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## **Beyond Postsouthern: The Return of the Rural in Twenty-First Century Southern Literature**

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BEYOND POSTSOUTHERN: THE RETURN OF THE RURAL IN TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by

Jeremy Gibbs

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
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and the School of Humanities  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes how twenty-first century southern literature employs rurality as a means of critiquing the dominant neoliberal impulse of an increasingly urban-attuned society. In times of transition, southern literature has traditionally turned to representations of rurality in order to understand, navigate, or resist change; rapid globalization has influenced contemporary writers to return to the rural in their fiction in order to expose manifestations of the urban/rural hierarchy and offer alternatives to a prevailing urban consciousness. This study's Introduction discusses ways in which pastoral and anti-pastoral literary modes have framed rurality in southern fiction, specifically through depictions of the plantation South as an idyllic paradise in ante- and postbellum fiction and depictions of depleted landscapes as sites of abjection in Depression-era fiction. Contemporary writers employ aspects of both modes in their descriptions of rural landscapes and lives. Chapter II reveals how in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, the privacy afforded by the rural landscape leads to conservatism as a political and a moral stance and a limited individual perspective, all of which contribute to the widespread acceptance of the institution of slavery in the antebellum South. In Chapter III, the effects of natural disaster on rural dwellers are shown to reveal not only racial and rural discrimination but also tenacious beliefs in fate and superstition in Bill Cheng's *Southern Cross the Dog*. Chapter IV examines how Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* exposes the constructed-ness of rural identities and demonstrates how rural locations and identities can both be sites of resistance to land development and capitalism. Chapter V discusses how agribusiness contributes to material and existential alienation in Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*. This chapter also argues that true

intersubjective community is easier to attain in rural areas than urban areas. Each of these works includes both positive and negative perspectives on rurality, demonstrating that the way in which rurality is narrated in literature can underscore its value in the modern world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

To my mom, Natalie Gibbs, who instilled in me a love of reading and who believed in me every step of the way, and my dad, Jeff Gibbs, who taught me how to work hard and persevere.

And to Alissa Gibbs, my constant source of support and encouragement throughout the journey.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION: RURALITY AND THE PASTORAL MODE IN  
SOUTHERN LITERATURE

“The South” and “southern literature” have been inextricably linked to a “sense of place,” both in academic discourse and in the popular imagination. This sense of place has typically coincided with assumptions about the land, from Thomas Jefferson’s descriptions of a South comprised of lush rural landscapes filled with a catalogue of natural resources in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) to the Nashville Agrarians’ portrayals of the southern family farm as the last bastion against northern industrialization in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). That perspective is only true for white southern authors writing throughout the history of southern literature, for whom the conception of southern “place” has often been associated with the traditional pastoral and accompanied by a narrative of decline: idyllic rural landscapes and virtues are being displaced by decadent urban sprawl and vice. Yet the pastoral is not the only mode in which southern writers have used rurality in southern literature; writers have used a variety of conceptions of rurality to help define the region. Differing viewpoints about the land have rendered different kinds of southern literature. For example, John Pendleton Kennedy’s idealized pastoral plantation in *Swallow Barn* (1832) bears little resemblance to Erskine Caldwell’s anti-pastoral, abject, barren farm in *Tobacco Road* (1932); however, both of these novels define the South in terms of rurality. In the latter half of the twentieth century, some southern writers turned away from writing about the rural South (and in some cases, from writing about the South at all) in what has been identified

as a “postsouthern” turn.<sup>1</sup> Yet now, many contemporary writers have once again begun to explore southern rurality in their works.

Even though the southern literary canon is sometimes understood to be white, the literature examined in this dissertation contests that understanding, as well as the previous assumptions about southern rurality. This dissertation explores how twenty-first century southern literary representations of rurality are influenced by changes in contemporary society, focusing on four representative novels: Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), Bill Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog* (2013), Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!* (2011), and Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox* (2004). These novels engage with rurality as a means critiquing the dominant, urban-based neoliberal impulse of global culture today.

Since the early twentieth century, rural areas have undergone a series of rapid transformations. In North America, food production has almost completely been overtaken by agribusiness, and as a result, small family farms that once proliferated in the countryside have now become exceptional. These changes to the rural landscape are due, at least in part, to neoliberalism, the late-capitalist idea that privatization, deregulation, and free trade encourage more productivity and profit. According to Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy, “neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society”

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<sup>1</sup> According to his entry in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, vol. 9 (2008), George Hovis defines “postsouthern literature” as the term used for work that “(1) describes a place and culture that is no longer distinctively southern (or that calls into question traditional assumptions about southern culture) and/or (2) exhibits a sensibility fundamentally different from the preceding literature of the Southern Literary Renaissance” (127). See, for instance, Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe novels *The Sportswriter* (1986) and *Independence Day* (1995) and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* (2013).

(2). Thus, farming's transition to corporate control has had other detrimental effects on rural areas, as well. One effect is rural migration to urban areas: the United Nations' publication on world urbanization prospects cites that as of 2018, eighty-two percent of the population of North America lives in urban areas ("2018 Revision"). Also, with new developments in broadcast and communication technologies, rural identities are becoming less distinct from urban or suburban identities. Yet at the same time the integrity of rurality is on the decline, literary representations of rurality have become more prevalent in contemporary southern fiction. These literary representations of rurality try to recuperate that integrity; however, as literature is generally comfortable with maintaining tensions and ambiguities, it does not do so without complication.

Literature is an art form that has a distinct capacity to comment on rurality's relationship to neoliberalism. Reading fiction requires the reader's sustained suspension of disbelief in order to imagine an alternative reality; within that alternative reality, the author and the reader can work out various possibilities in representational space that may have real-world consequences. Literary representations of rurality, in contrast to lived experiences of rural areas, allow writers to examine issues that may seem contradictory on the surface but that can coexist in fiction. For instance, the Bigtree tribe in *Swamplandia!* use their appropriated Native American identities to resist being assimilated into mainstream culture, but these identities are always already a part of a capitalist enterprise. Also, extremely contemporary southern literature pushes back against assumptions from its previous iterations, such as how the whiteness of the plantation tradition (and of, by extension, the southern canon) is questioned in *The Known World*. Each of the novels examined in this dissertation reveal how sentimental

nostalgia is rejected in favor of realism via their depictions of the negative aspects of rurality: in *The Celestial Jukebox*, exploited physical labor is still a foundation for the region's agriculture one hundred fifty years after the Civil War, and in *Southern Cross the Dog* and *Swamplandia!*, the trope of the sublime gothic swamp can no longer operate as a haven for the oppressed. Ultimately, extremely contemporary southern fiction navigates the real loss of rurality by recreating it in representational space, which allows for a critique of the neoliberal impulse that threatens rurality in reality.

“Rural” is a term that could be loosely defined as any space that is not urban; however, drawing a boundary between rural and urban space proves to be a more challenging task. With the increasing compression of time and space inherent in twenty-first century globalization, developing a strict definition of rural space, or any particular space, has proven to be very complex. In her introduction to *The Geography of Identity* (1996), “Narrating Place,” Patricia Yaeger states, “Social geography’s insistence on the interstitial, hybrid nature of place—its refusal to conceptualize location as either ethnically or ideologically bounded—also offers an important antidote to some of the dead-end binarisms within cultural studies” (15). In Yaeger’s view, types of “space” can no longer be understood primarily in terms of their opposites, as when rural space is contrasted with urban space or the country is contrasted with the city. Instead, understanding any kind of space requires “rethink[ing] the narrative dimensions of the strange effects of ordinary space” (9). Edward P. Jones’s narrator in *The Known World* complicates the meaning of the rural plantation through the complex narrative strategy of providing perspectives from a variety of races and classes. Space takes on different meanings when it is understood in different narrative contexts; thus, in response to the

narrative considerations Yaeger identifies in “Narrating Place,” the field of rural geography has incorporated a variety of approaches to conceptualize rurality.

Like many other disciplines (including southern studies), rural studies has had a long and tumultuous history that has followed broad movements in the academy. According to rural geographer Michael Woods, prior to the development of geography as an academic discipline, “the geographies of rural areas tended to be described and explained in terms of their functional relationships between urban centres as sources of food and natural resources” (6). The integrated approach to studying rural geography appeared in the 1970s. In his chapter “Conceptualizing Rurality” in the *Handbook of Rural Studies* (2006), Paul Cloke discusses three significant approaches geographers have applied to frame rurality conceptually. The first major approach identifies all of the functional elements of rurality that could be proven to be different from urban elements using statistical data. Together, these functional elements should provide an idea of what rurality actually is. Three of the primary functional elements of rural areas used in this approach are (1) that rural areas are dominated by extensive land use, most notably agriculture and forestry; (2) that rural areas contain small settlements that have a relationship with the landscape and that the inhabitants of these settlements think of them as rural; and (3) that rural areas promote a way of life that employs a cohesive identity based on a relationship with the landscape. The functional approach implicitly applies Ferdinand Tonnies’s theory of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) to rurality and urbanity, respectively, as two dichotomous types which define one another. However, using the functional approach has become less valuable for researchers since

the mid-twentieth century because increasing interactions between rurality and urbanity have blurred the functional distinctions between them.<sup>2</sup>

The second major approach to framing rurality uses political-economic concepts to determine the status of rurality within broader interactions between rural space and an aspatial international political economy. This approach assumes that since much of what goes on in rural society is caused by factors that are beyond the boundaries of rural areas, rurality should be studied in particular sectors. For instance, the food sector impacts both rural and nonrural areas, but the production and consumption of agricultural products is guided by more than just those who work in agriculture. Many researchers using the political-economic approach have questioned the relevance of rural studies in an increasingly globalized society that purportedly not only privileges urbanity but also assumes that urban culture has long since assimilated or erased rural culture. For example, Keith Hoggart has suggested that studying the characteristics of individual localities renders the term “rural” meaningless, so he invites other researchers to “do away with rural” (245).

The third major approach to framing rurality uses social constructivist thought. This approach asserts that the importance of rurality lies primarily in the social, cultural, and moral values that have become associated with rural life. In this approach, the practices of people who live in rural areas are influenced by ideas about rurality that come from a shared consensus among both rural and urban dwellers. In other words, the social-constructivist approach assumes that rural dwellers are living in a kind of self-

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, for instance, the trope of the urban cowboy, or the rise of “hick-hop,” a musical genre that fuses country music with hip hop-style rapping.

fulfilling prophecy. One drawback in using the social constructivist model is that many researchers have tended to view rural life from the perspective of white, middle-class males and have ignored many of the material conditions experienced by other rural dwellers. Each of these three theoretical models came about as a result of sweeping changes in critical thought throughout the twentieth century, and while each model has been fruitful for discussing rurality, various limitations inherent in each model have necessitated the formulation of new methods of thinking about the concept of the rural.

