somewhere between person and object, emerge out of the homogeneity of signs as a character? If all realist space is personal, is it not impossible for the non-person to emerge as a character? Chesnutt's conjure tales reveal bourgeois realism's reliance on the primacy of personhood and possessive individualism, which makes the representation of the slave impossible and fantasy and digression necessary.

In the end, Annie refuses to resolve the question of what is true or false and, more significantly, what is contiguous with the "real" world of the reader/listener and what is not. This refusal, ambivalence, or what could be mere apathy toward the question of veracity distinguishes the conjure tale from other genres such as the gothic short story in which the supernatural or fantastical also plays a crucial function. Unlike in the gothic mode, Chesnutt's stories do not resolve their mysteries or provide epistemological closure, nor do they reward the

"rational" assessment of evidence and deductive logic. Uncle Julius frames "Sis' Becky's Pickaniny" as an attempt to prove the value of carrying a rabbit's foot for good luck, but, as John is quick to point out, "your story doesn't establish what you started out to prove,—that a rabbit's foot brings good luck."[23] Annie disagrees: "I rather suspect….that Sis' Becky had no rabbit's foot." And Julius affirms, "Ef Sis Becky had had a rabbit foot, she nebber would 'a' went th'oo all dis trouble." Weeks later, after Annie's health has shown a marked improvement, John finds a rabbit's foot in the pocket of one of her dresses. While John is only able to read the story as a digression or, at best, an example of the impoverished logic of superstition, Annie articulates the story's strange force, betraying her belief in the talismanic power of the animal appendage and in the fantastical metamorphoses that take place in the story itself. This desire to believe is, to someone like John, mere naiveté. But, to a reader who takes in Julius's story from one more degree of removal, the will to believe exemplifies a longing for a subjectivity outside of empirical norms—a wish to suspend *belief* rather than disbelief—and this is noteworthy because the rabbit's foot signifies that Becky's plight could have been otherwise. It marks the past and present as hardly inevitable; it is, like all lucky charms, a testament to the inexorable forces we label as contingency.

John's interest in "proof" is important here precisely because no such thing is possible. The object's power is a negative one, and so proof as a logical structure, as the end result in a chain of deductions, could never apply. Nothing would count as sure proof of the rabbit's foot's ability to stave off misfortune, which explains why there is no rabbit's foot in the tale itself. Chesnutt's greater point here is that fiction, no matter how closely it seeks to mimic the real

[23] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 92.

world, does not ever prove anything and should not be invoked to do so. Realism construed broadly attempts to close the ontological gap between the world of the fiction and the world outside of the text by claiming that places, events, and persons similar to the ones represented in the fiction do take place or *could* take place upon the firm material ground of reality. And this possibility of *proof* was, as we saw in the previous chapter, encoded within the abolitionist literature of the nineteenth century in novels whose representations of slavery could be retroactively vindicated as well as in non-fiction that was taken to be proof of specific patterns of brutality that took place under slavery. Abolitionists would often point out the congruities between slave narratives in order to bolster their claims about what types of violence were possible or commonplace. In contrast, once we have entered into the realm of the conjure tale, the question of veracity is suspended. As Elaine Freedgood has written about ghost stories, they "do not resolve [their] mystery, the ghost."[24] Unlike detective fiction—where proof is possible—

> we are left with two distinct ontological realms at the end of the ghost story: One in which ghosts do exist and the one in which they do not. We inhabit the ruptured space, and so do many characters who do not know what they have seen, or if what they have heard of what someone else has seen is true. The ghost story is metaleptically ruptured by intrusion of belief into disbelief, and of disbelief into belief. There is a kind of play between these two levels, a heterotopia for which no resolution is offered, or even attempted.

World fails to map onto world and, instead, "rupturing diegetic and ontological levels break the world into worlds."[25]

[24] Elaine Freedgood, "Ghostly Reference," *Representations* 125, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 45.

[25] Ibid., 44.

These ruptures are significant to the extent that they divide up the social world, revealing the cracks in the otherwise undisturbed consensus about what it is possible to know. Sitting on the fence between belief and disbelief—not knowing whether what one has just seen or heard is true—in turn creates a whole slew of conundrums about how to act. At the end of "Po' Sandy," Tenie is left devastated, but no one understands why; her master assumes she is insane. Julius remarks, "en dey ain't much room in dis worl' fer crazy w'ite folks, let 'lone a crazy nigger."[26] Tenie's insanity highlights the necessarily social nature of capital's machinations by ejecting her from the frame of the social itself. There is no room in the world for her, no room within language, once she stops believing in the fungibility of all commodities, in exchange value, and mourns the loss of a tree. Of all of the inhabitants of the story, only Teanie hears the sounds of the rending wood as a form of speech. The story raises questions about knowledge that is unevenly distributed, about the nature of belief and specifically the *social* nature of belief, as well as about slavery and its relationship to characterization. This last issue seems to me to be vital for understanding Chesnutt's projects in his conjure tales and for understanding his choice of the conjure tale as a form to represent the past of slavery. "What a system it was…under which such things were possible," remarks Annie after hearing the story. John then expresses his skepticism: "Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man being turned into a tree?" "'Oh, no,' she replied quickly, 'not that'; and then she murmered absently, and with a dim look in her fine eyes, 'Poor Tenie!'" I take seriously what Annie says about what was "possible" under slavery. She is not merely naïve; she finds a form of truth in the story when she sees how they mark the ineluctable alterity of the South's slave past—history's ontological distance from

[26] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 53.

her own presence, a form of the rupturing that Freedgood identifies in ghost stories. I want to suggest that John's skeptical posture toward the story—which, as we will see, he takes over and over—may be the comfortable position to assume in the face of such fantastical details, but Chesnutt wants us to take Tenie's plight more seriously, to wonder how such a tale is made possible by the realities of enslavement and the habits of mind that are the preconditions for slavery itself. John wants to know what "really" happened, whereas Annie listens differently, not searching for the reality of the story or calculating its plausibility, but seeing it as a representation of history's otherness. Rather than differentiating the reality of dispossession under slavery from Julius's aestheticized version, Annie is able to see the story as being about the aesthetic nature of the slave's dispossession, or what the aesthetic has in common with the economic conditions that produced and reproduced plantation slavery in the south.

So what does it mean to consider the possibility of a man being turned into a tree? First one must consider the conditions under which that possibility is desirable—that is, when immobility rather than mobility become the preferred form of fugitivity. Chesnutt asks us to imagine a mode of fugitivity that is not synonymous with displacement, with the escape to elsewhere, but rather with rootedness. Central to this is the wish to stake a different ontological position under the existing regime of subjection rather than a wish to escape from the space occupied by the current regime. The problem that the story highlights is the linkage of freedom with mobility. To link freedom with immobility leads then to a rethinking of the embodied subject, a rearrangement of existing systems for organizing the body's relationship to sentience. To uncouple those two things—to remove the arena of phenomenology from the confines of the sensible body—is to at once escape power and open one's self up to the possibility of *random* violence. Relations of power are always established upon the suspended possibility of physical

violence, and so power at once wields the threat of this violence as it exercises what appears to be the choice to refrain from it, which then can be reframed as protection. Outside of any economy of subjection lies the threat of contingency—of randomized harm.

The story may be titled "Po' Sandy," but it is Tenie whose plight most moves Annie in the end. Tenie is the character who ventures beyond the arena of normative politics, who witnesses the randomization of violence that exists outside of existing relations of power, and then must return to her old life, burdened with the knowledge that the most radical forms of fugitivity cannot shield her from catastrophe. And yet, at the end of the story Annie decides that the aforementioned lumber should not be used to construct the new kitchen she and John plan to build. John begrudgingly agrees. No one believes Tenie in her own time, but the story of her mourning affects Annie and leads her to keep up the wooden structure as a kind of home for and monument to Sandy's ghost. Julius's tale effectively establishes a new ethical order, opening up the possibility that what counts as an ethical subject might change—might even extend beyond the human, beyond the living, beyond the dead, to what can only be understood in the present as an ingenious fiction.

Grapevines and Parahumanity

Chesnutt published his first conjure story in the *Atlantic* in 1887. In "The Goophered Grapevine" Julius tells of "Mars Dugal' McAdoo," the former owner of the plantation John is interested in buying, who suspects that slaves are eating the scuppernong grapes that grow on many of the vineyard's vines. In an attempt to put a stop to this, he enlists Aunt Peggy's help to "goopher" or curse the grapevines to prevent the slaves from devouring their fruits. The goopher proves a successful deterrent until a runaway slave from a neighboring plantation comes along

and, not knowing about the curse, partakes of the scuppernongs. Consequently, he is fated to have his health and vitality tied to the seasonal flourishing and withering of the grapevines. In the spring, his hair begins to grow grape-like clusters, and in the winter, he loses his hair while rheumatism sets in. McAdoo catches on and decides to take financial advantage of the goopher by selling Henry in the springtime, when he is energetic and capable of labor, taking him back in the winter only to sell him the following spring. In Henry, Chesnutt creates a character whose life is cyclically bound to the seasons and whose fate is bound up in the logic of capital. He is essentially human capital invested over and over in the service of producing surplus capital until McAdoo makes a bad investment in a new agricultural technique that ruins his crops and therefore kills Henry.

What does it mean for a character's life to be tied to the cyclical temporality of the seasons? "The Goophered Grapevine" does away with something we often take for granted when reading realist fiction: the need for biographical time to structure the story. As Lukacs puts it, the "essentially biographical" form of the novel is "a symptom of contingency."[27] "In the biographical form," he states, "the unfulfillable, sentimental striving both for the immediate unity of life and for a completely rounded architecture is balanced and brought to rest: it is transformed into being." While, strictly speaking, the conjure tales are stories rather than novels, I would argue that the short story form maintains the novel's grounding in the biographical, lending unity to a life and bringing it "to rest" in the sense that this unity naturalizes the individual's experience as "being." For Chesnutt, however, enslavement and its transformation of persons into commodities makes traditional realist characterization inadequate for

[27] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (MIT Press, 1974), 77.

representing the ways that the trade in chattel reconfigures the experience of time, overtaking the normative temporality of biography. Bodily experience becomes a function of investment cycles, and the only thing that brings the story to an end is financial ruin—the loss of capital itself—as a result of contingency.

But this reading remains somehow incomplete to the extent that it fails to account for the fact that the cycles of investment and return, of selling and buying, are inexorably tied to the temporal rhythm of the seasons. Henry's body, by becoming part grapevine or adopting some of the grapevine's traits, disrupts the unity that the biographical form imposes upon time. The goopher creates a narratological disturbance whereby the reader is no longer reading about human time but about something like planetary time. This causes a temporary crisis when it becomes unclear how the story could end since our protagonist has the ability to, like the grapevines, outlive all of the human actors involved in his exploitation. More to the point, as Marder writes, "…the spacio-temporal movement of plants, nonsynchronous with human time, is directed toward and by the other (light, the changing seasons, etc.) and therefore, unfolding as a hetero-temporality, is governed by the time of the other."[28] The goopher introduces this hetero-temporality into the story, directly opposing the unity of (human) being that Lukács identifies as the central structuring aspect of realist literature. The story itself, like Henry, can only come to an end, then, through an ecological disaster, which is exactly what happens when the crop is decimated by a northerner who arrives late in the story to convince McAdoo to adopt a number of bad farming practices.

[28] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 12.

As soon as Julius ends the story, Annie asks, "doubtfully, but seriously," whether or not it is true, and he offers to show her Henry's grave.[29] Back in the properly realist frame, the gravestone and its inscription of the biographical end, marks the ultimate triumph of biographical time over the hetero-temporality of plant life. "The Goophered Grapevine" is essentially a parable of cultivation and consumption, and it would suggest the inescapability of the speculative gaze, which has the power to transform everything in its purview into a potential source of surplus value by adapting hetero-temporalities into cycles of finance capital. The story shows the inextricability of speculation and the rhythms of finance capital, on the one hand, and chattel slavery, on the other. But it also suggests the possibility for insurgent temporalities and forms of embodiment that, though still vulnerable to the trade in humans, reconfigure the relation between the human and the non-human. And this is not a reconfiguration that is unique to Chesnutt, but actually, as Monique Allaewert has argued, a result of the plantation form's organization of labor power. The plantation, she writes, "required that slaves (often of African descent) become deeply familiar with the properties of nonhuman animal and plant life. This meant that Africans in the diaspora, whether slave or maroon (self-emancipated slaves), had especially deft imaginings of the forms of power and agency that developed at the interstices between human and nonhuman life."[30] She goes on to argue that the enslaved or fugitive body may be best understood in terms of its "parahumanity." The parahuman body is a "collation that comes together for a time but keeps open the possibility of other collations of parts" while never settling

[29] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 43.

[30] Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology : Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 7.

into a new, unitary hybrid identity.[31] Thinking about both Sandy and Henry as parahuman figures produced by the plantation system highlights at once the possibilities and the dangers that attend these configurations of personhood that are not opposed but orthogonal to the human and to plant life. As we will see, Chesnutt's later explorations of the conjure tale form would produce a different, and in some ways less despairing, pictures of speculation's abilities to reach and reify the enslaved body. Stories like "Lonesome Ben" and "Dave's Neckliss" also suggest a link between the characterization of enslaved men and their commodification, insisting on the need to represent the dehumanizing effects of bondage, but they ultimately emphasize, at least in part, the new temporalities and forms of the human that this commodification engenders as well. If "The Goophered Grapevine" is about speculation's triumph and the impossibility of a black body to escape commodification's grip, then these later tales suggest something different.

In a speech he titled "The Writing of a novel," Chesnutt described the creation of characters as "perhaps the most important elements in a work of creative imagination."

> As the Greek sculptors of the age of Pericles could produce a statue representing a perfection more ideal than could be found in any one human being, as the great masters of the art of painting can by combining the excellences of many models, infuse them with the fire of genius and make them live upon the canvas, the joy and the despair of those less gifted, so the master minds of fiction have created characters more real, more convincing than those of even the men and women whom we see around us. Nowhere is the kinship of humanity to divinity more apparent than in its power to create out of thin air, creatures who live and breathe and love and hate and do and die,—and yet live on forever.[32]

[31] Ibid., 99.

[32] Charles Waddell Chesnutt, "The Writing of a Novel," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 551.