More recently, rural geographers have proposed more multifaceted approaches to understanding rurality.<sup>3</sup> Michael Woods states, “the proliferation of diverse representations of rural space means that the sign of the ‘rural’ is becoming increasingly detached from the referent of rural geographical space. In other words, the way in which the countryside is imagined in popular discourses may have little correspondence with the actual ‘realities of rural space and real life’” (9). Literature’s ability to create imagined representational spaces is what allows Bill Cheng, a Chinese American living in New York, to write such a convincing account of the rural Mississippi Delta in *Southern Cross the Dog*. Cheng fictionalizes real issues of racial discrimination in the rural South, which adds insights that could not be gathered from purely historical accounts. In response to the discrepancy between imagined and existing rurality, Keith Halfacree offers a promising new theoretical development in rural studies, the three-fold model of rural

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Yaeger’s “themed space” is one such approach. Yaeger defines themed space as “space that is precolonized and prefabricated around an idea or point of view [suggesting a] subject of representation that is blatant, repetitious, and blandly revelatory” (18). Geographers using the concept of “themed space” analyze ways in which places are always already intertwined with narratives about them.

space. Halfacree's concept adapts Henri Lefebvre's model of space<sup>4</sup> and includes elements of the functional, political-economic, and social constructivist methods outlined above. Halfacree's understanding of space negotiates this discrepancy between discourse about the rural and actual lived experience by locating rurality within dialectical relationships among three facets:

- *Rural localities* inscribed through relatively distinctive spatial practices, linked to production and/or consumption activities;
- *Formal representations of the rural* such as those expressed by capitalist interests, cultural arbiters, planners or politicians;
- *Everyday lives of the rural*, which are inevitably subjective and diverse, and with varying levels of coherence/fracture. They both take in and, to a greater or lesser extent, subvert the other categories.

(“Rural Space” 127)

Halfacree also acknowledges that the ruralness of any given place (regardless of scale) is informed by the coexistence of multiple rural and nonrural spatialities that compete for dominance. Halfacree's article “Trial by Space for a ‘Radical Rural’” proposes that a dominant, radical rural spatiality concretized in the everyday lives of the rural could challenge the urban hegemony of global culture today.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation aims at a similar

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<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre's model focuses on social space, which is produced within the triad of representations of space (conceived space), spatial practice (perceived space), and representational space (lived space). See Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* vol. 1 (1991 [1947]).

<sup>5</sup> Halfacree identifies four possibilities for envisioning rurality following the agricultural productivism of the twentieth century: super-productivism, consuming idylls, effaced rurality, and radical visions. The term “radical rural” refers to “a (potential) rural space that challenges fundamentally the spatial logic ultimately underpinning the other species of post-productivism that are clearly emerging” (“Rural Space” 138). Halfacree notes several subspecies of right-wing radical rurality before focusing on the form that emphasizes direct-action politics and ecological citizenship that foregrounds the search for sustainability.

proposal; however, instead of emphasizing the everyday lives of the rural, it emphasizes representations of the rural.

Using Halfacree's model for analyzing rurality in twenty-first-century southern novels establishes a new way of understanding the interconnectedness of differing views of rurality and allows for both large- and small-scale investigations into the use of rurality in literature. In other words, rurality can be examined both across and within texts: the theme of rural poverty spans each of the novels examined in this dissertation, but the way the individual characters navigate their poverty is very different—contrast Robert Chatham's retreat to the country at the end of *Southern Cross the Dog* with the Bigtrees' migration to the city at the end of *Swamplandia!*. It is important to note that although Halfacree's three-fold model employs components of discourse and representation, it is primarily concerned with actual existing rurality. This dissertation argues that to apply this model to works of literature is to produce a metatheory, using the entire model to examine just one of the elements contained within it. Insofar as literature reflects society, performing such an analysis on twenty-first-century southern literature would complement Halfacree's project of reaffirming rurality's role in the contemporary global landscape. As a real-world "trial by space" is played out artistically in literature's imaginary space(s), it in turn shapes the deployment of rurality in the everyday lives of people today.

The specific components of rurality explored in this dissertation belong to the three categories implied in Halfacree's model: social, political-economic, and cultural. Treating the entirety of rural representation in southern literature is beyond the scope of this project; however, in this dissertation I examine some of the ways that rurality is

commonly displayed in four representative texts of twenty-first century southern literature. These instances of rurality appear as common patterns in *The Known World*, *Southern Cross the Dog*, *Swamplandia!*, and *The Celestial Jukebox*, and they can become noticeable signposts for other works as well. Specifically, along the social axis, I will discuss and problematize the rural sense of community as it appears in the collective consciousness and is produced by the culture industry, the privacy entailed in having a small population size spread out over large geographic areas, the importance of individual rural identities for navigating complex relationships among urbanites and other rural dwellers, and the resilience of rural populations in the wake of ecological disaster. Along the political-economic axis, I will discuss the way rural dwellers cling to conservatism as a political stance and as a general worldview, how the performance of rurality is often motivated by and constructed in response to a perceived or real urban hostility towards rurality, the ever-changing role of agriculture and natural resource extraction in rural areas, and the persistence of poverty in rural areas due to the uneven distribution of capital under a global capitalist system. Along the cultural axis, I will examine and complicate the tenacity of belief in religion, the supernatural, and superstition among rural dwellers. I will also discuss how folk art and music are widely considered to be more authentic than their commercial counterparts, how this perceived authenticity is infused into individual songs and artworks, and how folk art and music can be used to overcome both material and existential alienation, the by-products of living in an urban-attuned world. As rural studies is a discipline that includes (and that was developed from) regional geography, I will also pay close attention to descriptions of the landscape.

Much of the critical discussion of rurality in southern literature links the genre to traditional modes of literature, specifically the pastoral and the anti-pastoral. Some critics note that the pastoral cannot be completely defined; however, some conventions of pastoral literature can be traced from ancient to modern times.<sup>6</sup> The pastoral has roots in ancient Greek and Roman poetry, beginning with the Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*. Classical visions of the pastoral include plentiful rural landscapes that surpass the needs of the shepherds and other rural dwellers. For example, Theocritus's seventh Idyll, "Harvest Home," describes a scene in which the speaker enjoys the bounty of the harvest season: "We lay stretched out in plenty, pears at our feet, / Apples at our sides and plumtrees reaching down, / Branches pulled earthward by the weight of fruit" (86). This view of the pastoral brings forth images of rural simplicity and plenitude, a view that Leo Marx describes as "sentimental" in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964). As an alternative to the sentimental pastoral, Marx also discusses the "complex pastoral," which describes works that incorporate elements of urbanity in order to critique them. Lawrence Buell's definition of the American version of the pastoral tends towards Marx's complex pastoral: "'Pastoral' . . . celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city. This domain includes for present purposes all degrees of rusticity from farm to wilderness" (23). Another classical mode that has historically worked against the pastoral mode is the anti-pastoral, in which rural scenes are not presented as idealized, romanticized Arcadias, but instead are depicted as more realistic representations of existing rural conditions. In "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies," Terry Gifford summarizes the

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Paul Alpers's *What Is Pastoral?* (1996) and Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999).

features of the anti-pastoral, which include harsh, unattractive settings; an emphasis on “realism”; and a tendency to show tensions, disorder, or inequalities. Throughout its history, southern literature has used both the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes to craft representations of the South.

The southern pastoral tradition has its basis in antebellum southern literature, in which writers employed the pastoral mode to create an idealized version of the South. Often in these works, the southern plantation functions as a rural Arcadia in space and a nostalgic golden age in time. Many critics have dismissed the works of pre-Civil War writers John Pendleton Kennedy, William Gilmore Simms, and John Elston Cooke as sentimental pastoral fiction; however, as Jan Bakker argues in *Pastoral in Antebellum Southern Romance* (1989), these writers’ complex pastoral vision of a bucolic Arcadian South stands in opposition to the industrialized North and critiques various binaries, such as urban/rural, sophistication/naivete, and technology/nature. Yet the reality of slavery in antebellum society paradoxically undermined the image of the pristine garden of southern pastoral literature. For African Americans, the rural South has been experienced as violent and oppressive. Fugitive slave authors’ and former slaves’ varied experiences of rurality across the large catalogue of slave narratives complicate the traditional view of the pastoral, but works such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) adopted and reshaped the pastoral mode to show how they were excluded from it. Postbellum writers such as Sidney Lanier, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris used the sentimental pastoral mode to escape into depictions of the “Old South” as a haven for peace and security in the wake of the upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In

*The Dream of Arcady* (1980), Lucinda MacKethan discusses how postbellum southern writers' portrayals of the South nostalgically look back to the past in order to reaffirm difference and racial hierarchy. For example, MacKethan states, "Page's fiction was designed to dramatize his racial views, and his stories became in fact his most effective tool for displaying what he felt was the true case concerning the relationship between whites and blacks which had once existed and could exist again in the South" (54). Some African American authors, such as W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), pushed back against the racial views of white postbellum southern writers: for African Americans, the beauty of the rural South offers no solace for the hardships they face. However, by 1911, Du Bois's *Quest for the Silver Fleece* showed how African American characters can reclaim the pastoral landscape after attaining education and purchasing land. In the years after the Civil War, the pervasive sense among southerners that their way of life was ending and that another was just beginning provided a strong motivation for writing in the pastoral mode.

In the 1930s and 40s, the South was once again transitioning, this time from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrialized society. Many writers in the Southern Renaissance eschewed previous pastoral depictions of the Old South, partially because their modernist works are usually more concerned with questioning and deconstructing the grand narratives of the past. Instead, southern modernist writers often wrote in the anti-pastoral mode, using unflattering yet realistic descriptions of the natural world to critique their present society. In *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (2009), Christopher Rieger highlights ways that the Great Depression, more than representing an economic crisis in the South, also represented a

devastating ecological crisis. During the early twentieth century, the South experienced “a boll weevil infestation, a tularemia outbreak among rabbits, a yellow fever epidemic, a great flood, widespread droughts, drastic erosion, and the clear-cutting of millions of trees” (9). Rieger argues that writers of the Southern Renaissance, specifically Erskine Caldwell, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner, wrote “ecopastorals” that reworked the pastoral tradition and placed wild nature at the center of their works. Like the postbellum sentimental pastorals of Lanier, Page, and Harris, these ecopastorals were written in response to a time of great transformation in the South, and they used rural characters and settings to critique its effects.

Another major transition in southern society is reflected in postsouthern literature. Postsouthern is the term that has been widely used to describe new literature written in and about the South in the wake of an agrarian-based southern culture and the Southern Renaissance. This term was coined by Lewis P. Simpson in his 1980 essay “The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America.” For Simpson, this “closure of history” did not just denote the end of a particular southern time period; it also suggested that the distinctly southern regional identity had been incorporated into homogenized national one. Thus, in *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), Martyn Bone clearly defines his use of “place” when discussing postsouthern fiction: “I want to recover the Agrarians’ specific, economic vision of ‘place’ with agricultural real property” (5). Instead of critiquing the foundation of the southern agrarian myth in *I’ll Take My Stand*, Bone focuses on the development of the Nashville Agrarians’ ideals into a more concrete conception of the family farm as the quintessential southern place, as noted in Herbert Agar and Allen Tate’s 1936 follow-up to *I’ll Take My Stand*, *Who Owns America?: A*

*New Declaration of Independence*. Bone unites the changing southern “sense of place” with the decline of agricultural real property, which allows him to write about actual existing material conditions as he traces the development of postsouthern literature from Walker Percy to Richard Ford, Tom Wolfe, and Toni Cade Bambara. Specifically, the focus of postsouthern literature is shifted away from rurality and its pastoral associations with the past: Frank Bascombe, Richard Ford’s protagonist and narrator in *The Sportswriter* (1986), states that “all we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with our life” (24). This sentiment is reflected in the ways that postsouthern literature is often set in urban areas and shows little concern for southern literary traditions.

While some southern literature does follow a linear trajectory directly from southern modernism to postsouthernism, postsouthern texts were published alongside other notable works of southern literature that still used rural settings and traditional southern literary techniques.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) are two novels published in the latter half of the twentieth century that are set in rural areas and include rural characters. The notion of “postsouthern” has also recently come under scrutiny for its durability: in his entry in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 9: Literature* (2007), George Hovis asks, “What comes *after* ‘postsouthern’ literature? And how long can this particular theoretical perspective continue to describe an ever-changing response to a

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<sup>7</sup> In later publications, Martyn Bone recognizes the limitations inherent in postsouthernism. For example, in his entry on “Postsouthern” in *Keywords for Southern Studies* (2016), Bone mentions the need for “a timely check on postsouthernism’s tendency to look away from the rural South to urban centers such as Atlanta and Austin” (347).

culture in flux?” (131). Regardless of the status of postsouthernism in contemporary literary scholarship, the cultural trends it describes have made a profound impact on mid- to late twentieth-century southern literature.

In the midst of twenty-first century globalization, the South has once again been thrown into a period of transition, which creates the conditions for a return to rurality in literature in a number of ways. In “Rural Geography I: Changing Expectations and Contradictions in the Rural,” John McDonagh notes that “the pervasive nature of globalization, with its consequent fluidity in the movement of people, goods, services and knowledge systems, characterizes much of the backdrop to current rural research” (713). Rapid technological progress, increased in- and out-migration in the region, and increased stratification due to economic inequality have created social, economic, and environmental conditions similar to those of the postbellum period and the Great Depression. These conditions give rise to the rural novels of Jones, Cheng, Russell, and Shearer, as well as a number of other writers.<sup>8</sup> In “Romanticizing the Rough South: Contemporary Cultural Nakedness and the Rise of Grit Lit,” Zackary Vernon posits the effect of these conditions on literary consumption: “The burgeoning success of Grit Lit is a direct result of a regional and national obsession with authenticity. In the midst of global homogenization, readers are increasingly drawn to narratives about enclaves that have or appear to have retained certain hallmarks of cultural distinctiveness” (77).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry’s collection *Rough South, Rural South: Region and Class in Recent Southern Literature* (2016) examines the work of eighteen writers who are producing southern literature in the twenty-first century, most of it rural.

<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon is also characteristic of the late nineteenth century, when the genre of southern literature became perhaps the most popular form of regional literature in response to America’s imperialism and increasing urbanization.

Indeed, one of the common threads that connects the works examined in this dissertation is that each novel addresses the concept of authenticity in some way.

Many scholars have examined works of contemporary southern literature in which rurality is prominently displayed, but most of these discussions of rurality are routinely contained in discussions of class.<sup>10</sup> The subgenre of “Grit Lit” or “Rough South” writing often includes rural settings and characters, but this subgenre tends to include primarily white, male authors; female writers are not usually classified as “Rough South” authors. Rural settings and characters are also foregrounded in Jesmyn Ward’s National Book Award-winning novels *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and in Natalie Baszile’s novel *Queen Sugar* (2014); however, much of the criticism of these works focuses on race rather than rurality. Likewise, Donna Tartt’s *The Little Friend* (2002) and Wiley Cash’s *A Land More Kind than Home* (2012) also feature rural settings and characters, but little scholarship has been devoted to their use of rurality.

This study examines four contemporary southern novels that foreground elements of rurality, using rurality as the means by which they critique the prevailing neoliberal impulse of global culture today. Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*, Bill Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog*, Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*, and Cynthia Shearer’s *The Celestial Jukebox* are representative of the kinds of southern literature produced thus far in the twenty-first century. Each chapter in this dissertation will discuss ways that these novels possess continuities with earlier subgenres of southern fiction even as they transgress established norms in further developing the southern literary tradition. One of the most significant ways that some contemporary southern literature reflects and shapes

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Erik Bledsoe’s “The Rise of Southern Redneck and White Trash Writers.”

society, I argue, is through using rurality as a major component. Yet unlike Halfacree, who uses the notion of “radical rurality” as a hopeful utopian vision to combat late-stage capitalism, I pay equal attention to both the positive and negative characteristics of rurality in order to provide a balanced view of how rurality can potentially interact with a global society.

Chapter II examines Edward P. Jones’s postmodern vision of the antebellum South in *The Known World*. By juxtaposing elements of plantation fiction and abolitionist slave narratives, Jones writes about the institution of slavery from multiple perspectives, situating his novel within the larger conversation about the veracity of narrating the past. The narrator’s extensive knowledge of all of the minutiae surrounding the novel’s plot creates the sense that even when provided with an excess of details about the plot, the reader cannot attain a complete, objective understanding of the novel. Instead, *The Known World* implies that narrative truth becomes at least as important as objective truth. Jones’s narrator gives the reader access to the interior lives of all of the characters, whose subjective experiences are shaped by their connection to components of rurality, specifically privacy, conservatism, and limited perspective. In this novel, rural privacy creates opportunities for characters to engage in immoral actions, and on a larger scale, even offers a partial explanation for the continued existence of the institution of slavery. The novel demonstrates that the sense of privacy by which many rural people navigate their world is often undermined by the close-knit nature of the community. Stemming from the perceived sense of privacy enjoyed by rural characters in the novel are a conservative worldview, defined in this chapter as a desire to maintain the status quo without yielding to outside forces, and a limited perspective embraced by rural dwellers.

*The Known World* uses the institution of slavery to expose the rift between political and religious conservatism, and it demonstrates how even though a myopic view of the world can be harmful for individual characters, that view can also lead to intensely personal connections within the limited perspective of lived experience.

In Chapter III, I analyze the effects of ecological disaster and land development on rural populations in Bill Cheng's *Southern Cross the Dog*. Written by a Chinese American New Yorker who reportedly never visited the South prior to its publication, this novel dismantles the old idea that a text's regional authenticity rests at least partially in the biography of its author. This postmodern southern novel nevertheless fits in with the established southern literary tradition. Using pastiche to juxtapose the styles and idiosyncrasies of the southern blues tradition, southern modernism, and the Southern Gothic, this novel centers on the plight of black characters who drift around Mississippi following the Great Flood of 1927.<sup>11</sup> I focus on the effects that ecological disaster has on those who live lives of persistent poverty and I finally examine the haunted-ness of rural locations in the novel by discussing elements in the novel that point to a belief in determinism among rural dwellers through a discussion of the way hoodoo magic is at work in the novel. *Southern Cross the Dog* thus exposes many of the pitfalls of rural life.

Chapter IV centers on rural identities as sites of resistance to urbanity in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*. Ava Bigtree's narration of the history of the swamp's ecology

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<sup>11</sup> As the novel is a work of postmodern fiction, one of *Southern Cross the Dog*'s most noteworthy characteristics is its use of pastiche. Fredric Jameson explains in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that pastiche is a technique increasingly used in many postmodern texts: "[pastiche is] the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" that is essentially different from parody in that it lacks any of parody's "ulterior motives" (17). Pastiche imitates, but unlike parody, it does so respectfully. Pastiche also allows the writer to experiment with juxtaposing and combining elements of many different styles to create something new ("Pastiche").

mirrors the development of agricultural land use in the Florida swamp. Russell uses the ecological threat of the invasive melaleuca species encroaching on the natural landscape as a metaphor for the sociological threat of urbanity colonizing the rural population. Just as the melaleuca tree's rapid growth and reproduction threatens to turn the diverse swamp into a monoculture, the aspatial urban impulse to colonize all space threatens to transform, assimilate, or destroy any identities that do not conform to its standards. As *Swamplandia!* traces the decline of the Bigtree family after the untimely death of the family's matriarch, each character struggles to maintain his or her rural identity as it becomes increasingly clear that they will have to eventually join mainstream culture. Ironically, the novel's poor white, swamp-dwelling protagonists choose to appropriate Native American culture, the American proto-rural identity. The Bigtree family "plays Indian" as an important component of the experience sold at their alligator-themed amusement park. Like much southern literature, Russell downplays the longstanding indigenous presence of actual Native Americans in the region; however, the novel's final chapters contrast the real Native Americans' economic interest in casinos with the Bigtrees' sad cultural appropriation at Swamplandia!. Even though the Bigtree children must assimilate, because of their rural experiences, they can enter into their new lives with a kind of hope not always afforded to urbanites.

In Chapter V, I examine the consequences of agriculture's transformation into agribusiness in Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*. With its ethnically diverse ensemble of immigrant and indigenous characters, most criticism of the novel has focused on the way it globalizes the South. Acknowledging the role globalization plays in contemporary agricultural practices, I use Marxist theory to analyze the material

alienation from the products of their labor that the farmers Dean Fondren and Aubrey Ellerbee, as well as the Honduran migrant workers, experience. Their material alienation is related to existential alienation as a result of their inability to find any purpose or meaning in their work. Even though both rural and urban characters experience existential crises, the urban character Raine Semmes transcends existential alienation through Martin Buber's "I-Thou" theory of intersubjectivity. Shearer's novel reveals how rural spaces are more apt to be sites for authentic "I-Thou" relationships than urban spaces. Specifically, through rural community members' mutual cooperation in creating and appreciating art and music, they are engaging in a perpetual relation to an "eternal *Thou*" at the center of the community. Also, I discuss how *The Celestial Jukebox* points to folk art as a way to escape existential alienation. After distinguishing between mass-produced and "authentic" art and music, I analyze the various ways that folk art and music are shown in the novel to be deeply connected to rural existence and to the everyday lives of the rural dwellers who help to produce it.