Chesnutt's theory of character may appear simple at first glance, but the comparison that he makes between literature, sculpture, and painting, does not serve to collapse the distinction between media but instead reveals what is distinct about each medium's mimetic capacities, or what counts as a mimesis in each case. For the sculptor, success has been achieved when the ideality of form conveys the idea of perfection; for the painter, several models' features may be combined in order to produce the sense of liveliness or vivacity on the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. Great fiction writers are distinguished by their ability to create "convincing"—not, importantly, vivacious —characters, characters who are somehow more "real" than the human beings we encounter outside of aesthetic works. In all three of these cases, Chesnutt draws attention to the ways that artistic representation does more than simply index or document a person or type; he is interested in the gap between mere mimetic representation of living humans and the vivifying work of the artist, who exceeds mimesis and produces, in the case of fiction, "characters more real, more convincing than those of even men and women whom we see around us." But how can a literary character be "more real" than those people who inhabit reality itself? How does the "real" manage to detach itself from the perceptual experiences that we think of as everyday life and to then *exceed* them? In what sense does fiction depict an intensification of reality? The final sentence of the paragraph appears at first blush separate from the preceding train of thought about characters and their reality effect, but I think it actually suggests an answer to those questions that are raised by the earlier sentences. The answer depends upon the author's power to produce "out of thin air" individuals who live lives very similar to yours and mine, who die deaths like yours and mine "—and yet live on forever." This ontological paradox, which defines fictional beings—creatures who are at once like us, have all the characteristics of human beings, and who are not human—allows for literary characters to be more real than reality

itself, even when they lack the material presence that normally signals for us a person's realness. To write a character well is to successfully activate this paradox, and we know when this has been done because only then does the author's God-like power appear (a power whose source continually works to conceal its historical origin). That is, for Chesnutt, the goal of good characterization is to produce a character whose vividness serves as a testament to the power of the author and, by extension, the reader's subjection to the author in the form of this greater form of belief that good fiction demands. Like Tom Sawyer's notion of "style," which I discussed at length in chapter one, this philosophy of fiction hinges on the novelist's own ability to be at once in control of the imaginative universe and conspicuously absent from it—to have, in D.A. Miller's term, "godlike authority."[33]

Two distinct temporalities emerge in Chesnutt's theory of good characterization: the temporality of biography or the time of the human and the near-divine temporality of eternity. And it is in the gap between these two temporalities that one sits when reading a successful realist literary representation, perceiving both the familiar march of biographical time as it moves from birth to death and the eternal time of textuality. As he goes on to say in his speech, "As a great portrait painter may so idealize the living face as to bring out all the good and leave out all the bad, so the great master of fiction may take a historical character and make of him or her a person much more vital than the real man or woman could ever, in our human experience, have been."[34] We see the two temporalities at work again as well as an emphasis on the "human" or sensory "experience" of reading about a character versus that of encountering a real person.

[33] Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, 29.

[34] Chesnutt, "The Writing of a Novel," 551.

Realism for Chesnutt is, above all else, a particular phenomenology, a feeling that one is experiencing an intensification of vitality as opposed to a feeling of continuity between the world described by the narrative and the world beyond the text (whereby I feel characters to be *equal* in vitality to those I encounter in real life). This conceptualization comes strikingly close to Frederick Jameson's recent theorization of realism, where he writes about the two dialectical forces that constitute the mode: the narrative impulse and embodied affect. Most relevant for our discussion here is his distinction between the two temporalities represented by these opposing and mutually constituting discursive forces. The narrative impulse is of course characterized by the chronological passage of past into present and present into future—by the normative temporalization of the story into the past-present-future triptych. Affect, in contrast, is experienced as an "eternal present," as a shifting of intensities in the body that happens outside of chronology, outside of time.[35] Realist characterization starting around the middle of the nineteenth century in Jameson's view is a product of a tension between allegory and the body "which repel one another and fail to mix."[36] Allegory here means personification and "naming and nomination," and it is the narrative impulse to produce a character by providing an allegory of a person who becomes intelligible, who is ultimately knowable, through language. Affect, on the other hand, resists language; it cannot be easily named and incorporated into allegory. Drawing on Barthes, Jameson writes,

> This irreconcilable divorce between intelligibility and experience, between meaning and existence, then can be grasped as a fundamental feature of modernity, particularly in literature, whose verbal existence necessarily inclines it to idealism. If it means something, it can't be real; if it is real, it can't be absorbed by purely mental or conceptual categories (the ideal of the "concrete" then attempting an impossible synthesis

[35] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies Of Realism* (London ; New York: Verso, 2013), 24.

[36] Ibid., 37.

> of these two dimensions: clearly enough phenomenology conceived the most strenuous modern vocation to achieve it).

In other words, realism registers the modern split between the intelligible (that which is conceptualized, speakable, and meaningful) and the ineffability of pure affective experience. One name Jameson gives to the latter—to that which resists rational conceptualization—is "contingency."

I note the similarity between these two notions of what realism is and does because, ultimately, Chesnutt's curious brand of realism is a hyperbolization of realism's antinomies. The conjure tales stage the tug of war between affect and narrative as a divide between contingency and speculation, the latter being the attempt to contain, describe, temporalize, and ultimately overcome the former. "The Goophered Grapevine" is emblematic of Chesnutt's attempts to represent this conflict as it plays out on and through the body of a character, a character whose gravestone comes to signify finance capital's victory over any kind of lived experience, over any kind of rhythms of life that might resist its imperative of productive labor and the creation of surplus value. Those rhythms of life, as I have already begun to suggest, are uniquely vegetal in the conjure tales. More precisely then, Chesnutt's curious realism recalibrates the traditional antinomies of realism by situating affect not just in the realm of the human body but elsewhere as well, especially amid the flora of the plantation. This is not to say that the self expands to the point that it subsumes what was once its environment, but that there is a blurring of the divide between self and other, and between normative temporality and hetero-temporality.

Metonymy, Selfhood, and the Pine Knot

However, a later story that was not originally included by Chesnutt and his editors at Houghton Mifflin in the 1899 collection, *The Conjure Woman*, provides an interesting

counterpoint to that first story. "Lonesome Ben" is, like many of Chesnutt's conjure tales, a retelling of a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, specifically, the myth of Narcissus. In this reimagining of the story, the Narcissus figure is a slave named Ben, who manages to escape only to find that he cannot navigate his way to the North and to freedom. He makes a circle back to the plantation, where he decides to hide in the woods, slipping out in the night to cross the creek and scoop up gobs of clay which he eats. When Ben confronts his former master in an attempt to return to the plantation, his master fails to recognize him: "No, I doan know yer, yer yeller rascal! W'at de debbil yer mean by tellin' me sich a lie? Ben wuz black ez a coal an' straight ez an' arrer. Youer yaller ez dat clay-bank, an' crooked ez a bair'l-hoop."[37] Confused, Ben goes to creek to look at his reflection and see what Marrabo is talking about. At first "he didn' reco'nize hisse'f an' glanshed back ter see ef dey wa'n't somebody lookin' ober his shoulder—but dey wa'n't." Then he realizes that his diet has indeed turned him to the color of clay, and at the tale's end, he lies down to die, bakes into a brick, and crumbles to a dust that forever yellows the river's waters.

Clearly what interests Chesnutt about the myth is the misrecognition that Narcissus experiences as he stares at his own watery reflection and thinks that he is gazing upon the image of another. In "Lonesome Ben," Chesnutt rewrites that deadly misrecognition of self for other as a story about the outer limits of personhood, where an individual's status as subject or object, as living or dead, comes into question. As Julius puts it, Ben had felt loneliness before, but now "he felt mo' lak a stranger 'n he did lak Ben. In a day er so mo' he 'mence ter wonder whuther he wuz libbin' er not. He had hearn 'bout folks turnin' ter clay w'en dey wuz dead, an' he

[37] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 154.

'lowed maybe he wuz dead an' didn' knowed it, an' dat wuz de reason w'y eve'body run erway f'm 'im an' wouldn' hab nuffin' ter do wid 'im."[38] Like Narcissus, Ben becomes estranged from himself, and by virtue of this estrangement, he dies, but not before he enters into a liminal realm between life and death—a space of social death he can only experience as a radical, atomizing loneliness. But if Narcissus turns into a flower that stands at the edge of the riverbank where its image can be doubled on the surface of the water eternally, Ben dematerializes and literally dissolves to become an element in the water itself. This liquefaction or dispersal of his body literalizes the unmaking of Ben's personhood. Ovid's myth is, among other things, about how we acquire the knowledge of our own personhood—our immanence, our body as the site of our subjectivity—how, in other words, my body becomes the location of my self, the fantasmatic seat of that which is most precious to me, my own subjectivity. "In a certain sense I only love […] my body," as Lacan put it, "even when I transfer this love onto the body of the other."[39] If the image of the body is where one learns to accept the preconditions of personhood, what does it mean for the body to break apart and become suspended in liquid? Chesnutt dramatizes the ways in which fugitivity requires not only a breakage of kinship ties—loneliness—but also an undoing of the fugitive's personhood, which had, prior to escape, depended upon a scene of visual interpellation in which black skin signifies diminished or compromised personhood.[40]

---

[38] Ibid., 156.

[39] Jacques Lacan, "The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX: Identification," trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished translation), accessed April 15, 2015, http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-Iby-MCL-7.NOV_.20111.pdf Seminar 10: 21 February 19.

[40] The major theorization of this scene of interpellation is of course Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 2008).

Ben finds himself outside of the life/death binary, and so his dissolution is in fact not quite a death. It is, rather, a transubstantiation of his body into social incoherence. To borrow a couple of terms from Sharon Cameron, this particular "allegory of the body" illustrates an instance of "impersonality."[41] Indeed, the fact that Chesnutt rewrites the Narcissus myth is significant not only because of what the resulting tale has to say about the psychic violence of enslavement, but also because of what the story illuminates about narcissism and its imaginative possibilities. The Narcissus myth is also of course about the unreality of representation, about art's inability to provide the real thing, giving us instead a simulacum that, no matter how detailed, no matter how mimetic, is always removed from the grid of actuality. Chesnutt reimagines characterization in a way that amplifies his individual protagonist while sacrificing his discrete and punctual individuality. The creek becomes the site for an expansion and rethinking of selfhood, perhaps even a jettisoning of selfhood in favor of something that more closely resembles Jameson's idea of affect, which is not bound by beginnings and endings and is released from the body's discreteness.

What makes Chesnutt's realism "curious," I am arguing, has everything to do with characterization. He makes and unmakes characters, reconfigures them to the point that they are no longer recognizable as characters, and in doing so he produces a profound critique of normative personhood. He explores what happens to persons under the rule of a slave master and, perhaps most importantly, offers a vision of fugitivity that does not move toward the ego-anarchy of possessive individualism, but instead discovers new ethical possibilities in the very unmaking of the individual. "Lonesome Ben" proffers a vision of a desire for freedom untainted

[41] Cameron, *The Corporeal Self*; Cameron, *Impersonality*.

by the workings of capitalism, a vision of a desire for freedom that has yet to be seduced by the armor of identitarian political categories—a desire uncoerced. Ben's radical political move originates in the trap he finds himself in as a maroon between freedom and subjection. With nowhere to go, no freedom to be had and no master to return to, there is nothing left to desire, and, without knowledge of one's own desires, of what does the self consist? What is left to defend? "Knowing what one wants," writes Adam Phillips, "is an incitement to violence."[42] Alternately, not knowing allows for "a kind of reciprocal self-recognition in which the very opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being."[43] In the end, Ben's collapse into the river—his becoming part of the river—undoes what the original myth naturalizes: the discovery of difference and its triumph over sameness. Only a curious form of realism could represent such an escape.[44]

Similar concerns regarding difference, sameness, and selfhood arise in another story left out of *The Conjure Woman*, "Dave's Nekliss." This story is about a slave named Dave who is framed for stealing bacon from the plantation storehouse. As punishment, his master whips him forty times and then ties a ham around his neck, a burdensome reminder to all of his supposed crime. When the time comes for the ham to be removed, Dave appears lost without it and fashions a replacement by tying a pine knot to a rope, which he wears even in his sleep. Over the

---

[42] Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 94.

[43] Ibid., 86.

[44] I read this story and "Dave's Nekliss" (in the following paragraphs) as descriptions of what Daphne Brooks calls "Afro-alienation acts." Such performances "invoke largely anti-realist forms of cultural expression in order to call attention to the hegemony of identity categories." They offer "a fruitful terrain for marginalized figures to experiment with culturally innovative ways to critique and disassemble the conditions of oppression." *Bodies in Dissent : Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

course of the story Dave begins to believe that he himself is becoming a ham, and when the true thief comes forward at last, the confession comes too late. Julius finds Dave in the smoke house: "Dey wuz a pile er bark burnin' in de middle er de flo', en right ober de fier, hangin' fum one er de rafters, wuz Dave," strung up like a piece of meat in the process of curing.[45] Unlike in a story such as "The Goophered Grapevine," where there exists consensus about the truth of the goopher, here belief is distributed unequally among all of the characters within the tale, and Dave's insistence that he is a ham ejects him from the confines of the real. His bodily death is only the logical extension of his social death, his recession from the ambit of the socially agreed upon reality.

One should note that Dave is the only slave in any of the conjure tales who is also explicitly a reader. He is allowed to read the Bible up until the point that he is accused of his crime, when he is forbidden from reading and preaching any longer. The ham and then the pine knot become replacements for Dave's bible to the extent that he applies a biblical hermeneutics to those other objects, transforming them into loci of certainty, texts that hold the answer to the question of his identity. This chain of replacements—the bible for the ham, the ham for the piece of wood—reverses the colonial narrative that moves from primitive belief in the fetish to civilized belief in the bible, a narrative perhaps most famously explored in Henry Louis Gates's discussion of the talking book. There Gates suggests that black authors who moved from a belief in the talking book to an Anglo-European technological understanding of the book used the latter paradigm and its basis in the subject-object split to critique the idea that black persons were

[45] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, 134.

objects.[46] Allewaert raises an interesting alternative to Gates's teleological story of black biblical literacy when she writes that "it is possible to argue that this silence [surrounding fetishism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black Anglophone writing] suspends and even departs from transformational narratives. Instead of disavowing fetishes and other material objects [these texts] refract the material world into biblical history, in the process transforming both materiality and biblical history as well as the linear notion of history and influence Gates presumes."[47] "Dave's Nekliss" performs something similar to what Allewaert describes here by reversing the arc from "primitive" fetish to modern book. It also illustrates an imbrication of the material object world and biblical history, which otherwise divides brute materiality from spirit. The fetish and the bible become analogues for one another, both mere products of belief. Thus, Chesnutt critiques humanist arguments that hinge on the subjectivity, the non-objecthood, of black persons.

More significant for my discussion of literary character, though, is the mediating function of the pine knot, which first stands in for the ham and, in turn, defines Dave's understanding of his own ontology as the ham that speaks and thinks. The knot, after all, is the site of the joint where a branch meets the trunk of the tree. The story is a study in an alternative to metonymy, or an alternative to the way we learn to contain the uncontainable space and eternal temporality of affective life into the confines of the body. To be sure, the pine knot replaces the ham as an instrument of psychic terror. It also, though, suggests a scene of subjectivization different from

[46] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[47] Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*, 122.

that which produces the "print-mediated subjectivity" of the literate ex-slave.[48] For the enslaved, the body is not always the site where he learns the metonymic habit of mind. Dave, the fictive ham that speaks, learns from the both/and logic of the joint a mode of personhood that is not predicated upon the subject/object divide. In the end, the tragic tableau of Dave's body discovered in the cure house, which inevitably evokes the familiar spectacle of the lynched black body of the 1890s, only raises more questions about the status of agency and desire in such a death—or about how we read agency and desire *into* the body. Is this suicide simply the result of madness, a grave misapprehension of reality? Or, is it a wish to inhabit a different mode of being? Either way, Dave's death is destined to be read as an act of self-destruction and not as he understood it, as a refashioning of the self motivated by a longing for a radically different future.