As these four contemporary southern novels attest, understanding regional identity in the context of rurality is a means of critiquing the neoliberal impulse toward conformity in today's global society. Rurality has always been an essential component of any understanding of "the South," but its use in current literature, despite the supposed decline of rurality in recent decades, attests to its continued significance. In contemporary southern literature, rurality operates not only as a literary device, but also as a framework for conceptualizing realities experienced by southerners today. Rurality is more than just a way of living; it is also a way of thinking and imagining that offers an escape from the bleak spiritual existence presented by contemporary society.

CHAPTER II – NARRATING THE RURAL EXPERIENCE OF SLAVERY IN  
EDWARD P. JONES’S *THE KNOWN WORLD*

In *The Known World* (2003), Edward P. Jones explores how rural privacy and conservatism transcend both race and class as explanatory factors for the continued employment of slave labor in the antebellum South. The novel centers on the aftermath of the death of Henry Townsend, “a black man of thirty-one years with thirty-three slaves and more than fifty acres of land that sat him high above many others, white and black and Indian” (Jones 5). Part of the intrigue of this novel is Henry’s very existence as a slave owner: popular notions about the relationship between race and slavery are questioned in each successive chapter. At the novel’s opening, Moses, Henry’s overseer, struggles to come to terms with black slave-ownership only weeks after Henry purchases him. Moses thinks, “God had indeed set [the world] twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind” (9). Although the plantation Henry owns seems relatively stable and profitable before his death, after he dies, both the plantation and the surrounding county fall into disarray. Augustus Townsend, Henry’s father and a free black man, is sold back into slavery by lower-class white patrollers; Moses, hoping to marry Henry’s widow, encourages three of Henry’s slaves, including Moses’s own wife and child, to escape to freedom in the North; and Sheriff John Skiffington is murdered by his cousin, the deputy Counsel Skiffington, over one hundred dollars’ worth of gold coins. The very rapid decline of the plantation underscores the psychological and social impacts of the institution of slavery, especially when former slaves participate in the same system that subjugated them for so long. *The Known World* shows the transgression of the line between race and class in other ways as well: William

Robbins loves his black mistress, a former slave, more than he loves his own wife; Sheriff Skiffington is opposed to slavery, but he and his wife own Minerva, a young girl that was gifted to them as a wedding present; and Maude Newman, Caldonia's mother, constantly refers to Caldonia's slaves as her "legacy" and relentlessly encourages her to abandon thoughts of freeing them.

Although the novel is a work of fiction, Jones is working within the bounds of historical accuracy. There are many historical records of black slave owners in the southern states prior to the Civil War. Larry Koger's *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (1985) compiles information from U.S. censuses and other government documents to deliver numerous accounts of black slave ownership, and Michael P. Johnson's *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (1984) follows the life of William Ellison, a black cotton-gin manufacturer who owned a large plantation and many slaves in South Carolina. Despite these and other historical records, knowledge of black slave ownership has still not reached a mainstream audience. Some black slave owners, like their white counterparts, owned slaves as a source of agricultural labor, but others purchased family members in order to free them or else keep them from having to leave their homes and families. *The Known World* cites the 1806 act of the Virginia House of Delegates that "required that former slaves leave the Commonwealth within twelve months of getting their freedom. . . . [A]ny freed person who had not left Virginia after one year could be brought back into slavery" (Jones 15). This act made owning family members necessary for many freed slaves who were permitted to remain in Virginia, and it is what forces Augustus to maintain ownership of Henry in the narrative, albeit in name only. While *The Known World* highlights black

slave ownership and other often-overlooked conditions of slavery, it also critiques the usefulness of viewing the institution merely as an economic entity or a racial caste system. On the surface, Jones shows that when the slave owners are themselves former slaves, the cultural power that the institution wields in the antebellum rural South is nearly absolute; however, the breakdown of the Townsend plantation in the wake of Henry Townsend's death exposes the tenuous foundation of the entire plantation South.

The three closely-related aspects of rurality (in general) and the plantation South (in particular) examined in this chapter are privacy, conservatism, and limited perspective. Historically, these aspects of the rural South worked in conjunction to help create and maintain the institution of slavery in the United States well into the nineteenth century. Leigh Anne Duck takes up this phenomenon in *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (2006), applying it to legal segregation in the twentieth century: "when national discourse has acknowledged the conflict between southern conservatism and national democracy, it has typically done so in ways that localize this conflict—a 'backward South' and a modern or 'enlightened nation'" (3). Like the problem of segregation, the problem of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was considered in the national discourse to be a southern issue. Duck's discussion of the hierarchy between nation and region shares many similarities with this dissertation's discussion of the hierarchy between urban and rural: in each case, the dominant discourse marginalizes the abject "Other" while simultaneously creating the conditions necessary for the "Other" to exist as a category. The narrator in *The Known World* stands outside and in contrast to these elements of the rural South, and thus allows them to be examined individually.

Scholarship on *The Known World* focuses on insight provided by Jones's treatment of the institution of slavery, specifically in terms of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic; race, gender, and power; and the "thingness" of a slave.<sup>12</sup> The separation of race and class inherent in a novel that centers on black slave masters does merit critical attention; however, critics have not yet examined the significance of rurality in Jones's treatment of the institution of slavery. This omission is likely due to an implicit assumption about plantations: according to Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells, by the early 1900s, "plantations had been subsumed under representations of the rural, with pastoral depictions of US southern plantations in particular having achieved international currency" (3). Yet even though Jones's novel uses a southern plantation for a setting, Henry Townsend's plantation does not have the same referent as, say, Kennedy's Swallow Barn, from the plantation novel of the same title. Both of these fictional plantations are constructed based on *ideas* of antebellum southern plantations (which are necessarily mediated through popular consciousness), but unlike Jones's novel, works in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century plantation tradition look back nostalgically at an idealized agrarian world in which white slave owners were the heads of "families" that included both white and African American members. The traditional plantation novel's sense of place is derived from depictions of ideal rustic southern identities and agriculture. *The Known World's* focus is not on normative behavior or farming; instead, the rural sense of place in this novel is derived more abstractly from tensions between

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<sup>12</sup> See Richard King's "Reviews," Katherine Clay Bassard's "Imagining Other Worlds: Race, Gender, and the 'Power Line' in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*," and Sarah Mahurin Mutter's "'Such a Poor Word for a Wondrous Thing': Thingness and the Recovery of the Human in *The Known World*," respectively.

privacy and openness, conservatism and social justice, and limited and unlimited perspectives.

*The Known World* negotiates the conventions of two well-known categories of southern literature: the plantation novel and the slave narrative. As a plantation novel, *The Known World* contends with the plantation myth's effects on popular consciousness provided by ante- and postbellum plantation literature. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) has come to represent the plantation myth, yet this novel is in turn influenced by older, more flattering depictions of slavery and the antebellum South. Scott Romine and Tara McPherson have noted that both the novel and the film versions of *Gone with the Wind* invented an image of the plantation South that many people not only believe in, but also fetishize, as shown by the still-thriving *Gone with the Wind* memorabilia industry.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the publication of *Gone with the Wind*, antebellum plantation fiction was, according to Lucinda MacKethan, "ideologically motivated to render a vision of southern society as a slavocracy in all its relations" ("Genres" 18). Traditional plantation fiction's vision of southern society emphasized a rustic identity, giving a normative blueprint for southerners to follow. This literature tended to fall along distinct gender lines. Men's plantation novels, such as William Alexander Caruthers's *Cavaliers of Virginia; or, The Recluse of Jamestown* (1835) and William Gilmore Simms's *The Cassique of Kiawah* (1859), were often labeled historical romances, focusing on the exploits of cavalier gentlemen. The plantation settings emphasized that the nobility of character the heroic male characters exemplified were reflections of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Romine's *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (2008) and McPherson's *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (2003).

nobility of the plantation owner's class. Women's plantation novels, such as Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) and Caroline Howard Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1836), have been called domestic or sentimental fiction, focusing on teaching young women the manners needed to transform a southern belle into "the angel in the house." The importance of agriculture is another trait relevant to rurality. For example, John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* opens with a description of the rural landscape that features "a succession of fields clothed with Indian corn, some small patches of cotton or tobacco plants, with the usual varieties of stubble and fallow grounds" (29), and includes a chapter entitled "The Old Mill" that describes the trouble Edward Hazard goes through trying to set up a mill for all of the nearby people to grind their corn. William Alexander Caruthers's *The Kentuckian in New York* (1834) includes a description of the slaves at work on the acres of farmland surrounding the plantation home. Unlike these texts, however, *The Known World* does not emphasize traditional plantation fiction's most common rural elements; normative rustic identity and sustained references to agriculture are conspicuously absent from the text.

*The Known World* participates in the genre of plantation fiction not only via its setting, but also by exploring the various aspects of the daily lives of those who reside on and around the plantation. Like antebellum historical romances, the novel includes the stories of the exploits of brave men, such as when Sheriff Skiffington rides for hours to try to find evidence of Augustus Townsend's kidnapping. Skiffington's tireless search for Augustus resembles the feats of antebellum plantation fiction's cavalier heroes, such as the band of secessionists in Nathaniel Beverley Tucker's *The Partisan Leader* (1836). Also, like antebellum domestic fiction, Jones's novel includes descriptions of children

being trained in the values and mores of the aristocracy, such as when Fern Elston, Henry and Caldonia's teacher, mentions teaching fundamental lessons on manners to her students. Fern's pedagogy also includes instructing her pupils on the proper treatment of slaves, following Caroline Howard Gilman's pattern set forth in *Recollections of a Southern Matron*: "The moral education of Southern youth should be directed to their peculiar duties; indeed, there are passages in the teachings of the New Testament which apply peculiarly to our institutions, and which, though almost negative elsewhere, are exquisitely beautiful in the classification of relative duties here" (203). Conventional plantation fiction includes a vision of southern society that has only limited consideration for the lives of slaves, even though slave labor provided the economic foundation for the way of life the plantation novels exemplified. Unlike traditional plantation fiction, *The Known World* focuses both on the lives of those in power and on those who wield no power: the slaves themselves. In its consideration of the everyday activities of and the atrocities performed on slaves, the novel connects with the slave narrative genre.