Back in the frame narrative John sees Julius walking away from his and Annie's house with a basket that contains the remains of their supper: ham. The story, perhaps an elaborate scheme to procure some free food, leads Annie to lose her appetite and offer up the remains of her ham. The tale becomes a tool for manipulating Julius's white listeners and winning him what he wants. However, too often critics have overemphasized this aspect of the stories, instrumentalizing the embedded tales and reducing them to a form of tricksterism. Such readings overlook the tension produced by the juxtaposition of two very different economies of objects that are ultimately incompatible and irreconcilable. The past may erupt slightly into the present when the ham becomes unappetizing to Annie, but, ultimately, it ends up contained in a basket, ready for consumption, an image that may stand in for the stories themselves: containers for the impenetrable otherness that is the past of slavery.

[48] Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Surface Effects: William Faulkner's Flat Land

I began this dissertation with a novelistic emergency: Jim held captive at Phelps farm while Tom and Huck attempt to "free" him—something that they bungle so spectacularly readers have frequently disavowed the ending of the novel. And as I tried to suggest from the start, such readings assume a curious permeability between the inside and outside of the fiction, as though Tom and Huck cannot be trusted with the ending of *Huckleberry Finn,* and thus we, good readers that we are, should intervene on Jim's behalf. We feel we ought to save him somehow, or at least mitigate the violence that results from Twain's aesthetic and moral failing by denouncing the ending or averting our attention. My concern there and in the proceeding chapters has been the apparently fragile dignity of literary characters: that we often speak as though they are vulnerable to bad representations in the same way that real people are vulnerable to the reductions and indignities of bad publicity; that they are subject to an author who may choose to exercise his power over his creations in unethical ways or to a reader who, in the very act of reading, redoubles an author's violations. Writers and readers collude in creating and destroying, knowing and forgetting, regarding and discarding these entities that exist solely within the bounds of the text. However, because critics tend to discuss characters either "as if" they are real people or as simply illusions encoded within the grammar of the text, the phenomenology of reading—our sense that characters are *at once* like real people and not—often gets lost in the critical writing on novels. Readers know that Jim is a fiction, a mere function of a language game, and yet they also long to free him from slavery, from Tom's horrible adventure game, and

from the text. Together, these chapters reveal a counter-tendency in American fiction, a loose lineage that balances, on the one hand, an interest in interiority, psychological depth, and hidden meanings with, on the other, a focus on exteriors and surfaces, or what is manifestly present rather than what is absent. Put simply, this dissertation is about description. It is about what is merely said to be "there" by the novel and, more vitally, what it means for something to be "there" when that "something" is an unreal product of a reader's imagination under the influence of a writer's careful instruction (in the form of description). Twain, Crafts, and Chesnutt all write against the novelistic tendency to carry the reader deeper into the text, showing her more and more, for such a reader's pleasures are purchased at the expense of a character's privacy and integrity. The phenomenology of novel reading usually tends toward a feeling of omniscience and a sense that very little of importance is unknowable if one only reads well enough—anticipates, speculates, and looks deep enough—and Twain, Crafts, and Chesnutt all express concerns about the ethics of such a posture. They show that embedded within realism's obsession with interiority is an opposing force that keeps readers from entering too far, going too deep, knowing a character too well, and discovering the abyssal nothing that always lies at the bottom of fiction—the absence of reality or referents that make fiction fiction.

Like *Huckleberry Finn*, the ending of *The Sound and the Fury* contains a kind of artificial emergency in which one character misguidedly sets out to save another character without a need for saving. In the appendix, a piece of writing Faulkner actually considered to be a fifth section of the novel proper,[1] a Jefferson librarian comes across a picture of Caddie in 1943, three years

[1] See Faulkner's letter to Malcolm Cowley regarding the "Compson Appendix." "I should have done this when I wrote the book," Faulkner writes. "Then the whole thing would have fallen into pattern like a jigsaw puzzle when the magician's wand touched it." William Faulkner,

after she has disappeared "in Paris with the German occupation":

> a photograph in color clipped obviously from a slick magazine—a picture filled with luxury and money and sunlight—a Cannebière backdrop of mountains and palms and cypresses and the sea, an open powerful expensive chromiumtrimmed sports car, the woman's face hatless between a rich scarf and a seal coat, ageless and beautiful, cold serene and damned; beside her a handsome lean man of middleage in the ribbons and tables of a German staffgeneral.[2]

The narrative describes a familiar and distinctly modern image: a celebration of those forms of freedom promised by consumption—freedom to move, freedom from worry and anxiety, and even freedom from time (she is "ageless"). More to the point though, the photo links freedom with smoothness and surface itself. The slickness of the page echoes the car's chrome trim, the uniformity of the "backdrop," Caddy's seal coat, and her ageless face—all of which work together to produce an homage to the ideality of the modern surface as textureless, perfected, shiny, and without signs of human hands or decay.

The librarian brings the picture to Jason, who refuses to believe it could be an image of his missing sister. "'It's Caddy!," the librarian insists.[3] "'We must save her!'" When she carries the picture to Memphis to show the aging Dilsey, the old woman claims to be too blind to see what's printed on the paper. The librarian returns to the bus station in tears, and as she settles into her seat, the narrative begins to move closer to her consciousness. Faulkner stops reporting her actions from a distance and subtly begins to focalize the bus ride through her perspective in a sentence that first describes the view from the window—where "she could look out upon the

---

Selected Letters of William Faulkner, ed. Joseph Leo Blotner (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 205.

[2] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: The Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 209–10.

[3] Ibid., 210.

fleeing city as it streaked past and then was behind"—and then transitions to what can only be understood as the character's introspection: "and presently now she would be home again, safe in Jefferson…."[4] Next, she is struck by a revelation, a fully interiorized thought which Faulkner sets in italics: "...*Caddy doesn't want to be saved hasn't anything anymore worth being saved for nothing worth being lost that she can lose"*. This is the only moment in the appendix where Faulkner moves into a character's mind, and he chooses to do so with a character who is, above all else, a reader—and surely an allegory for readers of *The Sound and the Fury*. Interestingly though, he penetrates her consciousness in this characteristically realist way, as she gazes transfixed through a window, only to bring forth a kind of interpretive impasse: her inability to know anything more about Caddy than what she sees there in the photograph, which may or may not be a wholesale fiction. Looking out onto the world only reveals her distance and alienation from it. The city "streaks" as though her speed not only blurs the cityscape but flattens it as well, until the city passes and vision recedes from the narrative altogether. The glass of the window, like the glossy surface of the photograph, stops being something from which one looks out into the world and instead becomes a medium that returns her to her own inner thoughts, like a mirror that reflects not her face but her own desires.

What interests me most about this passage is that the librarian takes the fictionality of the image as a sign of Caddy's need for salvation. Artifice becomes a signifier of coercion; the façade indicates falseness and fallenness, and telegraphs to the librarian a secret wish for freedom, as though Caddy is trapped within the mimesis. In other words, the librarian performs a symptomatic reading in which the privileged object, the greater truth, is elsewhere, displaced

[4] Ibid., 211.

and opposed to what is manifestly represented. She conflates the artifice of the image with deception when she reads the too-slick paper of the magazine as an attempt to divert the viewer's attention from the representational violence that makes the image possible: the truth hidden beneath the lie. The photograph then becomes a demand for urgent moral action. But what she realizes while looking out of the window of the bus is that the object of her moral concern should not be read or seen as making a plea for assistance. As the city flattens and passes "behind"—as visuality itself recedes—the window returns to her gaze the very limits of her vision, that horizon that marks the division between the visible and invisible. It also returns her to her own inability to act upon Caddy's behalf, for the surface of the photo and the surfaces that echo within the image itself are not imprisoning; if anything, they are mirrors in which the viewer may look upon her own longings for freedom. What Dilsey understood, and what the librarian comes to "see," is that to respect the distance that separates myself and the other is to heed the fact that, as Stanley Cavell writes, "I am not now in the arena [of action]," and this, "the final fact of our separateness," is the primary condition of all ethical thinking.[5] In other words, Faulkner adds the Appendix in 1945 to address a problem of reception and to emphasize one of the novel's major points about fictionality and ethics: that what fictions have to teach us about ethical life has less to do with the moral judgments we make about characters—judgments about *how* they should act and whether they should act otherwise, which is inevitably accompanied by the wish to save them from their unstoppable, tragic march toward fate—and more to do with the irreducible separateness that divides the reader from the world in which literary characters perform the actions that always already take the shape of destiny. It has more to do with the fact that there is

[5] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 338–9.

no such thing as saving Caddy, for nothing would count as doing so.

The powerful irony of the librarian's epiphany flows from the fact that just as Faulkner affirms his and the reader's ability to enter into the interior lives of characters, he also reveals how problematic that access can be if it leads to assumptions about what characters "want" or "need," as though characters aspire to the immanence, durability, and continuity of real-live personhood. Like all of the writers in this dissertation, Faulkner critiques a possessive mode of reading that would make characters our own or of our world. We are privy to the librarian's realization at the end of the section, but that realization only reinforces the epistemological boundary between the novel's characters and its readers.

Faulkner, this chapter argues, had a career-long interest in flatness and the surface of visual artworks. When he was asked in later years what "Yoknapatawpha" meant, he replied, "It's a Chickasaw Indian word meaning 'water runs slow through flat land.'"[6] Perhaps unsurprisingly, he made that up. The correct translation, as several scholars have pointed out, is something closer to "split land." But whether the author was aware of his error or not, he obviously wanted the word to evoke the flat character of the world he described in his novels—and not only in the literal sense of the Jefferson, Mississippi topography. Flatness and in general the concept of the surface suffuse his first major pieces of long fiction, where he perpetually returns to descriptions of shadows cast on planar surfaces, silhouettes, doors and windows, and the process of arranging flat surfaces into three-dimensional shapes.

Because I agree with Eric Sundquist's assessment of Faulkner's career, especially his contention that *The Sound and the Fury* is where the novelist worked out the formal maneuvers

[6] Frederick Landis Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner in the University* (University Press of Virginia, 1995), 74.

that he would then use to explore the theme of miscegenation in following works, this chapter is divided into sections based largely (but not strictly) on three phases of his career.[7] The first looks at the status of the surface in Faulkner's early graphic work; the second explores the significance of flatness in *The Sound and the Fury*; and the third connects these discussions of form and figuration to *Absalom, Absalom!*'s meditations on the history of slavery. Ultimately, I argue that Faulkner's later masterpiece is concerned with geometry, cartography, and accounting as grammars through which slavery was established and its legacy sustained.

"[T]here is no study of character in Faulkner, no so-called narrative weight," writes Édouard Glissant; "rather, we find a vertigo of striking, irremediable people."[8] *The Sound and the Fury* in particular, Glissant suggests, replaces realism's traditional attention to character with an interest in the legitimacy of the Compsons' claim to their land and in larger questions about the genesis of Southern identity that linger in the wake of the Civil War. He ends his short summary of the book without a reference to any of its characters, writing instead about the parceling out of Compson property. "The geometrically artificial straight lines that mark the property decompose into a wild, mixed-up degeneracy," he writes, "like putrefying vegetation no longer in regeneration but in steady annihilation."[9] Glissant's use of the word "geometry" to describe the novel gets at something that will be important to my own discussion of Faulkner in this chapter, namely, that the novelist's first major work subjugates character to fictional space, and that the work is interested in the cartographic imagination, or the way land is mentally

[7] Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

[8] Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 22.

[9] Ibid., 42.

shaped, navigated, and parceled by its inhabitants—all of which is conditioned by *a desire for geometry*, a longing for recognizably regular ways of organizing space. *The Sound and the Fury* is not about who characters are or why they behave as they do; rather, it is concerned with how its characters and readers exist in and understand the fictional space they inhabit. Ultimately, the novel replaces psychology and its imperative to look for answers deep inside characters' interiority with geometry, and in doing so explodes into greater dimensions the reader's hermeneutic wish for a singular fixed point of meaning. In the following pages we will see how geometry, graphic art, technical drawing, and the legacy of black slavery all converge in the flat land of the Yoknapatawpha novels.

As we have seen in previous chapters, slavery and the rituals by which it produces a new category of individual problematize some of the most basic assumptions underpinning realist fiction. Certain authors writing in the wake of slavery often saw themselves as tasked with representing not the interiority of the slave but the forms of ontological violence perpetrated against and upon black bodies, and they often did this not by arguing for the personhood or sentience of blacks, but by writing characters who expressed the categorical uncertainty that made black slavery possible, characters who were not allegories for real, full persons. Thus, the lineage of writers I describe in this dissertation recapitulate the ethical problems inherent in imagining the enslaved. Because Faulkner's true subject is Southern white identity and subjectivity in the wake of slavery, this chapter differs somewhat from the previous ones, which were concerned primarily with images of enslaved bodies as they are produced in the imaginations of readers. The present chapter pivots away from the scene of reading and toward the scene of authorship, toward Faulkner's complex relationship to his own characters and, more

generally, the relations of power that are mimicked by novelists' production and manipulation of the individuals who populate their work.

Faulkner, Draftsman

The visual arts were serious passions for the young Faulkner. He illustrated and bound his own earliest written works by hand and would go on to pay special attention throughout his career to the visual and physical presentation of his volumes. In college at the University of Mississippi, Faulkner contributed illustrations to the student publications *Ole Miss*, *The Mississippian*, and *The Scream*. Often derivative and amateurish but occasionally striking, nearly all of his drawings from the period are heavily indebted to the English art nouveau movement, especially to William Morris and Aubrey Beardsley, who Faulkner perhaps discovered through the famously stylized illustrations in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.[10] Faulkner's 1920 play *The Marrionettes*, for example, is a bound and fully illustrated work in the vein of Wilde and Beardsley's collaboration. It draws attention to the physical object of the volume, to its own design, and generally obeys the compositional principles of the art nouveau style, with illustrations that replicate Beardsley's generous serpentine lines, stark black-and-white contrasts, as well as the dramatic, sinuous proportions of his figures.[11] But, as these homages to the *fin de siècle* decorative arts tradition show, what Faulkner may have loved most about Beardsley's work was their flatness—the way that they clung to the plane of the page, never aspiring to a

[10] He owned a 1912 edition in his library. Joseph Blotner, ed., *William Faulkner's Library: A Catalogue* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1964), 77.

[11] Lothar Hönnighausen discusses Faulkner's illustration work and their relationship to his development as a writer in *William Faulkner: The Art of Stylization in His Early Graphic and Literary Work* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

third dimension of representational space. This decorative flatness was a significant principle of the entire art nouveau movement, starting with its first great practitioner and theorist, William Morris, and Beardsley even further collapsed space onto the page's surface, often wholly subjugating perspective to the arrangement of lines and shapes on the two-dimensional plane. Wilde encouraged this, publicly championing flat styles of illustration and attentiveness to the work's objecthood. He proclaimed in 1889, that, "there is a danger of modern illustration becoming too pictorial. What we need is good book-ornament, decorative ornament that will go with type and printing, and give to each page a harmony and unity of effect."[12] In nineteenth-century figures like Morris, Beardsley, and Wilde, Faulkner found a sensibility about literary works as a whole—notions about what they should look like as physical objects as well as more fundamental ideas about what a book is—that appealed to him. Specifically, he discovered the surface of the page as a site for experimentation, and he became fascinated by flatness itself—something that would preoccupy him in his mature literary works.

This is not to say, however, that Faulkner's graphic works from the teens and twenties are merely documents of his nostalgia for late Victoriana. Indeed, as Lothar Hönnighausen has shown, many of the drawings incorporate modernist elements as well, revealing Faulkner's acquaintance with and interest in certain visual tropes of American modernist works of the period, such as checkerboard patterning. One example of modernist painting's influence on him is especially significant for our purposes. An illustration from the Ole Miss student yearbook, *Social Activities I* (1917-18), combines three free-floating figures, which have little to do with the Beardsleyesque flatness of most of his other work, standing before a checkerboard

[12] Oscar Wilde, "Some Literary Notes," *Woman's World*, 1889, 168.

background that lies flat on the page and gives no hint of perspective. Between the checkerboard pattern and the figures is an interesting y-shaped field that "consists of a system of cubistically arranged surface segments resembling those encountered by an astonished American public" in the Armory show.[13] And this, in a work preceding the Beardsleyesque illustrations he would create a few years later. In discussing this drawing, Hönnighausen notes that the young Faulkner apparently did not intuit the epistemological crisis that the early analytic cubists tried to convey, instead seeing in their work an amalgam of "sharp lines and acute angles" that simply amounted to a set of "surface effects."[14]

Social Activities I, by William Faulkner, 1917-18

[13] Honnighausen, *William Faulkner*, 62.

[14] Here Hönninghausen is quoting art historian Barbara Rose ibid.

But what Hönninghausen dismisses as a facile engagement with modernist art is precisely what interests me most about the illustration. Faulkner may have come to modernist painting merely for its "surface effects," but he was not deaf to some supposedly more profound statement about modernity that the cubists intended. For cubism's radical disruption of the representational plane (and of its newfound alignment with the support)—of the art work's surface—is precisely the movement's great innovation. With cubism, "surface effects" become painting's subject.

In the first edition of *Absalom*, published in 1936, Faulkner included his first map of Yoknapatawpha county at the back of the volume, and he would create a different version of the same map for Malcolm Cowley's 1945 edition, *The Portable Faulkner*.[15] Printed in black ink with red dots that indicate the location of specific plot points, the original 1936 map is all the more flat for the fact that it is composed on a strict grid: the roads, railroads, and rivers all relate to one another at perfect 90- and 45-degree angles and are all seemingly arranged around two roads which function as perfect axes dividing up the map into four equal quadrants. The effect locates the viewer directly over this central intersection, perfectly parallel to the ground. Looking at the page, one's eye is always drawn toward the center of the map, where the dots cluster and the roads meet, as if to calibrate one's gaze to remain perpendicular to both the document and the land it represents. Because of the exact geometry of the map, and because it resists any gaze other than a God-like one, it is hard to view the map as a representation of real space. While it is easy to visually navigate a perfect grid when one is positioned parallel to the (upright, front-facing) plane, it is much harder to then imagine one's perspective as a point

[15] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; William Faulkner, *The Portable Faulkner* (New York: The Viking press, 1946), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

situated on the surface of the grid. Indeed, the more regular and apparently flat a surface is, the harder it is to imagine oneself maneuvering as a human actually navigating the land. Topographical maps and different forms of projection all seek to correct this problem by introducing a third dimension to help render the map as a representation of inhabitable space rather than something more abstract. Looking at Faulkner's map, we are left with only an abstract idea of space—a perfect plane that coincides exactly with the surface of the page.

All of this is complicated by the fact that the 1936 map unfolds accordion-style out of the back of the book. The act of unfolding serves to remind the reader of the materiality of the map as such, and so again throws into relief its abstract and planar qualities. Furthermore, the accordion fold also works to redouble the flatness of the map. Maps are unfolded to *reveal* their flatness, but they are also folded up into flat objects; they transition from one kind of flatness into another, and any three-dimensional state is transitional and leaves the map inoperable, incomplete, obscured, illegible, or vulnerable to damage (disfiguration here is anything other than flatness). I would also suggest that this particular map challenges traditional conceptions of the book as an object constituted by an inside and an outside, because, as Deleuze is fond of saying about the fold, the inside is never more or less than a fold of the outside.[16] The novel is no longer just a container for the world of the story and its characters—something whose opening coincides with and symbolizes the opening of the interiority that contains the world where the actions of the plot take place. Instead, the plot gets reenvisioned, removed from time and redistributed upon the collapsed singular instant of the map; it is forced out of time and into space, but a space that, as we have seen, is hardly the space of the fiction's universe and hardly

[16] Deleuze, *The Fold*; Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (A&C Black, 2006).

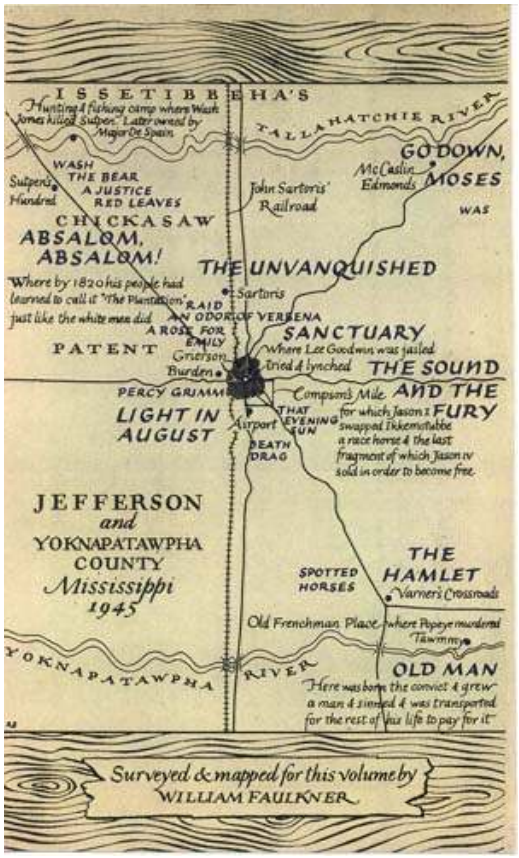
naturalistic. Faulkner's maps are an example of what Leo Steinberg famously calls the "flatbed picture plane," which he traces back to graphic art of the teens. The flatbed picture plane "makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed…."[17] This particular quality is especially clear on the 1936 map because of the two colors Faulkner uses for his drawing: black to produce the grid-like arrangement of roads, rivers, and railroads, and red to mark the specific sites of interest, creating the impression that the map in black is a primary receptacle or field for the arrangement of a secondary set of data in red. Steinberg goes on to state that such an image "guarantees that the presentation will not be directly that of a worldspace, and that it will nevertheless admit any experience as the matter of representation. And it readmits the artist in the fullness of his human interests, as well as the artist-technician."[18] Faulkner highlights this, too, by marking the page with his own name: "WILLIAM FAULKNER, SOLE OWNER & PROPRIETOR." These maps dramatize both the replacement of the fictional worldspace with the labor and subjectivity of the artist as well as the replacement of the law of genre with the rights of the author. They suggest that this is not a book about characters in any traditional way, but instead an arrangement of information—of plot points—orchestrated by a single individual so that plot may not always correspond to its usual components of "character" and "action." The Aristotelian idea that plot and character are bound together begins to buckle when plot becomes distributed as a series of dots in space rather than a series of events strung together in time to produce characters. What

[17] Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 84.

[18] Ibid., 91.

does one do with a map of a fake place, anyway? Such a document can only ever provide a survey of the boundary dividing the reader's "reality" from the realm of the fiction, can only ever banish the fantasy that there exists some vague continuity between the work of art's world and our own.

The version of the map that Faulkner created for the 1945 edition is less grid-like than the earlier map, and instead of proclaiming himself the owner of Yoknapatawpha county, he has written a more modest note at the bottom, stating "Surveyed & mapped for this volume by William Faulkner."



Map from *The Portable Faulkner*, by William Faulkner, 1945

He also added a new decorative element: a strip of faux bois on the top and bottom margins of the page. Similar to Picasso's famous use of faux bois wallpaper on his early collages,

Faulkner's wood grain drawings represent or refer to the wood's texture at the same time as they call attention to their own referential gesture—the fact of their representing rather than actually being wood. They paradoxically make the absence of texture that is the paper's smooth surface conspicuous, once again, flattening the page. It is unclear whether the wood strips are meant to be seen as part of a wood frame for the map—in which case they are themselves inside the fiction—or whether they mark the boundary between the fiction of the map and its other, that is, between the world of the novel and ourselves. What we are seeing when we look at the two strips of wood grain is unclear; our relation to the text's fiction is impossible to determine. Faulkner, like Picasso, is clearly interested in calling attention to the arbitrariness of the sign at the same time that he indulges the cartographer's dream of perfect consonance between the signifier and signified.[19] As we move from the inner space of the map out to the faux bois and then out one step further to the small plaque at the bottom, the only thing we can ascertain is Faulkner's primacy over the entire arrangement and over "this volume" as a whole. The map serves to orient us and help us to follow the intricate plotting of these confusing novels, but as we move outward, our only point of orientation is the author himself.

Benjy's Fence

Faulkner's power over the "volume" at hand results from his modernist cartographic experiment, but it also harkens back to his earlier interest in the Romantics and their search for perfect and perfectly whole artistic forms. For example, as Cleanth Brooks notes, his 1925 poem

[19] Borges famously invokes this idea when he writes about a map that perfectly corresponds to what it represents. Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 325.

The Marble Faun is heavily indebted to Faulkner's favorite poem, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."[20] And when Faulkner abandoned his wish to fashion himself into a (neo) Romantic or Symbolist poet, he held onto the Romantic and Symbolist propensity for thinking and writing about form in terms of a vessel whose surface articulates a volume of space. In one of the two introductions he wrote for *The Sound and the Fury*, he describes writing the sections that follow Benjy's as an attempt to clarify and "get completely out of the book":

> There is a story somewhere about an old Roman who kept at his bedside a Tyrrhenian vase which he loved and the rim of which he wore slowly away with kissing it. I had made myself a vase, but I suppose I knew all the time that I could not live forever inside of it, that perhaps to have it so that I too could lie in bed and look at it would be better; surely so when that day should come when not only the ecstasy of writing would be gone, but the unreluctance and the something worth saying too.[21]

In writing the first section of the novel, he was exercising a longing to inhabit the mimesis in the same way that the speaker of Keats's "Ode" longs to bring the beautiful mimesis closer and closer until there is no longer any distance left between the viewer and the art object (and the viewer finally becomes the immortal voice of the poem). This longing is what gives first-person narration its allure, inviting both writer and reader to approach the condition of inhabiting the world of the fiction. Of course, Keats's thesis maintains that the desire to inhabit the aesthetic realm is always preceded by the unbridgeable distance between the space and time of the "real," on the one hand, and the infinite space and eternal temporality of the scene represented, on the other. From this perspective, Keats's real interest lies with embodiment, or the condition of being other than and apart from the aesthetic, which fuels the poet's wish to escape his own body

[20] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (LSU Press, 1989), 5.

[21] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1994, 232.

through the disembodied voicedness of the poem. I interpret Faulkner's idea of being "inside" the book as something like inhabiting Benjy's interiority and therefore escaping his own body in the way that focalizing a narrative through a character effectively permits an author (and a reader) to do. As I suggested in the first chapter, when we talk about "style" and "voice" we are also speaking about the author's will to efface any trace of his own body as he aspires to the omniscient status of a non-person. For Faulkner, then, the final three sections and the appendix were motivated by an antithetical desire to recall the body of the author as a material and finite thing embedded within history. The Roman who wears away his vessel's perfection with kisses is expressing the opposite of the wish to fully incorporate or acquire, to be one with, the vase and to live forever in its timeless world: he must maintain between himself and the object the distance that allows him to, paradoxically, be proximal and wear it away kiss by kiss (to make it his beloved). As Faulkner tells it, writing *The Sound and the Fury* fundamentally changed how he understood his relationship to his artworks. The novel may have begun as something one could inhabit and be "inside," but as it grew, it became something to live *with* and engage, to touch and reshape. He turns away from a form of writing that is a vehicle for speaking in the voice of the other and writes a work with which one must negotiate one's relation. Each kiss of the Tyrrhenian vase is both an act of love and an act of violence, and whatever remains of the vase becomes an artifact of an ethical relation that unfolds through time. In other words, Faulkner activates the question of *how* one should live alongside the work of art, which is impossible to ask from the perspective of the Keatsian narrator, who wishes to be a self that also encompasses the aesthetic realm.

More than any of his other works, *The Sound and the Fury* explores what it means to live alongside, rather than "inside" or excluded from, a representational or fictive interior. Tellingly,

his other major novels from this period take interiority and containment as their primary subject: *Absalom, Absalom!* is about a house; *Light in August* is about a pregnancy; *As I Lay Dying* is about a coffin. *The Sound and the Fury* is, in contrast, about a fence. This is an emblematic distinction to the extent that those other, later works consider form as a vessel that gives shape or constrains—or gets punctured, crumbles, and spills—all of which is characteristic of a line of modernism that follows from a high realist tradition. In another introduction Faulkner wrote for *The Sound and the Fury*, he refers twice to Henry James, who famously describes the novel as a house with a façade covered by many different styles of window.[22] Dissimilar to James's windows, the fence through which Benjy watches the world does not signify an opening out onto a "scene"; the fence's pickets create a pattern of negative and positive space that he perpetually confuses. Unlike the realist's emblematic figure, the house of windows, neither side of the fence is an inside or an outside. And more to the point, nothing ever lies behind a picket; it is only ever the positive instantiation of a pure absence: Benjy "remembered not the pasture but only its loss." Put another way, the logic of the vessel is replaced by the collage-like logic of adjacency in which everything is collapsed onto one plane and the naturalistic illusion of depth and visual displacement disappears.

Here are the first sentences of the novel: "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence."[23] Faulkner begins the book with a familiar and characteristically realist gesture when

[22] Henry James, "Preface to 'The Portrait of a Lady,'" in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 40–58.