Typical nineteenth-century slave narratives served the abolitionist cause by exhibiting firsthand accounts of the hardships endured by slaves in the South. In these works, southern-born first-person narrators follow a prescribed pattern, attempting to provide accurate reproductions of the experiences they endured under the slave system. In *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (1986), William L. Andrews notes that the slave narrative was distinguished by two rhetorical aims: "(1) that the slave was . . . 'a man and a brother' to whites, especially to the white reader of slave narratives; and (2) that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and

character of black folk” (1). In order to achieve these aims, slave narratives used a number of common tropes and techniques.<sup>14</sup> First, traditional slave narratives usually begin with the narrator’s realization of enslavement, as when Frederick Douglass acquires literacy and understands his place in the scheme of things in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.<sup>15</sup> Also, slave narratives usually start on a minor note, as when Harriet Jacobs begins her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) with a sorrowful depiction of her mother’s death and her being bequeathed to her mistress’s five-year-old niece. Another familiar trope in traditional slave narratives is that, in support of abolitionist movements, the narrators discuss the corrupting effects of slavery on both slave and master, as with the cruel masters Tibaut and Epps in Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. Next, in support of the abolitionist cause, traditional slave narratives worked against rural conservatism both by depicting the evils inherent in choosing the status quo under such a violent system and by casting a backward glance on the overall narrative in order to solicit the reader’s sympathy and support. Many slave narratives, including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, included a concluding section in which the author reflects on the preceding narrative. Finally, many slave narratives offered corroborating documents in the form of prefaces and appendices written by supposedly trustworthy white men and women. For instance, Charles Stearns signs off as the editor and compiler of the narrative

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<sup>14</sup> In the twentieth century, many authors such as Octavia Butler, Charles Johnson, and Ishmael Reed self-consciously adapted the slave narrative genre to create neo-slave narratives. *The Known World* contends with the following aspects of slave narratives, and even though it lacks a distinct first-person narrator on a quest for physical and spiritual freedom, it can be considered a neo-slave narrative.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews states that the acquisition of literacy is treated in many slave narratives as a matter equal in importance to the achievement of physical freedom (13).

of Henry Box Brown, which ends with an appended “REPRESENTATION OF THE BOX” in which Box Brown was transported from Richmond to Philadelphia (92). In addition to adhering to these conventions for the purpose of helping the abolitionist cause, these traditional features of the slave narrative genre serve as markers that writers of neo-slave narratives have used in crafting their texts.

In creating his own version of a neo-slave narrative, Edward P. Jones uses many of these markers expected in traditional slave narratives as well. For instance, the novel opens on Moses contemplating that he is the black slave of a black master. The novel begins with the somber words “The evening his master died” and goes on to describe the hunger and hard work Moses endures during a typical day on the plantation. After Henry dies very early in Jones’s novel, the slaves on his plantation immediately begin to suffer even more. When news of Henry’s death reaches the slaves, they gather at the plantation house, hoping to be freed by their new master, Henry’s widow. But even though Caldonia previously had no strong feelings about slavery, she becomes corrupted through her exposure to the institution and refuses to free her slaves, stating that “We will be together in all of this. God stands with us” (64). Of course, in creating a neo-slave narrative, Jones is not required to follow any pre-set pattern; thus, the backward-looking glance in the novel’s epilogue comes not from a former slave (as it would in a traditional slave narrative) but from Calvin, a freeborn black man. In a letter to his sister, Caldonia, Calvin describes Alice Night’s tapestries depicting Manchester County and Henry’s plantation. These two tapestries do serve as a summarizing overview of the novel, but the descriptions of the tapestries are secondhand, coming from an observer and not the runaway slave who created the tapestries. In this instance, Calvin’s letter and his

description of the tapestries serve as corroborating evidence, but Calvin's race undercuts the corroborating authority usually held only by white men in antebellum slave narratives. Although Jones's novel contains conventions of two well-known southern literary genres, through the novel's omniscient narrator, Jones invokes something new in the field of southern literature.

By manipulating conventions of the plantation novel and the slave narrative, Jones attempts to provide the reader with an unprecedented psychological and social overview of the institution of slavery. These contrasting viewpoints depict how privacy, conservatism, and limited perspectives have been historically understood to be especially prevalent in rural spaces. Writing about the slaveholding South from multiple perspectives, Jones also situates his novel within the larger conversation about the veracity of narrating the past.<sup>16</sup> The task of the historical novel in the twenty-first century, then, is to re-present the established narrative in ways that have previously been neglected, not in order to erase the dominant narrative, but rather to supplement it with alternative viewpoints. *The Known World* subtly provides that alternative to the established historical record through its narrator, its fictitious sources, and its supernatural elements. Through its use of a conspicuously omniscient narrator and an innovative narrative strategy, *The Known World* presents the story of slavery from within

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<sup>16</sup> Even though *The Known World* contains characteristics of each of the above genres of southern literature, the novel was ultimately marketed as historical fiction, a category that is not particularly descriptive or useful. In "Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South," Susan V. Donaldson states that *The Known World* is not just a historical novel; rather, it is a "postmodern novel written for a postmodern South and a postmodern age—with all the connotations of a loss of mastery that the term 'postmodern' carries" (268). Influencing the reader by obscuring or overemphasizing aspects of the historical record is nothing new. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon describes how some historical fiction "brings attention to and questions its own operations of representing history" (114).

a framework of human intersubjectivity. This novel reveals the various psychological and social implications of the rurality of its southern setting as major components of the slave experience.

Perhaps the most interesting way that Jones plays with “truth” in the novel is through his innovative use of an omniscient narrator to provide many superfluous details that are only tangential to the main narrative. In the novel’s first chapter, the reader is presented with a very large number of characters from all walks of life: Moses, Alice, and Elias are shown going about their daily routines as slaves, while the free blacks Caldonia, Fern, Augustus, and Mildred await Henry’s death in the plantation house. The first chapter also introduces William Robbins, the richest white plantation owner in the county, his mulatto mistress Philomena, and their two children, Dora and Louis. The second chapter introduces the major characters John Skiffington and three slave patrollers into the already crowded cast. The narrator interweaves each narrative strand seamlessly, treating each major and minor story with the same careful attention to detail. Often, though, the narrator’s very omniscience intrudes into the narrative, which creates the sense that the narrator’s extensive knowledge of the overarching plot is more important than the main action being narrated. For example, while Henry is still on his deathbed surrounded by his wife and former teacher, the narrator states, “Loretta, Caldonia’s maid, would be there as well when Henry died, but she would be silent. She merely closed her master’s eyes after a time and covered his face with a quilt, a Christmas present from three slave women who had made it in fourteen days” (7). In this short quotation, each successive phrase and clause provides the reader with an excess of information that disrupts the emotional impact of Henry’s death. That the quilt was a Christmas present

has no bearing on the narrative, nor does the fact that three slave women made it in fourteen days. This type of narrative intrusion, found throughout the novel, draws attention to itself without explicitly mentioning the narrator.

Although the narrator's authority stems from its omniscient standpoint, Jones's use of the narrator's omniscience can sometimes be disorienting because of the shifting tenses used throughout the novel. For a narrator that exists outside of time, all knowledge would be simultaneously "present," but relaying that information to an audience, locked within the bounds of time and communicating in a language that is founded on the notions of past, present, and future, would be challenging. The first section of *The Known World's* opening chapter (the novel's "present") is written in the past tense on the day of Henry's death, seven days after first becoming ill: "The evening his master died [Moses] worked again well after he ended the day for the other adults" (1). This section begins and remains in the evening of the seventh day of Henry's illness. The next section of the chapter, however, analeptically discloses Henry and Caldonia's conversation on "the fourth day on his way to death" (5). This section is also written in the past tense. In this section, the narrator delves even further into the past, giving an account of Caldonia and Henry's teacher, Fern Elston, and her twelve slaves; here the narrator uses the past perfect tense: "That woman, Fern Elston, had returned to her own plantation after visiting the Townsends three days ago" (6). The narrative then switches back to the present, citing that in 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there are eight slave-owning black families, and then the narrative slips *forward* in time, beyond the "present" of the novel, stating that in 1860 the number of slave-owning black families "would be down to five" (7). The auxiliary verb "would" signals that the future is included in the past tense. In this case,

the narrator is not making a prediction but rather is revealing what the narrator knows *will* occur soon after the events of the present narrative.

The narrator is not only able to provide exhaustive, sometimes seemingly irrelevant details about events surrounding the novel's main storyline; information about the very distant future is also included, and with the same level of detail. The novel's main storylines take place between 1855 and 1861, but the progression of the plot is constantly interrupted by proleptic and analeptic passages. The 2006 *Amistad Deluxe Edition* of the novel features an interview with the author in which Jones is queried about the reason he chose to use a nonlinear narrative structure. Jones responds, "It might be that because I, as the 'god' of the people in the book, could see their first days and their last days and all that was in between, and those people did not have linear lives as I saw all that they had lived. . . . I can't afford to forget if I'm trying to tell the truth" (4). Jones gives the example of Tessie's doll, stating that Tessie may not be able to remember the words she said when she received the doll as a child, but when she repeats those words on her deathbed ninety years later, it is of narrative importance. This detail implies that Tessie not only survives slavery, but she also has a family of her own and her children able to thrive after slavery as well. The narrator also includes details that none of the characters in the text could ever know. For instance, Moses makes the slaves work so many extra hours in the fields that Celeste, Elias's wife, has a miscarriage. In the next chapter, though, the narrator references a scholarly book to demonstrate that Elias and Celeste's hopes for having a large family are not deterred by her miscarriage: "In 1993 the University of Virginia Press would publish a 415-page book by a white woman, Marcia H. Shia, documenting that every ninety-seventh person in the Commonwealth of

Virginia was kin, by blood or by marriage, to the line that started with Celeste and Elias Freeman” (352). This type of intrusion again draws attention to the “godlike” omniscient narrator’s existence outside of time: including excessive information about the number of pages in the book and the race of its author in this minor detail exhibits the narrator’s exhaustive knowledge of information that would only be accessible after 1993.

Even though the narrator is positioned to have unlimited access to knowledge about the characters and events in the novel, the way that knowledge is delivered highlights how the whole story extends beyond the pages of the novel and is thus inaccessible to the reader. One way Jones accomplishes this is by regularly introducing and abandoning plotlines. For example, in Chapter Three, the narrator mentions the interesting fact that two young boys on Henry’s plantation, Grant and Boyd, share the same dreams for many nights. They find enjoyment in comparing their dreams, but every night they are terrified of falling asleep. After briefly mentioning this peculiar occurrence, Grant and Boyd’s dreams are never brought up again. More is needed for the reader to make sense of this piece of information, but the narrator does not return to it. Another way Jones shows that a complete knowledge of the story is unattainable is by “giving away” climactic events at certain points, which robs the main storyline of its emotional impact as the story progresses. For example, Moses’s punishment for running away to Mildred Townsend’s at the end of the novel is to be hobbled, having his Achilles tendon cut to reduce his mobility and to remind him never to run away again. Even though Moses’s hobbling is described in graphic detail in the novel’s final chapter, the narrator states much earlier in Chapter Six that Moses does not consider the implications of telling lies about his dead master “until that day Oden Peoples, the Cherokee patroller,

said to the men around him about Moses, ‘Heft him on up here. I’ll take him in. He ain’t gon bleed for long’” (209). More than just foreshadowing, the narrator gives actual speech from the scene in which Moses is hobbled. Giving away key points in the novel’s plot suggests that the importance of the action leading up to these climactic moments may be different than what the reader expects. Likewise, Jones’s novel demonstrates that anyone may have access to extensive information about slavery, but all of the information taken together still does not add up to a full understanding of the institution overall. The reader is given an excess of details about the plot, but the reader cannot access the whole story of *The Known World*.

At the same time Jones establishes his narrator’s authority over the text, he also complicates his narrator’s reliability by including invented facts and statistics alongside real ones. Many of the facts and statistics mentioned in the novel are indeed true. For example, when describing the 1806 Act that required freed slaves to leave the state of Virginia within one year, Jones uses language from the actual historical document. Jones also cites the 1830 U.S. census that showed over 10,000 slaves belonging to black owners nationwide to support the novel’s main premise. Yet although the narrator goes to great lengths to indicate that the statistics and facts used in the novel are verifiable, most of them are actually part of the fiction of the novel. According to one interview, Jones says that he did “hardly any research”—the scholarly book mentioned above that documents Elias and Celeste Freeman’s legacy, for example, does not exist; its author is named after Jones’s friend, a public school teacher in Washington, D.C.<sup>17</sup> *The Known World’s* narrator concludes that the 1840 census data is more factual than that of the erroneous

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<sup>17</sup> See Arthur Hirsch’s article “Where Fiction Meets Reality.”

1830 census: “all of the 1840 facts pointed to the one big fact that Manchester was then the largest county in Virginia, a place of 2,191 slaves, 142 free Negroes, 939 whites, and 136 Indians, most of them Cherokee but with a sprinkling of Choctaw” (22). The narrator’s level tone and the specificity with which these statistics are presented make them seem real; however, the narrator’s treatment of the fictional Manchester County undermines all of the facts presented in the novel, both real and invented. Jones’s invention and misrepresentation of historical documents, census data, and scholarly source material also contributes to the reader’s sense that the entire story behind the novel is inaccessible. The most reliable-sounding narrator is absolutely unreliable.

Jones’s omniscient narrator also loses credibility by engaging uncritically with another component of rurality: the supposed “haunted-ness” of rural spaces. Further complicating the narrator’s veracity is the inclusion of many strange, supernatural events in the novel, some related in great detail, others merely mentioned in passing. These passages are always written in the same cool, detached way that the narrator might provide census statistics or describe the landscape. For example, in Chapter Five, Harvey Travis, one of the slave patrollers, sells a dying cow to Clarence Wilford, a poor white who owned no slaves, under the pretense that the cow is “a good milker,” but “more milk fell from the sky than came from the cow” (155). After Clarence decides to cut his losses and slaughter the cow for meat, the cow miraculously begins producing copious amounts of milk. In addition to providing a humorous interlude between Henry Townsend’s funeral in the prior chapter and the rapid decline of his plantation in the following chapter, this episode shows John Skiffington’s wisdom in settling legal disputes and the slave patrollers’ treachery in business dealings, both essential to the plot as the novel

progresses. Another supernatural event described in the novel occurs when the slave Stamford goes out into a thunderstorm after recovering from a beating and drinks a concoction made from fermented potatoes. Stamford runs toward a tree where “lightning flowed down to the ground so that it was now a line of fire laid out across the grass, which did not burn” (204). Afterwards, he sees two dead crows fall from a tree, and he speaks to them before “the ground opened up and took the birds in” (205). When he returns to the slave quarters, Stamford imagines a flying cabin coming to rest before him. He sees that the cabin is inhabited by happy, blueberry-stained slave children before it rises and floats back the way it came. This supernatural experience is transformative, echoing the transformation of Saul to Paul in the New Testament. Afterwards, Stamford changes his name to Stamford Crow Blueberry and goes on to found the Richmond Home for Colored Orphans. Thus, *The Known World* paradoxically invites the reader to simultaneously trust and distrust its narrator. Yet Jones’s project is to move beyond whether and to what extent the reader trusts the master narrative created in this novel in order to illustrate that narrative truth is at least as important as objective truth.

Further critiquing the way that the rural southern institution of slavery has been recorded, Jones’s narrator also provides superfluous details about other overlooked material conditions of slavery. One question implied in the text is whether the slave system was even a necessity in the agricultural antebellum agricultural economy. The common justification for slavery, that large plantations required large workforces and cheap labor, is implicitly questioned when the narrator discusses the wages of the patrollers in relation to the price of slaves. The poor white (and one poor Cherokee) slave patrollers represent the most economically-disadvantaged free people in Manchester

County. According to the text, “The patrollers were paid \$8 a month, mostly from the tax on slaveowners, a levy of 5 cents a slave every other month” (155). This would add up to \$96 per year as a minimum annual wage. Although these slave patrollers supplemented their income by selling livestock or by maiming runaway slaves, they were able to keep large families and even buy alcohol. Compared to the price of a slave (William Robbins bought Moses at a large discount for \$525, down from \$800) and the overhead required to maintain a captive workforce, the novel implies that wage labor could have easily replaced slave labor in this fictional county without much loss of revenue. However, the omniscient narrator relates many other economic factors associated with the slavery besides agricultural labor. First, for plantation owners and small farm owners alike, participating in the slave trade could provide extra income. Owning the laborers created a commodity that could be traded as lucratively as plantation crops. Also, the institution of slavery led to an expansion in other associated enterprises. For instance, the narrator includes details about agricultural insurance, as shown by the Atlas employee attempting to sell Caldonia an insurance policy on her slaves, as well as criminal enterprises such as the black market slave trade, as shown by Darcy and Stennis kidnapping free blacks in Virginia and selling them back into slavery from North Carolina to Florida. Yet despite providing a description of the institution in all of its economic relations, Jones’s narrator suggests that it is slavery’s psychological and social foundations, rather than its economic ones, that are the most compelling to an understanding of slavery.

The various subjective perspectives intermixed within the novel reveal how the privacy, conservatism, and limited perspective inherent in *The Known World’s* rural setting affect the historical institution of slavery and the way slavery is narrated and

understood today. Jones's best use of his omniscient narrator, then, lies in providing the reader access to the interior lives of all the characters and displaying all of their interrelated subjective experiences. For instance, in the novel's main storyline, Henry struggles with and finally rejects his father's views on slavery in favor of those of his former master, William Robbins. His father, Augustus Townsend, believes that slavery is a great evil that corrupts master and slave alike. William Robbins, on the other hand, envisions a world in which slavery and racism exist, but there can still be a comfortable place for his mulatto children. The narrator is able to show these characters' emotional attachment to their own subject positions by providing insight into their thoughts: After Henry acquires Moses, his first slave, they tussle in front of Henry's new house, "like children in the dirt" (123), until William Robbins explains how he should act with his slaves; Augustus says to himself, "Of all the human beings on God's earth I never once thought the first slaveowner I would tell to leave my place would be my own child" (138); and Robbins "still wanted Henry in any world his black children would have to inhabit" (128). Later, Augustus is sold back into slavery by the slave patrollers—Augustus's subjective experience at the beginning of the novel is that his freedom has become a part of his identity, but in reality his freedom is based on the attitudes of the white patrollers and an easily destroyed piece of paper. Throughout the novel, the narrator proves that the thoughts, emotions, reactions, and interactions of the entire cast of characters propel the narrative forward, and by extension, the subjectivity of the rural dwellers keeps the slavocracy in place. Thus, the novel does illustrate the material conditions of slavery, specifically in the context of black slave ownership, but it does so

within the framework of human interaction: Jones is pointing out that each character is complicit in the continued existence of the plantation system.

The southern plantation's relative isolation is made possible by the supposed privacy afforded by rural areas. One result of the cultural hierarchy between rural and urban statuses is the stereotypical assumption that rural areas are places of unlimited privacy. Indeed, the difference in population density between rural and urban areas affords more opportunities for privacy in rural areas. Edward Soja's claim that rural areas are filled with "*idiotes*," a term literally translated as "private people," shows disdain for the level of privacy he assumes can be found in rural areas.<sup>18</sup> In the introduction to their edited collection *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (1997), Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed cite the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing as a lens through which urban America took a new look at "the heartland" and found it threatening (2). Today, many militant hate groups abound in the rural United States, and they are allowed to operate in relative secrecy. Yet although the privacy afforded by a low rural population density can be real, rural life is also paradoxically experienced as very being open to scrutiny from friends, relatives, and neighbors, making it difficult for rural dwellers to keep sensitive information private. The tension between these two extreme viewpoints, utter secrecy and pure openness, creates a stage in which rural dwellers act as though they have privacy, even when everyone actually knows what is going on. It is also common in rural areas that knowledge of private matters should be understood and treated as private. For example, in Eudora Welty's short story "The Whole World Knows," Ran McLain, rightly intuiting that his life is constantly put on display, takes his

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<sup>18</sup> See Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989).

young lover away to Vicksburg to try to avoid the public eye of his rural community. Thus, rural areas are paradoxically understood both as the most private and the most public spaces.

Like other rural areas, the rural South is often understood as a private place in which bad or immoral things are expected to happen. One way in which *The Known World's* narrator critiques the institution of slavery is by showing the secret thoughts and actions of the characters associated with slavery. For the first half of the novel, William Robbins, the richest man in Manchester County, is the main character who acts in supposed secrecy. He has a secret black mistress, his former slave Philomena Cartwright. Robbins and his mistress have two children together. Robbins's wife, Ethel, knew about his first child, Dora; "she would not know about the second, Louis, until the boy was three years old" (21). White slave owners having children with their female slaves is a well-documented occurrence, and even Skiffington realizes that if he were to have sex with Minerva, the slave he raised as a daughter, he would be thought normal in some circles. Shut up in the east wing of her plantation home, Ethel is not able to participate in the public dissemination of private knowledge because it is still treated as private.