[23] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (Norton, 1994), 3.

he invites the reader to look upon a scene through a window-like space between the flowers growing on the fence, and yet what we see on the other side is confusing nearly to the point of being totally opaque. One must read almost the entire novel to figure out that Benjy is watching a game of golf on his pasture, land that has been sold to pay for Quentin's Harvard education. "Through the fence" becomes a kind of red herring that suggests a relationship between the reader and the novel in which the reader is confronted with something like James's house of fiction, while in reality the fence is nothing like the façade of a house through which one may view characters performing actions. And the problem is not so much that Benjy fails to understand or narrate clearly what happens on the far side of the pickets and the flowers; the more fundamental narratological issue is that he sees no distinction between the framing device (the fence) and the action taking place within that frame, for he often confuses positive and negative space in ways that make such a distinction impossible in the first place. Light and shadow often take on an almost material presence in the section focalized through Benjy's mind, as when "Light came tumbling down the steps" or when he states that "We went down the steps, where our shadows were," as though both are durable, physical things.[24] He experiences the world not as a series of objects differentiated from one another and from himself by virtue of their being discrete, proximal, and reflective but as a Bergsonian series of "shapes" which "flow."[25] The shapes are often distinct from one another, but they aren't experienced with any kind of constancy in relation to fixed space; Benjy's narration works more like a film screen over which shapes pass, giving only the illusion of movement and depth. And rather than standing

[24] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1994, 15, 22.

[25] Ibid., 8.

still and looking through the holes in the fence, he often describes himself walking "along" the fence, which creates an imaginative challenge for the reader: the frame does not recede as we move "into" the action of the novel, but instead we are asked to produce in our minds a series of scenes broken up by the vines and pickets that pass before Benjy's eyes. The fence and its other nearly become part of the same plane. This descriptive strategy in which we are often reminded that Benjy is moving along the fence also creates a flickering quality that is cinematic, like a series of images sewn together into a strip of film that moves too slowly to produce the full illusion of an uninterrupted space "within" or "beyond" the screen. The flat screen itself bodies forth, and the fictionality of the narrative announces itself.

At one point Benjy describes his experience of crying while a clock simultaneously begins to chime: "I could still hear the clock between my voice."[26] Like a sonic version of the fence, Benjy's perception of his own continuous scream is broken up into a series of discrete sounds divided up by the chimes, producing a set of regular intervals out of what would otherwise be one continuous sound. The interaction of shapes and sounds produce an effect of seriality (rather than an experience of layered perceptions) in which the world passes by as a sequence and not as a set of simultaneous phenomena. Even Benjy's own self becomes a series of shapes and sounds that lack continuity. This happens most dramatically when Benjy himself "disappears" at certain moments. For example, when Caddy hugs Benjy and she no longer "smells like trees," he states, "*She put her arms around me again, but I went away.*"[27] Without being able to fully recognize his sister by her scent, her embrace no longer provides him with the comforting sense of a

[26] Ibid., 38.

[27] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1994, 26.

bounded and present self, and he disappears unto his own consciousness and the narrative. How does one imagine a narrator as he disappears? What happens, in other words, when characterization stops?

There is an important distinction to be drawn between the examples of seriality—the division of a single "stream of consciousness" into more or less discrete parts—and the more absolute imaginative effect produced by Benjy's *"I went away*." In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* Paul Virilio discusses "picnolepsy," which is something like a condition of frequent *petit mal* seizures which leave the sufferer without any memory of certain intervals of time. In Virilio's analysis, the philosophical consequences of picnolepsy are significant because, "for the picnoleptic, nothing really has happened, the missing time never existed. At each crisis, without realizing it, a little of his or her life simply escaped."[28] He is interested in the freedom the picnoleptic fit affords the subject, who is then able to "invent his own relations to time and therefore a kind of will and power for minds…."[29] When Benjy says "*I went away*" he performs something similar to the extent that he, as an "embodied" subject, slips out of our imaginations for an unspecified amount of time and in fact stops the image-making process altogether. Going away in this sense—disappearing *to one's self*—resembles the picnoleptic phenomenology and, more importantly, mirrors the picnoleptic's epistemological relation to the world, since "going away" lifts Benjy out of the homogenous temporality in which the other characters exist; his disappearance expresses a form of freedom to live a duration entirely separate from the other characters and from the text. Benjy's statement has no preposition attached to its end because in

[28] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (Zone Books, 1991), 10.

[29] Ibid., 22.

the instant we read it, he moves in relation to nothing, because in his absence simultaneity is impossible.

Furthermore, if traditional description differentiates objects by degrees of proximity and distance, presence and absence, Benjy's narrative confuses these categories. In the final paragraph of his section, he describes the experience of going to sleep next to Caddy:

> Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again. Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep.[30]

The darkness has an almost physical presence for Benjy, and there is no distinguishing between the dark of the closed door and the "black" of his silhouetted father. Most importantly, the dark then takes on a quality of "smooth, bright shapes," just as it does in his dreams. The play of light and darkness make it difficult to say what is genuinely present for Benjy and what constitutes an absence, for the negative space he describes at the end has a kind of solidity—even a malleability—that it shares with the positive presence of his father's body and the door. And in taking on shapes and colors, the darkness assumes the properties of illumination. Finally, when Benjy suggests that his experience of the dark is activated "even when Caddy says that I have been asleep," he indicates that what he is describing is actually a dream. However, he only knows of the experience of sleep from being told that he has been unconscious, and so we need to assume that there exists no hard distinction for him between dream life and "reality."

All of this is to say that Benjy's narrative is distinct for the way it overturns several hierarchies of experience, such as the privileging of presence over absence, light over darkness,

[30] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1994, 48.

and wakefulness over sleep. Each duality gets confused as the privileged term loses its positive valence and the negative term gains a positivity that it normally lacks. These partial reversals or confusions of antithetical terms make it possible for Faulkner to say in the Appendix that Benjy does not *lose* Caddy "because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her."[31] An absence untethered from a former presence is not a loss in the usual sense of the word. It is a more radical form of absence—a hole in the fabric of the perceptual world that takes an unrecognizable shape.

Of course, when presence and absence, waking and dreaming, no longer structure experience, the narrative also veers toward an anti-sociality in which it is difficult to say that there exists any singular, shared realm of reality and in which language risks losing its meaning. Benjy's narrative performs a kind of solipsism in which the risk of unintelligibility that the novel's title first alerts us to is never very far off. Writing "inside" the novel and from "inside" Benjy's consciousness is an anti-social move that dramatizes the near collapse of signification and in turn of sociality. And thus the return to more traditional forms of narrative in the subsequent sections carries the reader back from this brink and back to the world of language.

We need only look at the first sentence of each of the proceeding sections to see how the flatness and confusion of positive and negative space that suffuses Benjy's section slowly transforms from a flat plane of "shapes" and "colors" that do not necessarily signify presence or absence, proximity or distance, into the three-dimensional space of novelistic interiority. Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey's sections begin this way:

"When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight

[31] Ibid., 213.

> oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch."[32]
>
> "Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say."[33]
>
> "The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of gray light out of the northeast which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust that, when Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil."[34]

As we saw previously, in Benjy's section, rather than signifying an absence, shadow and darkness have a distinct and durable presence. In opening Quentin's section as he does, Faulkner signals that shadows function differently in the second section of the novel. They appear or are projected "on" objects like the curtain rather than having the more independent, almost material character that they do when Benjy narrates, "We went down the steps, where our shadows were," speaking as though the shadow is not a contingent image that moves with the object that casts it or as though shadows do not refer to an illuminated object.[35] Quentin, on the other hand, understands that shadows are plastic images that change in time, and so the appearance of the shape situates him "in time again"—within duration. What Faulkner emphasizes in this initial sentence is not the shifting immateriality of the light and shadow that Quentin perceives but the way that the shadow's transitory and translucent qualities allow him to experience his own durability and immanence. Over and against the translucent shadow that simply appears (from nowhere), Quentin reports the feeling of his own vitality or the phenomenology of solid,

---

[32] Ibid., 48.

[33] Ibid., 113.

[34] Ibid., 165.

[35] Ibid., 22.

embodied, subjecthood that results from the encounter with the fleeting negativity of that which does not attain durability and solidity. Shadows, in other words, are not "in time"— constant within the flow of time—when they move and mark the passage of time itself, as the shadow does here. This sudden emphasis of the narrator's embodied position within the world of the text marks a major shift from the first section, where Benjy appears and disappears to his own consciousness as if he himself were merely a shadow. Even when Benjy's body is finally described in the fourth section of the book, he looks "to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it."[36]

The opening of Jason's section continues to reconstitute characters and to insist on their presence and durability. If in Quentin's section the first sentence needs to do the work of situating the narrator "in time" and establishing his immanence, Jason's "Once a bitch, always a bitch" is a paean to identity's triumph over time. And finally, the first sentence in the Dilsey section draws attention to the embodiment of the section's main character, establishing the materiality of her skin's surface by first evoking the "bleak" "wall of grey light" that comes into contact with her "flesh" to produce the texture and sheen of her skin. Dilsey has a visual and haptic presence in the novel that none of the other characters ever attain. In this way, and in the descriptions of space, the fourth section of the novel exaggerates realism's strategies for producing the imaginary world of the novel, anchoring the reader on firm ground or, more precisely, within a solid structure populated by equally solid and durable individuals. Dilsey constantly moves into and out of doors, looks out of windows, walks up and down stairs and in and out of rooms, and all of this movement shores up the interiority of the novel's fictional

[36] Ibid., 171.

world.

What I am trying to suggest by tracing a certain arc from the beginning of the novel to the end is, first, that the characterization in the earlier sections of the novel do not give us characters in the realist model, and, second, that the successful production of characters in the later two sections amounts to a pastiche of realist characterization. In the Dilsey section, Faulkner gives our imaginations the security of clearly embodied individuals who move through a world that is always safe for our imaginative projections because of its walls, windows, doors, and hallways—all of which collude to create a coherent sense of solid space in which we can imagine action taking place within and through clearly defined space without fear of the vertiginous falling inward we feel when we try to adapt to the placelessness of Benjy's section. The novelistic world maintains a feeling of wholeness throughout the Dilsey section, even when the action leaves the Compson house. As they drive to church, the third-person narrator describes

> a scene like a painted backdrop. Notched into a cut of red clay crowned with oaks the road appeared to stop short off, like a cut ribbon. Beside it a weathered church lifted its crazy steeple like a painted church, and the whole scene was as flat and without perspective as a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth, against the windy sunlight of space and April and a midmorning filled with bells.[37]

The flatness of the "backdrop" secures the imaginative landscape even to the point that there is no real perspective in this image: the road stops "like a cut ribbon," so what would normally act as a line intersecting a point of infinity, a point that signifies the threshold of the visible, falls short of reaching a vanishing point. Instead of disappearing into infinity, the road ends with a blunt edge, securing the periphery of the hermetic space Faulkner keeps from expanding in any direction. He fortifies the novel, keeping it from bleeding into any other real or imaginary space

[37] Ibid., 182.

that the reader might envision.

And inside the apparently flat, interior-less church we find a "visitor" preparing to preach. At first he "sounded like a white man" as he speaks beside "the reading desk," his body "reft of all motion as a mummy or an emptied vessel," and "the congregation sighed as if it waked from a collective dream and moved a little in its seats."[38] When the preacher begins to move his voice takes on a new timbre. "With his body he seemed to feed the voice that, succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him. And the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even the voice that, succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him." Inside the flat church we find a body that is less a body and more a voice that overtakes both its speaker and its audience until there is, according to the narrator, "nothing" or no one inside the church except for the voice itself, a voice whose power is uncoupled from any body. The voice is Faulkner's. It is the author who gives a version of his voice in place of himself and in exchange for his body. It is the author whose voice constitutes his medium and which speaks through the body of another—Benjy or Quentin or Jason or the impersonal no-one who narrates Dilsey's section—while effacing his own self along with any other reminders of a world outside of the text. The flatness of the "painted cardboard" church "set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth" is an image of a world like Benjy's, collapsed into two dimensions of shapes and colors. However, here we find planes that function like retaining walls for the action of the story, creating a bounded interiority. When we enter into this façade, this surface, we find a nearly disembodied voice that explodes the planar description into the three-dimensional fullness of real, inhabitable space. The realism of

[38] Ibid., 183.

the Dilsey section culminates here in the church, where Faulkner shows us the magnitude of his authorial powers—of every novelist's potential power—to call a world into being and populate it through the God-like voice of a narrator who exceeds the constraints of personhood.

The minister next begins speaking in a black dialect ("I sees de light en I sees de word"), and one cannot help but think of Faulkner writing the novel's dialogue in Dilsey and her children's voices. When Faulkner says that he wrote himself "out" of the novel he means that he constructed the book as an arc that moves from ventriloquizing a character, as if he is reporting from the deepest and most private recesses of the novel's interior, out toward the third-person position of the traditional nineteenth-century realist narrator. But he must also go one step further than that, if only because this latter position is never quite outside of the text; the omniscient narrator that Faulkner creates is never in any one place and never confined to any one body. It is the voice of power, which always works to efface its origins. Therefore, he writes himself into the novel as an act of self-revelation—to remind the reader of the author's near absolute power over the world of the fiction, a power that is in fact localized in a single body. When we read the black voices in this novel, they come to us mediated by Faulkner's own ear and voice.

Sutpen's Fiction

Of the Yoknapatawpha novels, the one that most penetratingly investigates this ineluctable boundary between reader and character is *Absalom, Absalom!*, which constantly brings to the reader's attention its many layers of fictionality. Most of what is told in the narrative is second- and third-hand, and even when an event is reported by a first-person witness, questions about invention, verifiability, and plausibility swirl about, undercutting any sense of a

stable set of events anchoring the center of the story. But here Faulkner is not so much interested in creating a completely nonobjective artwork as he is in representing the social nature of the fantasy we call "reality." *Absalom* is the story of Thomas Sutpen's appearance in Mississippi, seemingly, at first, out of nowhere; his attempt to break from the past and invent himself as a member of the land- and slave-owning Southern aristocracy; and the inevitable tragedies that mar his quest for what he grandly refers to as his "design." If there is an artist figure in Yoknapatawpha, it is Sutpen, who carves a plantation, "Sutpen's Hundred," out of the map of the county and in doing so produces the tragedy of the novel almost out of thin air. He is an artist in the Romantic model, who builds a grand house for himself before the forces of history, and in particular the racial history of the US, destroy his dream of living within an autonomous fantasy of his own making. Faulkner structures the novel so that Sutpen's past and the tragedies of his legacy are revealed slowly over the course of many first-, second-, and third-hand tellings, which also increasingly raise doubts about the existence of a singular set of events and even about the veracity of anything reported in the whole of the text. As the story unfolds, one does not feel an ever-increasing clarity of revelation but instead a piling up of disbelief.