The real secret, then, is not that Robbins has children with a former slave, but rather that he has fallen in love with her. Robbins keeps his second family in a house in town, and he often goes to visit them. This open secret is facilitated by Robbins's wealth, as "no one else in the county could have gotten away with putting a Negro and her two children on the same block with white people" (23). Yet far from being the secret second family that Robbins imagines Philomena and her children to be, many characters know about Robbins's infidelity, even if they never discuss it openly. In Chapter Two, the

narrator states that the old sheriff, Patterson, “had never liked the idea of Robbins riding into town in broad open daylight any day of the week to be with a nigger and her nigger children” (37). Likewise, Fern Elston, who teaches Dora and Louis, wonders about Robbins’s infidelity when he asks her to take on Henry Townsend as a student: “She had not heard that he had any more children with Philomena Cartwright, so she thought that he had taken up with another colored woman and now the child of that coupling needed to be educated” (127). William Robbins thus exemplifies the way that many rural people navigate in their world, acting in supposed privacy despite the lack of privacy a close-knit community entails.

Although on the surface William Robbins seems unconcerned about falling in love and starting a second family with a member of the class of people he exploits in order to gain wealth, his interior life is thrown into shambles because of it. Robbins’s cognitive dissonance takes the form of epileptic trances: “Robbins had been thinking for a long time that he was losing his mind. On the way to town or on the way back, he would suffer what he called small storms, thunder and lightning in the brain” (25). The timing of these “storms” is telling—Robbins only experiences these epileptic fits when he is thinking about his second family, either on the way to meet with them or on the way back to his plantation after a visit. Robbins consciously associates the trances with his second family, thinking of them as “the price to be paid for Philomena and their children” (25). Robbins’s internal guilt over his “private” life is the direct cause of many of the basic plot points in the novel. For instance, Henry’s plantation would never have existed without Robbins’s help. Robbins gives Henry Townsend special treatment and starts him on the path to slave ownership only because Henry starts to wait for Robbins on his

return trips from Philomena's house: Robbins "came to know that the sight of Henry meant the storm was over [and] came to develop a kind of love for the boy" (28). The slave patrols that result in the sale of Augustus back into slavery are formed at Robbins's request after he makes the poor business decision of selling two slaves at a startling low price to a man who helps him find his way home during one of his trances. The character of William Robbins, then, brings to light the idea that trying to keep secrets private has debilitating psychological effects. This novel shows that the cognitive dissonance experienced by immoral slave masters can lead to real psychological problems that have a direct influence on other people's lives.

Part of the reason William Robbins has such trouble reconciling his status as a plantation owner and as Philomena's lover is that he truly believes that his actions are hidden. Speaking to Henry Townsend after helping Henry acquire his first slave, Moses, Robbins states, "God is in his heaven and he don't care most of the time. The trick of life is to know when God does care and do all you need to do behind his back" (140). It is ironic that such a statement can be made in a novel in which the narrator is shown very prominently to have the same power Robbins attributes to God; nothing can be done beyond the notice of the omniscient narrator. However, if by invoking the attention of God Robbins is metaphorically talking about the notice of the public, the irony operates on another level, as the reader knows that the public already has access to Robbins's secrets. In another conversation, Robbins chides Henry for tussling on the ground with Moses, stating, "If you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns round and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need. You will have failed in your part of

the bargain” (123). Locked into the erroneous belief that his misdeeds are done beyond the attention of the public, Robbins does not seem to fully appreciate that he is in fact guilty of the very thing he warns against, treating “property” as human. *The Known World* could have used William Robbins as a stand-in for the collective consciousness of the planter class in the antebellum South, introducing yet another tired metaphor for the corrupting effects of slavery. But by interweaving Robbins’s subjective experiences with those of the other characters, Jones seems to make a different point.

William Robbins appears very infrequently in the novel’s second half, but the theme of rural privacy is continued in the liaison between Moses and Caldonia. Moses begins the novel as Henry Townsend’s loyal overseer but, following Henry’s funeral, Moses believes that he can take Henry’s place by marrying Caldonia, Henry’s widow. After Stamford is beaten by a rival, Caldonia has Moses make regular reports about the slaves’ activities on the plantation. Moses soon gains Caldonia’s trust by making up stories about Henry from before the time they met (209). Soon, these nightly meetings turn physical, and Moses speculates about his future with Caldonia. Although Moses and Caldonia continue to meet publicly, the privacy that allows for their sexual encounters in their later meetings is not actually private. Loretta, the house slave, sees and knows what goes on between Moses and Caldonia, but she is not taken into account by either party. Reversing the male and female roles from those of William Robbins and Philomena, Jones further highlights the role of rural privacy in the institution of slavery as it is presented in the novel.

Like William Robbins, the discrepancy between Moses and Caldonia’s private and public lives causes them to experience psychological distress. Caldonia must publicly

take over the operation of the plantation, but she needs to grieve privately over the loss of her husband. Thus, while Moses's nightly reports serve a real purpose attached to Caldonia's new role as plantation owner, their love affair grows out of Caldonia's psychological need to fill a void left by the death of her husband. Her wish to hear stories about Henry reveals Caldonia's avoidance of coming to terms with Henry's death, and her sexual encounters with Moses can be viewed as attempts to achieve a kind of vicarious intimacy with her deceased husband. The affair develops gradually, and always with the memory of Henry as its impetus: "Then she allowed him to put her on his lap, with him filling every moment with words about Henry" (274). However, the sexual relationship between slave and master is fraught with anxiety from both parties: Moses leaves one night after a sexual encounter, and Caldonia reflects on a white woman who "had been whipped for such an offense, and her slave was hanged from a tree in what passed for the town square" (292). Caldonia clearly understands the danger in carrying on a romantic relationship with one of her slaves, but she disregards the possible outcomes and tries to explain her feelings for Moses to herself: "'I love Moses. I love Moses with his one name.' But when she saw Loretta, the words did not make as much sense" (292). These secret affairs affect Moses psychologically, as well. After Moses and Caldonia begin their sexual relationship, Moses unrealistically fantasizes about becoming the next master of the Townsend plantation. The love affair puts Moses in a much more precarious position than Caldonia, however: as a slave, he must first obtain manumission, and as a husband and father, he must make a difficult decision about leaving his wife and child. Moses does eventually convince his wife and child to escape to freedom in the North but, after they leave, he is uncomfortable with his decision, imagining his wife

asking him “Moses, why would you do this when I trusted you? Why would you take our future and just throw it away?” (298). Later, Moses rages at Caldonia for not freeing him and he becomes despondent, regretting sending his wife and son away: “No, Priscilla hadn’t been such a bad wife. And the boy could have turned out right with just a little more time. A little less fat” (333).

Also like William Robbins, the psychological distress caused by Moses and Caldonia’s private actions manifest physically in ways that are detrimental to the well-being of the other characters. Moses’s fantasies about becoming the master of the plantation cause him to work Caldonia’s slaves even harder. Even after Elias requests that Moses ask Caldonia whether his pregnant wife has to work when she is sick or whether Elias can do her share of the work later, Moses makes Celeste work anyway, which causes her to miscarry as she is working in the fields (326). After this incident, all of the slaves turn against Moses and, when Caldonia hears about it, she bars him from the plantation house. Moses finally realizes that the delusions he has come to believe about marrying Caldonia will never come to fruition, so he exposes their secret affair by demanding his freedom publicly. Openly discussing such a dangerous secret, even when the public already knows about it, transgresses the rural norm of privacy. Thus, Moses’s actions lead to disastrous results: he feels forced to run away from the plantation, and when Counsel Skiffington brings him before the slave patrollers, he is hobbled as a punishment (373). Thus, the novel keeps the tension between supposed rural privacy and the lack of privacy that rural life actually entails at the forefront of the narrative in the novel’s second half. *The Known World* makes the comment that rural privacy is one

component of the continued existence of the slave system, but that imagined sense of privacy also leads to another factor: rural conservatism.

If privacy can be understood as freedom from undue intrusion into one's personal life, then conservatism would be the worldview extending from that desire for privacy. Rural identity is often associated with a conservative outlook, or a desire to maintain the status quo without yielding to outside forces. Yet just as the rural sense of privacy has in many ways been created by the rural/urban hierarchy, the political, social, and moral conservatism assumed to be a part of rural life is often either stereotypically attributed to rural dwellers by urbanites, or else necessitated by them. Ching and Creed state that although rustic people "are often identified with the right and its racist, ethnocentric or nationalist ideologies . . . they are *made* conservative by others" in resistance to "urbanites needing a low other against which to claim their own superiority" (29). While rural dwellers typically desire a sense of stability in the face of a rapidly changing world, their desire does not automatically give them a radically conservative worldview. However, it does put them at more risk of being swayed by conservative ideology. In many cases, rural people would benefit materially from adopting progressive policies, but accepting economic progressivism might endanger their other social and moral convictions. Thus, rural conservatism is problematic, and rural conservatives must constantly make compromises among their varied beliefs in different contexts. For example, a person with deep religious convictions might vote for a political candidate who exemplifies immoral behavior simply because that candidate espouses a similar political ideology. In *The Mind of the South* (1941), W.J. Cash depicts rural dwellers in the South as backwards peasants steeped in unchangeable, old-fashioned beliefs. While

that stereotype persists today, in actuality rural conservatism is much more complex. The conservative position of maintaining the status quo is often conflicted, especially when conservative morality and conservative politics are in opposition.

The rural conservative viewpoint is held by many characters in *The Known World*, no matter their race. Like Henry Townsend, Fern Elston, Henry and Caldonia's teacher, is a black slaveowner who earns money by "teaching the freed black children whose parents could afford her" (6). Even though she has family members who pass for white in the North, Fern chooses to remain in Virginia as a free black, partially because her husband is black. Fern expresses her views on slavery and abolition openly with other free blacks over supper at Caldonia's plantation: "I realized all over again that if I were in bondage I would slash my master's throat on the first day. I wonder why they all have not risen up and done that" (288). In this statement, Fern acknowledges that life as a slave must be intolerable and should require violent action. However, when Caldonia asks her whether she would choose to side with the abolitionists, Fern insists that she would rather maintain the status quo. Considering her quality of life without slaves, Fern states, "I do not think I would fare very well as a dressmaker's apprentice. 'Yessum' and 'Yessuh' do not come easily from my mouth. My hands, my body, they fear the dirt of the field" (289). Thus, when confronted with the loss of status abolition would entail, Fern holds on to her conservative stance, choosing to embrace the status quo. After the Civil War, Fern is interviewed by Anderson Frazier, a Canadian pamphleteer who wishes to learn more about one of the "curiosities and oddities about our southern neighbors" (106). Frazier assumes that black slaveownership would be like owning a family member, but Fern responds, "It is not the same at all. . . . All of us do only what the law and God tell us we

can do. No one of us who believes in the law and God does more than that. . . . We owned slaves. It was what was done, and so that is what we did” (108-09). This passage indicates that even after slavery is abolished, Fern believes that God’s law and human laws are synonymous. After the laws change and slavery becomes illegal, Fern still does not take responsibility for her role in continuing slavery; instead, she justifies herself by claiming she merely operated within the bounds of legality.