While in the cosmos of the novel, Sutpen's sin might initially appear to be his wish to author something like a fiction, his error is actually the opposite: he attempts to participate in the production of a durable reality. Around the middle of the book, we learn about Sutpen's life prior to his migration to Mississippi, including his decision to go to Haiti to make the initial fortune to fund the first stages of his design. He learns of the Caribbean slave economy and the wealth to be made there in school, but he worries about the veracity of what he has heard: "I asked [the teacher] if it were true, if what he had read us about the men who got rich in the West

Indies were true."[39] Desperate to know that he has not been lied to, he violently accosts the teacher with his demand for truth until the schoolmaster begins to cry for help. Sutpen is preoccupied by the verifiability of what he has heard—paranoid that he will discover that the story he has been told will prove untrue. The same problem arises when he boards a ship and has "no more way of knowing whether the men who said the ship was going there were lying or not than he had of knowing whether or not the school teacher was telling the truth about what was in the book."[40] Sutpen embodies the epistemological obsession—How do we know what we know? Will my knowledge be verified?—in a world that can no longer afford answers to those questions. The house he builds with slave labor serves as a monument to a material reality immune from the destabilizing effects of uncertainty. It is a wish for something other than fiction. As Rosa puts it, "He was a walking shadow" descending "from abysmal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark" while "trying to cling with vain unsubstantial hands to what he hoped would hold him, save him, arrest him."[41] In her complex image, Sutpen is a shadow who falls from one darkness into an even deeper darkness while trying to keep himself from dissolving into indecipherability by groping for something solid enough to "hold him." His acquisition of the knowledge of slavery marks a kind of primal scene in the novel which sends him hurtling toward his fate. Slavery is the thing toward which he will grope, attempting to hold himself, save himself, arrest himself in certainty through the reality of coerced labor. Faulkner here distills the idea that slavery is not simply an economic relation in which whites participated;

---

[39] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 196.

[40] Ibid., 197.

[41] Ibid., 139. "Walking shadow" comes from the same soliloquy in *Macbeth* as "sound and fury."

far more essential than that, as a discursive entity, it serves as the "real" against which Southern white subjectivity sought to define itself and establish its own immanence. Of course, what Sutpen finds in Haiti is not only the band of black men who will build his house, but also his first wife, who has racially mixed blood; he discovers that an economic relation that is built upon an ontological divide between the races also occasions the sexual relations that will simultaneously blur that divide. And he will spend the rest of his life trying to recapture the certainty of racial purity that is the phantasmatic foundation of American slavery.

Throughout the novel Faulkner uses the idea of shadow to emphasize the immaterial and unverifiable quality of characters who may be—who almost certainly are—more fantasy than reality. Judith is just a "blank shape"[42]; Charles Bon is "a shape, a shadow"[43]; Henry is "more shadowy than the abstraction" that is Bon's buried body[44]; women are said to live in "some beautiful attenuation of unreality" full of "the shades and shapes of facts."[45] The novel constantly undermines any wish for verisimilitude by flattening out its characters into planar blank shapes that, like all two-dimensional objects, can never attain solidity. What makes *Absalom* so difficult to read is, in part, the overwhelmingly abstract quality of its characters, which is descriptively figured as a flattening out and an evacuation of materiality. Rosa describes a photograph of Charles Bon before saying, cryptically, "But I never saw it. I do not even know if my own knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew

[42] Ibid., 95.

[43] Ibid., 120.

[44] Ibid., 123.

[45] Ibid., 171.

it: so who will dispute me when I say, Why did I not invent, create it?"[46] The photograph becomes an illusion before it also seems to become Charles himself—the man who Judith may have loved and Henry eventually kills—and finally she asserts that the question of facticity itself does not even matter. Because she can never know what the man meant to Ellen or Henry—what it meant to love Charles or to kill him—she cannot say what it means to discover a picture of him; it might as well have been invented wholesale out of her own imagination. She clarifies her odd logic when she next describes "a machine" that produces images "which would adorn the barren mirror altars of every plain girl" with a "pictured face." These images "would not even need a skull behind it; almost anonymous, it would only need vague inference of some shadow-realm of make-believe." The photographs she imagines on young women's dressing tables are not the indexical signifiers of the real that we normally conceive of when we think of photographs but completely flat, anonymous surfaces upon which to project certain desires. She might as well be describing all of the characters in the novel that she herself inhabits, all of whom share these properties and do indeed radiate and move within a "vague inference of some shadow-realm of make-believe" rather than a sturdily constructed three-dimensional representational space.

The other way that Faulkner figures the condition of imagination is through the idea of "projection." "You can not even imagine [Charles] and Judith alone together," one character comments.[47] "Try to do it and the nearest you can come is a projection of them while the two actual people were doubtless separate and elsewhere—two shades pacing, serene and untroubled

[46] Ibid., 118.

[47] Ibid., 77.

by flesh, in a summer garden…." In his book about Faulkner and film, Peter Lurie writes about moments like these as evidence for his argument that "Faulkner's modernism is inflected by what we might call the 'film idea,' the manner of impression and visual activity his novels emulate from the cinema."[48] Lurie's claims are compelling, and his reading of *Absalom* especially makes sense given that Faulkner had started his work as a Hollywood screenwriter by the time he was composing that novel. However, in addition to the cinematic quality of the "projecting" that characters undertake in the novel as they try to envision a past that may or may not have happened, I want to suggest an additional context that I think informs the novel's representation of fictionality: geometry. As we have already seen, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels return again and again to the idea of flatness and geometry as metaphors for fictionality as well as to simply describe the phenomenology of reading—of confronting a page of text and imbuing it with a mimesis and of producing figures in one's imagination when verisimilitude fails to round out and solidify the bodies of those figures. And indeed, questions of epistemology and Euclidean geometry are often bound together by Faulkner, as when he says that Charles Bon's wife was carried out of "whatever two dimensional backwater (the very name of which, town or village, she either never had never known or the shock of her exodus from it had driven the name forever from her mind and memory)."[49] Similarly, when Quentin approaches the Sutpen house he "saw completely through it as if the house were of one dimension, painted on a canvas curtain in which there was a tear."[50]

---

[48] Peter Lurie, *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination* (JHU Press, 2004), 6.

[49] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1990, 166–67.

[50] Ibid., 293.

This linkage of geometry with literary subjectivity has a history that stretches back to the end of the nineteenth century, where it begins most famously with Edwin Abbott's novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimension* (1881), which is set in a two-dimensional world and narrated by a character named A. Square. I am reluctant to suggest that *Flatland* and *Absalom* share some kind of literary heritage, but I do think that, for the first time, Abbot's book ushered some of the representational concerns of modernist visual art into literary fiction, and that this serves as a precedent for writers who wanted to import questions of representational space, surfaces, and the flatness of the canvas/page into their work, allowing them to explore fictionality in an unprecedented way and making it possible for E.M. Forster to famously distinguish between "round" characters and "flat" characters. Mark McGurl writes that the "plane-being foregrounds the curious fact about fictional characters that their physical existence is realized in real space only as ink on a page, as collections of letters. Otherwise they are as invisible as spirits. From this substrate the character is 'raised' into a virtual three-dimensional existence that seems to leave behind its crudely material origins."[51] Moreover, the attempt to think about the world in two dimensions (and failing to perceive the third) serves to explore by analogy the condition of human beings who move within three dimensional space even as mathematicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century increasingly popularized the notion that there existed a fourth dimension beyond our perception.

At the turn of the century "many authors were touting the superiority of thought that was based on an understanding of four-dimensional geometry," Tony Robbins states, "and collectively they established in popular culture the once-esoteric mathermatical idea of the fourth

[51] Mark McGurl, "Social Geometries: Taking Place in Henry James," *Representations*, no. 68 (October 1, 1999): 65, doi:10.2307/2902955.

dimension."[52] The fourth dimension held a special appeal for a culture in search of ways to suture the idea of a transcendental realm with an ever-more scientific, materialist vision of reality. However, it was not until later in the century that a new way of conceiving of the fourth dimension would popularize a strategy for *visualizing* the fourth dimension, which would be hugely influential for visual artists like Picasso—and, in turn, for Faulkner. For Abbott and the mathematicians who theorized the fourth dimension around the turn of the century, the preferred way of thinking visually about n+1 dimensions was through the "slicing method." In this imaginative operation a three-dimensional object, a sphere, for example, is passed through a two-dimensional plane so the plane bisects the sphere, creating a circular "slice" at the site of intersection. As the sphere moves through the plane, the size of the circle changes depending on where the sphere is in relation to the plane, so if the sphere has one hemisphere on top of the plane and the other is on the bottom, then, from the two-dimensional perspective, we have the largest possible circle or slice in view. As the sphere continues to pass through the plane, the slices get progressively smaller. This accumulation of two-dimensional slices is one way that beings in Flatland, for example, are able to encounter three-dimensional objects. A little later in the century, however, mathematicians would begin to favor the "shadow" or "projective" method for visualizing three- and four-dimensional objects. A projection of a three-dimensional cube that shows every edge of the object, even the ones that are hidden from view (a now familiar geometric figure), became the preference for representing three-dimensional shapes in two-dimensional drawings, and this method was also employed to conceptualize four-dimensional shapes. Projective geometry actually originates in art with early developments in perspectival

[52] Tony Robbin, *Shadows of Reality: The Fourth Dimension in Relativity, Cubism, and Modern Thought*, First Edition edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 34.

painting, but it didn't become the preferred way of thinking about a fourth dimension of space until after the turn of the twentieth century.

Once it did however, the cultural influence of geometers' theories about a dimension of space that we cannot perceive by the human eye exploded. As Robbins writes, following the work of art historians Josep Palau i Fabre and Linda Henderson, "artists developed a view of the figure as geometry" and "culture developed a philosophical and mystical approach to the fourth dimension, *n*-dimension geometry, and non-Euclidean geometry, an approach so general that no real distinction between these very different geometries was made."[53] As Henderson has proposed, amidst this very general and usually confused artistic fascination with turn-of-the-century developments in geometry, there exists one outlier who had a much more rigorous understanding of projective methods for representing four-dimensional shapes and who would rely heavily on an intense study of these projections: Pablo Picasso. As she influentially argues, cubism was born from Picasso's engagement with the writing and especially the technical drawings in Esprit Jouffret's *Traité élementaire de géométrie à quatre dimensions* (1903).

Whether or not Faulkner was aware of Picasso's influences, he was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century to be fascinated and influenced himself by projective geometry, and in the canted surfaces of cubism he very likely found a painterly analogue for the kind of novel he wanted to develop—a novel that somehow referred to another dimension of representational space just as it flattened out that space onto the plane of the page, an operation similar to geometric projection.[54] As Picasso's works lie flat on the surface of the canvas,

---

[53] Ibid., 28.

[54] Panthea Reid Broughton has written about Faulkner's early education in modernist visual art and its influence on what she describes as his "cubist" novels. Beginning with *The Sound and the Fury* and inspired by cubist painting, the author "tr[ied] the sorts of structural interruptions

Faulkner's characters exist only in two dimensions; as Picasso manages to refer through this very flatness to a higher dimension than the one we perceive in everyday life, so too do Faulkner's characters manage to move within another dimension of space that is not bound by the usual rules of visual displacement and simultaneity. In their Harvard dorm room Quentin and his Canadian roommate Shreve piece together a coherent version of the Sutpen family tragedy, and they are transported elsewhere: "Because now neither of them was there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither, smelling the very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years ago…."[55] They are carried through time and space, but, significantly, neither of them occupies just one role, one other character. There is instead the strange compounding that Faulkner describes as a compounding of "both yet either neither"—as if they are each capable of being both Henry and Bon as well as themselves (Quentin and Shreve) at the same time. This representation of the ability to simultaneous inhabit and be outside of multiple characters at once bears a remarkable resemblance to the representational revolution that the four-dimensional projection model inspired by giving Picasso a way to represent the "odd way in which spaces are both inside and outside a four-dimensional figure," which is precisely the subject of one of Jouffret's illustrations that most inspired the early development of the cubist method.[56] "For

---

which force the reader to participate in assembling the work of art itself." Panthea Reid Broughton, "Faulkner's Cubist Novels," in *A Cosmos of My Own*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 78.

[55] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1990, 280.

[56] Robbin, *Shadows of Reality*, 33.

seven hundred years Western painters have been concerned with the skin of objects: how light reflects off the surface, how the surface defines volume. The four-dimensional projection model freed Picasso of the tyranny of the surface…."

In an analagous way, the idea of projection freed Faulkner from the duality of interiority and exteriority that structured the novel on several levels: at the level of the material book, the level of representational space, and at the level of character. His Yoknapatawpha works emphasize "flat land," flatness, the two-dimensionality of the page, and shadow in order to entirely upend the hierarchy of interior over exterior and to remake the reader's relationship to fictional characters.

Faulkner, we now know, often took the opportunity to pore over a nineteenth-century plantation diary that belonged to family friends, a diary that includes records from the sale of slaves.[57] The logic of the plantation diary have been explored especially in critics' assessments of *Go Down, Moses*, where a plantation ledger actually appears.[58] To some degree, scholars have noted the influence of the diary on *Absalom*, pointing out the ways it may have inspired Sutpen's obsessive accumulation of furnishings and other appurtenances which launch himself into the class of planter aristocracy. Here, however, I am more interested in the ways that the plantation diary as a form influenced Faulkner's narratological and characterological thinking in the novel. Quentin's father describes the production of historical knowledge to his son, stating,

> we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or

[57] Patricia Cohen, "Mississippi Plantation Diary That Inspired William Faulkner Discovered," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/11/books/11faulkner.html.

[58] Erik Dussere, "Accounting for Slavery: Economic Narratives in Morrison and Faulkner," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 2 (2001): 329–55, doi:10.1353/mfs.2001.0021.

> nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable—Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from the forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs.[59]

The past here reads very much like fiction—a sensually impoverished version of the real thing, a collection of names which, if one looks too closely, simply dissolve into black marks on a white page, leaving no other material to grasp. Reading an archive quickly turns into a form of accounting when Mr. Compson "sees" the "people" as figures, lists them by name, and then confirms, "all of them" as if he has just called roll. The "something missing" becomes apparent when he compares this form of reading to a formula that fails to balance no matter how often the proportions are checked, no matter how carefully the calculation is done.

The notion of the formula or book that won't balance or that "no longer balanced" appears throughout the novel, betraying the haunting presence of the plantation ledger, suggesting that such a ledger is still somehow in process or that its business is unfinished.[60] As Mary Poovey shows in her study of sixteenth-century merchants, the balancing of the ledger requires, in the end, an imaginary sum of money in the form of either credit or debit, attesting to the significance of balance as a formal element which, she argues, produces the factual quality of

[59] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1990, 80.

[60] Ibid., 92.

the ledger's contents.[61] The encounter with the formula or ledger that fails to balance is, therefore, an encounter with a fiction; it produces the feeling that Quentin's father describes at such length: that of being in the presence of a "shadowy" realm of human affairs that do not properly add up to a singular reality.

Furthermore, the organization of the balanced ledger's surface evinces the same "grammar" that Hortense Spillers famously describes in American slave codes: "we are stunned by the simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series: 'Slave' appears in the same context with beasts of burden, *all* and *any* animal(s), various livestock, and a virtually endless profusion of domestic content from the culinary item to the book."[62] Balance, in the case of the ledger, also gives rise to the ultimate fungibility of all its items, including enslaved persons. The ledger that fails to balance contests this logic of absolute equivalency, and this is both important for understanding what the novel has to say about slavery and for conceptualizing its economy of character. The ledger's grammar, which was so central to plantation life and remains a primary source for knowing that past, also structures the production of history in the novel's present. It serves as a structure of thought for Quentin, his father, Shreve, and Rosa—all of whom obsessively narrate the events of the past with the hope of getting it "right" or balanced, of lending it facticity's weight. To know a collection of people becomes akin to assigning them exchange value and deeming them possessions. Because every attempt to know the past is determined by the forms through which we encounter that past, the plantation ledger's ideology

[61] Mary Poovey, "Accommodating Merchants: Accounting, Civility, and the Natural Laws of Gender," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 1–2.

[62] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 226.

conditions the relation Faulkner and his characters have to the past of slavery. They are doomed to an accounting that will never add up not simply because the past can never have the vibrancy of the present, but more significantly because in the wake of formal emancipation, the ledger itself has been transformed into a fiction.

At stake in all of this is how we understand the relationship between fiction and history—where we locate history when we read a novel that seeks to wrestle with the very real violence of the past through the unreality of fiction. *Absalom*, perhaps more than any other novel by Faulkner, is about the legacy of slavery, but it does not attempt to locate slavery within novelistic time and space—to "represent" slavery in any normative sense of that word. Sutpen's slaves are present in the novel, but they are the epitome of "flat" characters. Slavery as experienced by enslaved persons is not Faulkner's subject. The novel is instead about the way that the real historical, physical, psychic violence of slavery only exists in far more abstract forms that are difficult to see or even imagine. How difficult it is to think "the paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling" that springs from "a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation."[63] Quentin recalls his grandfather saying that man rides "peacefully about on his horse…not knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano" and believes "that earth was kind and gentle and that darkness was merely something you saw, or could not see in; overseeing what he oversaw and not knowing that he was overseeing it."[64] The history of slavery is essentially a question of visuality in Faulkner. And darkness is never simply the absence or presence of light, the ability to see or not see, but the

[63] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1990, 202.

[64] Ibid., 202–03.

very condition of all vision, and to actually see darkness for what it is—to see it as always a shadow of something else, of some unknowable absence—is to encounter one's own implication in that darkness, one's own failure to connect to the past. As Quentin's grandfather puts it, a blindness to the history of slavery manifests as a form of "overseeing." By this I take him to mean that "man" looks upon the land as an overseer does—with a possessive gaze. I also take him to mean that man *over*sees in the sense of looking closely, too closely, for evidence of the past, as this kind of vision privileges a certain kind of presence; it seeks the material evidence of history and does not account for the paradox of the past's ineluctable alterity, for the fact that this past will always remain obscure no matter how well we "see." Rather than overseeing, the grandfather is able to connect "two hundred years of oppression and exploitation" with the "sugar cane sapling." To not "oversee" history, then, would be to resist cathecting it into a solid object to be redeemed but to see it instead as an ungraspable shadow.[65]

Coda: Faulkner in Paris

While in Paris in 1925, the young Faulkner made a pilgrimage to Père Lachaise, "particularly to see Oscar Wilde's tomb, with a bas-relief by Jacob Epstein," as he wrote in a letter to his mother.[66] Many critics have noted the Decadent author's influence on Faulkner's first known writings, such as his 1920 play *The Marionettes*. They also note Faulkner's mention

[65] Here I draw on Stephen Best's discussion of the ethics of historiography, especially where he engages with Leo Bersani's work. Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 453–74, doi:10.1215/00267929-1631478.

[66] Faulkner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, 12.

of Wilde in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Quentin's father describes the afternoon in 1870 when Charles Bon's mistress sojourns to Mississippi to mourn at Bon's grave:

> It must have resembled a garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde: the late afternoon, the dark cedars with the level sun in them, even the light exactly right and the graves, the three pieces of marble…looking as though they had been cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who with the passing of twilight would return and strike them and carry them, hollow fragile and without weight, back to the warehouse until they should be needed again; the pageant, the scene, the act, entering upon the stage—the magnolia-faced woman a little plumper no, a woman created of by and for darkness whom the artist Beardsley might have dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed not to infer bereavement or widowhood but to dress some interlude of slumbrous and fatal insatiation, of passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh, walking beneath a lace parasol and followed by a bright gigantic negress carrying a silk cushion and leading by the hand the little boy whom Beardsley might not only have dressed but drawn—a thin delicate child with smooth ivory sexless face….[67]

Like so much of the novel, this is a second-hand account. Mr. Compson is actually describing what Quentin's grandfather would have seen during that afternoon at Sutpen's Hundred. In its retelling the scene becomes stylized, and the description, rather than opening up the fictional world and attempting to lend it solidity, depth, and durability, flattens everything into a shallow scene staged in proscenium, complete with props—hollow reproductions of the real things. Faulkner gives us the aestheticized, Wildean version of the image: the world represented as something second-hand, unreal and yet more beautiful and memorable for its unreality. Judith stands to the side of the main action, "inside the cedars," wearing a "shapeless" dress "in the attitude of an indifferent guide in a museum" until Bon's mistress rises up in order to return to the house, at which point Judith follows the other figures "with that face like a mask or like marble."[68] As she moves from outside the scene to the inner space of action with the other characters, her unmoving face collapses into a mask or marble rendering of her head, and she too

[67] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1990, 157.

[68] Ibid., 157–58.

becomes an aesthetic object, a shapeless mass wrought into form. Faulkner invokes Wilde and Beardsley's *fin-de-siécle* aestheticism for its championing of artifice and ornamentation, and more specifically for their interest in surfaces, both in the sense of surface-as-appearance and in the literal, material sense of the word. Also note that the invocation of Wilde's writing is more an invocation of Wilde himself, more a reference to the cultural idea of the person than to any specific element in his work. And indeed, naming another writer is unusual in Faulkner's fiction. Rather than alluding to any one story or character, for example, Faulkner asks us to recall a general essence of the writer's ouvre, an overall feeling or affinity for pageantry simply evoked by his name. (Of course it has always been said of Wilde that his greatest theatrical invention was himself.)

These Wildean grave-markers recall the emphatically frontal theatrical effects that Epstein used to memorialize Wilde himself in the Père Lachaise monument, which had been unveiled to much controversy eleven years prior to Faulkner's visit.

Oscar Wilde's grave by Jacob Epstein

Like the graves in the passage, Wilde's tomb emphasizes a certain surface-ness and frontal

orientation that is distinctly modernist and, in particular, emblematic of the European avant-garde milieu in which it was produced. Epstein was a New York-born artist who went abroad to continue his artistic education in Britain and France, where he would meet Picasso, Brancusi, and Modigliani, all during the period that he worked on the commission for Wilde's tomb. Carved out of a 20-ton block of stone, the grave marker retains much of its original shape. Even the flying figure on its face nearly fills the tomb's rectangular façade from corner to corner, drawing attention to the hulking dimensions and density of the stone, and subordinating figuration and artistic skill to the properties of the raw material. While, upon its completion, many found the figure's nudity indecent, some critics praised Epstein's bas-relief as an excellent exercise in "direct carving," which privileges the eloquence of the material over the artist's preconceived design. Recalling a monumental Assyrian carving that Epstein had studied in the British Museum as well as the African and Ancient Egyptian art that he collected, the figure reveals the sculptor's belief in the special aesthetic powers of "primitive" iconography. Most significant for our discussion here, however, is the emphatic flatness of the tomb's front. Viewed straight on, the relief is remarkably shallow and hews close to the supporting stone, with most of the façade taken up by the sheet-like wings that are almost perfectly rectangular and minimally ornamented. Their scalloped edges and shallow striations from left to right both suggest feathers and give the sense that the figure is moving perpendicular to the viewer's line of sight, as though streaking through her visual field.

Those scholars who have written about Faulkner's development as a novelist underemphasize his early visit to France because he failed to fraternize with many of the other major Anglophone writers who were there, in addition to the fact that he spent less time in Europe than planned. But while Faulkner's time in Paris may not have ensconced him within the

literary avant-garde in the way he desired, it almost certainly marked the moment when what we think of as his mature work began to germinate. Carvell Collins has written that, according to a friend with whom Faulkner corresponded during his time abroad, the short piece of writing about a young girl and her two brothers that would grow into *The Sound and the Fury* was written during this period.[69]

While the young writer may not have made his way into the center of literary society during those months, according to his correspondence home, he spent much of his time looking at art. In letters to his mother decorated with self portraits, he wrote about seeing works by Picasso and Matisse in private collections and spending many of his days at the Louvre enjoying paintings of Manet, Degas, and Cézanne. These visual works made a significant impression on Faulkner, and, I argue, were vital to the modernist experiments he would begin to fully explore as *The Sound and the Fury* took its earliest form. In the paintings and sculptures he saw in Paris, Faulkner further developed his interest in the flat surface or support and in the way modern painting and sculpture used them to forward the Greenbergian project of persuing a "pure" manifestation of painting itself—work that was "about" its own ontology rather than whatever it referred to in the world outside of the work. He would transpose this preoccupation with artifice—with the non-referential aspect of visual art—into his fiction. And in doing so, he would call the status of literary character as a category into a crisis. If we are accustomed to thinking about literary modernism in terms of its disruptions to traditional narrative, I want to draw attention to the ways that Faulkner's modernism very self-consciously disrupts the novel at

[69] Carvell Collins, introduction to *Mayday* by William Faulkner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 3–40. It is true that some scholars have questioned Collins's source's memory, but their own evidence relies upon Faulkner's obviously self-mythologizing account of the Benjy section's composition (which conflicts with plenty of evidence).

the level of characterization as well. For thinking solely in terms of narrative experimentation obscures the ways in which personhood gets destablized and terms like "subjectivity" become nearly irrelevant to the novels at hand. So much has been written about loss in Faulkner, but rarely have critics addressed what gets lost to the genre: the radical loss of character that is experienced by readers of these texts. Part of what makes them difficult is their demand that the reader address her attention to entities whose fictionality overrides her ability to imagine stable, durable, solid, embodied characters. Benjy's stream-of-consciousness is not an invitation into the interior life of a literary character—a representation of the phenomenology of his consciousness—but an attempt to throw a wrench into the mechanisms of interiority itself. And this, I argue, demands a form of reading not oriented along an inside/outside axis, but instead attuned to the cubist logic of adjacency and folding.

In *As I Lay Dying* Darl lists the reasons why he constructed the joints of his mother's coffin "on the bevel."[70] Reason number one: "There is more surface for the nails to grip." Reason number three: "The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across." Reason number nine: "The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are best made on the bevel."[71] Narrowing the narrative's focus dramatically, Darl calls our attention to the minutiae of two planks fastened together to create a beveled joint. If we are accustomed to thinking of coffins as whole vessels, that is, in terms of their interior volumes and what they hold, Darl's list makes a claim for the importance of the exterior surfaces, joints, densities, and physical forces that keep

[70] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (Vintage, 1990), 82.

[71] Ibid., 83.

the coffin together and allow it to articulate a space for death. He directs our attention *at* rather than *into* the object, encouraging us to imagine only a hypothetical body—"a dead body," as in, any dead body—whose identity is as hollow as the coffin itself. This hypothetical corpse, this mere shape and weight of a person who lacks all particularity despite the "real" body held in the coffin, is interesting for its potentiality; it is emphatically no-body. Like the coffin, novels are carefully crafted containers completely empty of real people. They carry no real-world signification, and yet, in the sometimes vast empty spaces that they articulate, we imagine there to be something resembling persons within. Darl's coffin is, I suggest, a figure for the Yoknapatawpha novels themselves in that its meaning moves along and through the formal construction of its surfaces, and because the more we look for breaks in those surfaces, the more surface area we discover: the beveled joints maximize the flat surface area at the site of the seam, serving to strengthen the overall surface of the hollow structure. The fact that Addie Bundren's corpse lays with its head at the wrong end of the box makes the point clear: the coffin is among other things a figure for the arbitrary, non-referentiality of fictional description, which always fails to properly refer to any real body.[72]

[72] My discussion of *As I Lay Dying* is indebted to Joseph Urgo's reading of the novel. He describes it as a "conflict…consisting of a magazine of images, metaphors, and projections—of *figurations*—that characters volley at one another (and at the reader) in an effort to 'know' what is happening to themselves, to each other, and to the environment." Joseph R. Urgo, "William Faulkner and the Drama of Meaning: The Discovery of the Figurative in as 'I Lay Dying,'" *South Atlantic Review* 53, no. 2 (May 1, 1988): 14, doi:10.2307/3199910.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to represent the very real historical violence of slavery and its aftermath through the *un*reality of a novel? What are the ethical implications of reading about a fictional slave? The question of literary character took on a special urgency in the nineteenth century as novelists sought to represent the enslaved, who stood outside the privileged realm of personhood. While we are used to thinking about the slave as an individual simply transformed into property, recent scholarship has complicated that view, showing how, in law, the slave was actually suspended between the poles of person and thing. This neither/nor status allowed for slaves to be, for example, held culpable for crimes without holding the other legal privileges that come along with full personhood. Through legal reasoning, the status of the slave was constantly reinvented as hybrid or liminal. The writers I look at in the preceding pages saw this, the imperiled personhood of the enslaved, as an aesthetic challenge to the conventions of traditional novelistic characterization: How might one write a character who is refused recognition as a person? What happens when literary character does not correspond to what we understand to be a person? Thus, a political and ethical problem became a literary one. Crafts, Twain, Chesnutt, and then, in the twentieth century, Faulkner, produce or fail to produce the imaginary bodies and subjectivities of literary characters. Their fictions often resist the reader's desire to appropriate black characters and imbue them with the fullness of interiority. In other words, instead of making a more familiar sentimental argument for the humanity of the slaves they represent, these authors all render the ideological violence through which black individuals were relegated to the margins of humanity. Their radical new forms of characterization seek to make visible the denial of personhood to slaves.

Fiction was not what nineteenth century American readers wanted from formerly enslaved writers. The slave narratives of the antebellum period were designed to telegraph their absolute truth and authenticity as pamphlets for abolitionism. From the authenticating documents written by prominent white abolitionists to the etched portraits of the author that decorated the fronticepieces of slave narratives, the reader was meant to feel assured that the bodies described therein corresponded to actual bodies in the real world. In a literary landscape where black authorship, authenticity, and the "real" were so linked, there was little room for black fabulation. And while authentication was a hugely important political tool for black writers to shore up the legitimacy of their testimony and have their stories circulated, the need for an unvarnished truth also had the effect of reinforcing the idea that black writers had or ought to have a special purchase on authentic experience. In turn, there has been a long history ever since in which the imaginative and aesthetic accomplishments of black writers have been ignored. This history, which extends into our own moment, poses blackness and imagination against one another, often turning attention to the body of the artist herself rather than the work of art or the bodies of her characters.

Of all the terms literary critics regularly rely upon, "character" is perhaps both the most heavily used and the least examined. Our criticism often presumes that there exists a consensus about what a character is, about what we speak of when we say the names "Hamlet," "Emma Woodhouse," or "Ahab." But apply the slightest critical touch to the concept of character and out tumble a set of puzzling ontological and epistemological questions: What, exactly, is a character? Where do literary characters begin and end? With the text? In our imaginations? How do we know we are in the presence of a fictional character? What is the difference between persons in our memory and the characters who populate our fictions? What is the relationship

between characters and real-world people? "Character," writes John Frow, "is not a substance but the literary or dramatic or filmic instance of an operation within a social assemblage, by means of which the reader is inscribed into the terms of a particular formation of personhood."[73] To be intelligible, every character relies upon a certain set of historically specific assumptions about what constitutes a person, about the basic conditions of the human as it is defined against the non-human. Thus, the history of character can only be understood alongside the history of the production of personhood through different ethical, legal, religious, and civic modes of thought. Drawing on Foucault's terms, Frow contends that "the person is less a concept than a *dispositif*, an evolving apparatus for the shaping of social arrangements."[74]

Traditionally, the problem of character has been defined by the failure of any univocal language to bridge the gap between the discourse of fiction and the discourse about fiction. In other words, one can speak about Ahab as Ishmael does, as if he were a person in a world contiguous with our own, *or* as a character who inhabits a novel, as a formal function of a text. Whereas philosophers of aesthetics usually attempt to resolve this hybridity in order to name what characters are, I want to insist along with Frow that "[w]hat counts is less what they are than what we do with them: the historically, culturally, and generically various ways in which the reader or spectator or listener endows them with specular personhood, and on that basis finds them of interest."[75] Characters do not precede our understanding as one or another kind of object; rather, they come into being in the moment of reading, hearing, or seeing. In other

[73] John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ix.

[74] Ibid., 71.

[75] Ibid., 31.

words, my account of literary character bends toward the phenomenological, thinking of character as an effect of one's encounter with a text.

Along with the work of theorists of character and fictionality such as Frow, Diedre Lynch, Elizabeth Fowler, Catherine Gallagher, Michael McKeon, Mary Poovey, and Alex Woloch, *"*Prisoners of Style" attempts to move beyond what once seemed like the two primary critical options: to discuss characters as though they were real people or to take the strict structuralist position that character is a ruse of the text. Of course when we read we know that characters are always both—we feel for them as we do people but know that they begin and end with the text—and my approach, like these other critics', honors that fact, taking the paradox of characters' quasi-personhood as a premise of my analysis. What makes the recent work on character and fictionality exciting and distinctive from much of the criticism in the vein of New Historicism is its attempts to historicize not a single character but character as a formal category. If historicist criticism that attends to character often asks, where does the idea for a particular character come from, I and these other critics want to know what makes a particular regime of character (and indeed of personhood) possible. What ideas about the constitution of the self, truth and untruth, the human and its others coalesce at a particular moment to produce the kinds of figures that populate a text?

Revealing character and the history of personhood to be inextricably bound together invites us to envision new relationships between literature, history, and the law. For the writers I discuss, the historical fact of slavery was not only something to be represented in fiction; it also posed a formal problem, prompting a rethinking of characterization. Each chapter in this dissertation dwells on the relationship between character and personhood to show the literary expression of personhood's systematic unmaking under the institution of slavery. There is, in

other words, an underbelly to the narrative that aligns character with personhood: a history of representations of dispossession and exclusion.

"Prisoners of Style" is also about the experience of reading. It points to the discontinuities—the negative spaces in the reader's imagination—that destabilize personal identity and modernity's nearly sacred sense of self; it is about the impersonality at the heart of the person. In the cases I have presented, representations of fog, shadow, forgetting, and flatness all disrupt the reader's ability to imagine characters. They unmake imaginary persons. To read about a fictional character is, as Gallagher has argued, one way of feeling the immanence of one's own self. But character can also be a technology for throwing selfhood into question in order to remake its contours, in order to question the primacy of personhood—in order to make strange the privilege of one's own humanity. Placed side-by-side, the categories of character and person are shown to be linked and yet opposed. Together, they vibrate. If characters are allegories for persons, attending to literary character means confronting the history of personhood's making *and* its unmaking.

REFERENCES

Allewaert, Monique. *Ariel's Ecology : Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Arac, Jonathan. *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time*. Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

———. *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative: 1820 - 1860*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

———. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973.

Baker, Houston A.. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral : Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*. New York: Columbia University Press, n.d.

———. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. University of California Press, 1989.

———. *Writing Degree Zero*. Macmillan, 1977.

Beaumont, Matthew. *Adventures in Realism*. Wiley, 2007.

Bell, Michael Davitt. *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny about Interpretation." *The Kenyon Review* 24, no. 3/4 (July 1, 2002): 90–134.

Bersani, Leo. *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1984.

Bersani, Leo, and Adam Phillips. *Intimacies*. Reprint. University Of Chicago Press, 2010.

Best, Stephen M. "On Failing to Make the Past Present." *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 453–74. doi:10.1215/00267929-1631478.

———. *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. “Surface Reading: An Introduction.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (November 1, 2009): 1–21.

Blotner, Joseph, ed. *William Faulkner’s Library: A Catalogue*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1964.

Boltanski, Luc. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. University of California Press, 1988.

Bosman, Julie. “Professor Says He Has Solved a Mystery Over a Slave’s Novel.” *The New York Times*, September 18, 2013, sec. Books. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/books/professor-says-he-has-solved-a-mystery-over-a-slaves-novel.html.

Brodhead, Richard H. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. LSU Press, 1989.

Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent : Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Knopf, 1984.

Broughton, Panthea Reid. “Faulkner’s Cubist Novels.” In *A Cosmos of My Own*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981.

Browder, Laura. *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Butler, Judith. *Antigone’s Claim*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Cameron, Sharon. *Impersonality: Seven Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

———. *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne*. Columbia University Press, 1991.

———. *Thinking in Henry James*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Casati, Roberto. *Shadows: Unlocking Their Secrets, from Plato to Our Time*. New York: Random House, 2007.

Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge University Press, 2002.

———. *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Chen, Ken. "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show." *Asian American Writers' Workshop*. Accessed July 30, 2015. http://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/.

Chesnutt, Charles Waddell. "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South." In *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Joseph R. McElrath McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, and Jesse S. Crisler, 155–60. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

———. *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*. Edited by Richard H. Brodhead. Duke University Press, 1993.

———. "The Writing of a Novel." In *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler, 549–53. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Character of 'Character.'" *New Literary History* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1974).

Cohen, Patricia. "Mississippi Plantation Diary That Inspired William Faulkner Discovered." *The New York Times*, February 10, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/11/books/11faulkner.html.

Collins, Carvell. "Introduction to." In *Mayday by William Faulkner*, 3–40. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.

Crafts, Hannah. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. New York: Warner Books, 2002.

Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. New York: Verso, 2013.

Culler, Jonathan D. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Cornell University Press, 2002.

Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates, eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Dayan, Colin. *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Foucault*. A&C Black, 2006.

———. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Truth in Painting*. University Of Chicago Press, 1987.

———. *Writing and Difference*. University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Dussere, Erik. “Accounting for Slavery: Economic Narratives in Morrison and Faulkner.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 2 (2001): 329–55. doi:10.1353/mfs.2001.0021.

Eliot, T.S. “[An Introduction to Huckleberry Finn].” In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 320–27. New York: Norton, 1962.

Elliott, Michael A. *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism*. U of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Ellison, Ralph. “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.” In *Shadow and Act*, 100–112. Random House LLC, 2011.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* London: Chatto & Windus, 1936.

———. *Absalom, Absalom!: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

———. *As I Lay Dying*. Vintage, 1990.

———. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*. Edited by Joseph Leo Blotner. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

———. *The Portable Faulkner*. New York: The Viking press, 1946.

———. *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*. Norton, 1994.

———. *The Sound and the Fury: The Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*. W. W. Norton & Co., 1994.

Fiedler, Leslie. *A New Fiedler Reader*. Prometheus Books, 1999.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Was Huck Black? : Mark Twain and African-American Voices: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Fleissner, Jennifer L. “Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt’s Diasporic Regionalism.” *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 313–36.

Fossett, Judith Jackson. “Discerning Shadows: Race, Representation and Difference in the Age of Slavery.” Ph.D., Princeton University, 1999. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/304540274/abstract/C943D3B05E01492FPQ/1?accountid=10226.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Reissue edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Freedgood, Elaine. “Ghostly Reference.” *Representations* 125, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 40–53. doi:10.1525/rep.2014.125.1.40.

Frow, John A. *Character and Person*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

———. “Spectacle Binding: On Character.” *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986).

Gallagher, Catherine. “The Rise of Fictionality.” In *The Novel*, edited by Franco Moretti, 1:336–63. Princeton University Press, 2006.

Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Hollis Robbins, eds. *In Search Of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays On The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Basic Civitas Books, 2004.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Genette, Gérard. “The Frontiers of Narrative.” In *Figures of Literary Discourse*, translated by Alan Sheridan, 127–43. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Glissant, Edouard. *Faulkner, Mississippi*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

———. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

“Gloom, n.1.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed July 16, 2015. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/79084.

Gold, Herbert. “Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction No. 40.” *Paris Review*, Summer-Fall 1967. http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

Gwynn, Frederick Landis, and Joseph Blotner. *Faulkner in the University*. University Press of Virginia, 1995.

Harries, Martin. *Forgetting Lot’s Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.

Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Harvey, Harvey, William J. *Character and the Novel*. Cornell University Press, 1965.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

Hildreth, Richard. *Archy Moore, the White Slave: Or, Memoirs of a Fugitive*. New York ; Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856. http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011609784.

Hirsh, John C. "Realism Renewed." *Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1991): 235–43.

Honnighausen, Lothar. *William Faulkner: The Art of Stylization in His Early Graphic and Literary Work*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Jaffe, Audrey. "Introduction: Realism in Retrospect." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 309–13.

James, Henry. "Preface to 'The Portrait of a Lady.'" In *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, 40–58. New York: Scribner, 1934.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies Of Realism*. London ; New York: Verso, 2013.

Kane, John Kintzing, Passmore Williamson, Arthur Cannon, and United States District Court (Pennsylvania : Eastern District). *Case of Passmore Williamson: Report of the Proceedings on the Writ of Habeas Corpus*. Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt & Son, 1856.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Edited by Nicholas Walker. Translated by James Creed Meredith. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Keene, John. "On Vanessa Place, Gone With the Wind, and the Limit Point of Certain Conceptual Aesthetics." *J'S THEATER*, May 18, 2015. http://jstheater.blogspot.com/2015/05/on-vanessa-place-gone-with-wind-and.html.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue.* Oxford University Press, 2000.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. *Humiliation*. New York: Picador, 2011.

Kurnick, David. *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX: Identification." Unpublished translation. Translated by Cormac Gallagher. Accessed April 15, 2015.

http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-Iby-MCL-7.NOV_.20111.pdf.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. MIT Press, 1974.

Lurie, Peter. *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination*. JHU Press, 2004.

Lynch, Deidre. *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Mantel, Hilary. "The Shape of Absence." *London Review of Books*, August 8, 2002.

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Marx, Karl. "Capital." In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McClellan. New York: Oxford, 2000.

Marx, Leo. "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and 'Huckleberry Finn.'" *The American Scholar* 22, no. 4 (October 1, 1953): 423–40.

———. *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

Matheson, Neill. "History and Survival: Charles Chesnutt and the Time of Conjure." *American Literary Realism* 43, no. 1 (October 1, 2010): 1–22.

McElrath, Joseph, Robert C. Leitz III, and Robert C. Leitz, eds. *"To Be an Author": Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

McGurl, Mark. "Social Geometries: Taking Place in Henry James." *Representations*, no. 68 (October 1, 1999): 59–83. doi:10.2307/2902955.

Miller, D. A. *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

Moten, Fred. "Knowledge of Freedom." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 269–310.

Nyong'o, Tavia. "Unburdening Representation." *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (April 2014): 70.

Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *Callaloo*, no. 20 (1984): 46–73.

Peck, Richard E. "The Campaign That... Succeeded." *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 21, no. 3 (April 1, 1989): 3–12.

Poovey, Mary. "Accommodating Merchants: Accounting, Civility, and the Natural Laws of Gender." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 1.

Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Ranciere, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 2006.

Riffaterre, Michael. *Fictional Truth*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

Robbin, Tony. *Shadows of Reality: The Fourth Dimension in Relativity, Cubism, and Modern Thought*. First Edition edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Scarry, Elaine. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Sklar, Martin J. *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Sommer, Doris. *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, The Jokes of Discourse, Or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed." In *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003.

———. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003.

Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. Oxford University Press, 1975.

Stepto, Robert. "'The Simple but Intensely Human Inner Life of Slavery': Storytelling, Fiction, and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius Stories.'" In *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, edited by Gunter H. Lenz, 29–55. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1984.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press, 1984.

Still, William. *Still's Underground Rail Road Records: With a Life of the Author...* William Still, 1886.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. John P. Jewett & Company, 1853.

Sundquist, Eric J. *American Realism: New Essays*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

———. *Faulkner: The House Divided*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

———. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Harvard University Press, 1994.

Taylor, Matthew A. *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

"The Wheeler Slave Case.--Passmore Williamson Committed for Contempt." *The New York Times*, July 28, 1855. http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40912FA355A1A7493CAAB178CD85F418584F9.

Thrailkill, Jane F. "Emotive Realism." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 3 (2006): 365–88.

Tourgée, Albion W. "The South as a Field for Fiction." *Forum*, no. 6 (December 1888).

Twain, Mark. *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*. Edited by Frederick Anderson, Lin Salamo, and Bernard L. Stein. Vol. 2. 3 vols. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1975.

———. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Penguin Classics, 2002.

Urgo, Joseph R. "William Faulkner and the Drama of Meaning: The Discovery of the Figurative in as 'I Lay Dying.'" *South Atlantic Review* 53, no. 2 (May 1, 1988): 11–23.

Vermeule, Blakey. *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* JHU Press, 2009.

Virilio, Paul. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Zone Books, 1991.

Wagner, Bryan. *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Warren, Kenneth W. *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Watt, Ian P. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. University of California Press, 2001.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Wilde, Oscar. "Some Literary Notes." *Woman's World*, 1889, 164–68.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2009.