Unlike Fern, who invokes God’s laws only when it suits her purposes, Sheriff John Skiffington places much more personal importance on traditional morality. Skiffington is a deeply religious man, but his beliefs are tinged with Puritan guilt: “He tried to always live humbly and obediently in the shadow of God, but he was afraid that at twenty-six years old he was falling short. . . . I am imperfect, he said to God each morning he rose from his bed. I am imperfect, but I am still clay in your hands, ever walking the way you want me to” (29). This strict adherence to morality is a common among characters in southern literature. In *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction* (1994), Susan Ketchin writes, “The distinguishing features of this religious tradition are its strict adherence to biblical teachings and private morality. . . . Strong Calvinistic doctrines such as the absolute sovereignty of God and the depravity of human beings [are] a significant underpinning of southern evangelicalism” (xii). At the beginning of the novel, Skiffington, like many religious fundamentalists, sees the world in terms of absolutes. He is personally opposed to slavery, but he “had no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going, an institution that even God himself had sanctioned in the Bible” (43). He is able to separate the law of the land from his own beliefs about slavery by using the Bible as a justification for the practice. Yet

Skiffington's conservative religious convictions come into conflict with the community's politically conservative views when he must make personal choices about owning slaves. Skiffington confronts these two conflicting worldviews as the sheriff of a southern county when he and his northern wife, Winifred, receive Minerva, a nine-year-old slave, as a wedding present. Selling Minerva would implicate them in profiting from a system they objected to, and freeing her to send her north to Winifred's family would have him politically blacklisted, unable to perform his job as sheriff. In the end, Skiffington compromises between each conservative view, deciding to keep Minerva but raising her as a daughter instead of as a servant.

Skiffington's compromise haunts him years later in many ways. First, his solid religious convictions begin to crumble when Minerva grows up to be an attractive young woman. After inadvertently seeing Minerva in her sheer nightgown, he considers taking her as a mistress. Skiffington tries to bury these feelings by reading the Bible, but the damage is already done. He thinks, "What good had all the praying done? Why should a man feel this way about someone who was like a daughter to his heart?" (308). His good intentions for raising Minerva still involve his participation in the slave system, which has corrupting effects on even the most moral men. Skiffington's job also becomes more difficult as a result of his moral compromises. While he looks down on the patrollers for their shady business dealings, he at least acknowledges that they are very good at their jobs. Yet when he hires his cousin Counsel as a deputy out of a sense of familial duty, Counsel immediately begins acting dishonorably, not performing his duties well and sleeping with the proprietor of a boardinghouse in exchange for a discount on rent. Skiffington tries to rely on his compartmentalization of law and morality to justify firing

Counsel, but he ultimately lets his moral convictions guide his decision to let Counsel keep his job: “The fornication sin was on their souls alone, but he felt the lying about Augustus was on his head as well because he had brought Counsel in. Had vouched for him before God” (309-10). In the end, Counsel murders Skiffington over a handful of coins, again showing that compromise leads to disaster. Thus, this novel depicts rural conservatism as a conflicted and destructive force, and specifically as one of the major psychological components of the continued existence of the slave system prior to the Civil War.

Another component of rurality that Jones engages with in *The Known World* is the tendency of rural dwellers to have, and in many cases to embrace, a narrow perspective. People who live in rural areas simply do not have the same access to the products of the dominant culture as those who live in urban and suburban areas.<sup>19</sup> Often that lack of access is presented as a conscious preference, what Bourdieu calls “the choice of the necessary” (372). Rural people may actively resist new experiences, not necessarily because they fear the unknown, but because adopting a new perspective would complicate their ability to exist within a rural society. For example, rural students often perform more poorly on summative academic exams than non-rural students; when Ching and Creed discuss the challenges of rural education, however, they locate the problem within the curriculum: “the traditionalist pedagogical agenda, with its emphasis on enlightenment through liberal arts, has long been opposed to the supposed essence of rusticity. . . . Indeed in Soja’s variation on the Marxist distaste for rural idiocy, knowledge

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<sup>19</sup> This lack of access has been somewhat alleviated due to technological innovations and the internet; however, rural dwellers’ access to culture is still limited by economic and spatial factors.

itself is urban” (10). In the popular consciousness, learning for rural life is often associated with the lifetime mastery of one domain of knowledge or a skill, such as farming or forestry. Yet in today’s increasingly global society, educators place more emphasis on having knowledge of a broad range of topics and skills. Jones’s novel contrasts the narrow perspectives of the rural characters with the unlimited perspective of the narrator, and thereby highlights the implications of embracing a limited view of the world.

The character that most exemplifies a narrow rural perspective in *The Known World* is Moses. The novel opens on Moses eating dirt: “Moses closed his eyes and bent down and took a pinch of the soil and ate it with no more thought than if it were a spot of cornbread” (1). This odd action, the narrator states, is done “because the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life” (2). Moses thus begins the novel so inextricably linked to the land, specifically the Townsend plantation, and he has no understanding that there is anything beyond plantation life. After Moses is introduced in this way, he is shown in many other ways to exhibit a limited perspective. For instance, Moses’s terse response to Elias’s staying up at night whittling, “You gotta meet that mule in the mornin” (8), is repeated to many other slaves throughout the novel. As the overseer, Moses has trouble forming relationships with the other slaves on the plantation, preferring to bark orders and reminders about work to having actual conversations. Also, in the episode in which William Robbins admonishes Henry for tussling in the dirt with Moses, Henry slaps Moses and rides away, leaving Moses to work on building the house alone. Moses works on into the night: “There was not time and there was not darkness out there beyond the room. There was no empty

stomach. There was only work” (125). Here, Moses is able to drown out all thoughts besides what he is focused on. These examples do not imply that Moses is lacking in intelligence; rather, they demonstrate that the way Moses chooses to exist in the world is with a single-mindedness that does not leave room for distractions.

Moses’s narrow perspective makes him excel in his role as overseer under his master, Henry. Moses is usually depicted as caring very deeply about the work he does. He does not simply monitor the other slaves’ progress; rather, Moses works in the fields alongside them. One evening, Caldonia asks Moses why he does not sit on a horse and watch the other slaves work like other overseers, to which he replies, “Wouldn’t know how to do it any other way” (320). This response indicates that Moses’s unwillingness to try an alternative approach is actually an inability to do so. After Henry’s death, Moses’s single-mindedness gets him into trouble and ultimately leads to his downfall. Unlike slaves such as Augustus Townsend, who works to purchase his freedom and the freedom of his family, the only way Moses sees out of slavery is becoming the master of slaves. Once Henry dies and he and Caldonia begin having an affair, Moses single-mindedly works toward becoming a slaveowner. He imagines himself as the next “Mr. Townsend” (293), taking on his supposed future wife’s last name since he does not have one himself. For over a month, Moses meets with Caldonia nightly, and each night the conversation follows the same pattern: first Moses discusses the operation of the plantation and the lives of the slaves, and then he moves on to making up stories about Henry. Moses cannot find anything else to talk about besides work and Henry, so Caldonia finally asks Moses about his own life. He responds, “I been workin since I was three years old, just draggin that cotton sack along. . . .The body commences to turn to the work the way you bend a

tree and make it grow whichever way you got a mind to” (321). In this moment, Caldonia realizes that Moses is essentially one-dimensional, and she lets him leave. Unable to understand Caldonia’s rejection, Moses tries to bury his emotions in hard work, and since he is the overseer, he makes the other slaves work harder, too. As stated above, this leads to Celeste’s miscarriage, Moses’s escape, and Moses’s punishment. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Moses’s limited perspective prevents him from escaping Manchester County. Throughout the text, Moses is described as being “world-stupid” (268, 359), not knowing “north from south unless somebody told him and even then he wasn’t real sure” (350). Thus, when he runs away, he goes to the only place he knows beyond Henry Townsend’s plantation: Augustus and Mildred Townsend’s home. Sheriff Skiffington easily deduces Moses’s whereabouts and Moses ends the novel hobbled, unable to work, and thus, in his view, unable to live.

Although Moses is punished for his myopic view of the world, not every instance of the rural narrow perspective in *The Known World* is negative. Hanging in Sheriff Skiffington’s jail is a large map, a “browned and yellowed woodcut of some eight feet by six feet” depicting North and South America, headed by the legend “The Known World.” The map represents what was known of the New World in the 1500s. Although the map is not drawn to scale, and Florida is missing, Skiffington states, “I’m happy with what I got” (174). Skiffington prefers this inaccurate map to a better one promised by Jean Broussard, a jailed Frenchman. While it may not be useful for actual navigation, the map in Skiffington’s jail does symbolize one of the main themes of the novel, that inaccuracies can exemplify a kind of subjective truth that cannot be arrive at through objective means. Skiffington’s map can be compared to the two tapestries Calvin

Newman writes about to his sister, Caldonia, at the end of the novel. These tapestries were created by Alice Night, who escaped the Townsend plantation with Moses's wife, Priscilla, and their child. One tapestry depicts Manchester County; it is described as being "what God sees when He looks down on Manchester" (384). The second tapestry depicts the Townsend plantation in such detail that "there is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct" (385). Unlike the map in Skiffington's jail, these tapestries show a different kind of subjective truth: lived experience. In order for Alice Night to create these artworks, she had to roam about at night for years learning the landscape. Unlike Moses, who can only see the work, Alice Night uses her narrow perspective to learn the way to freedom. Indeed, the narrow perspective she used to navigate her world was needed in order for her to be able to create the illusion of an unlimited perspective in the tapestries. As a kind of corroborating evidence, like the prefaces and appendices included in many slave narratives, the tapestries actually subvert rather than support the objective truth of Jones's narrative: these tapestries demonstrate that the way to understand a complex topic such as slavery is not through memorizing facts and statistics, but rather through the narrow perspective of lived experience.

Even though *The Known World* is historical fiction, Edward P. Jones problematizes assumptions about the real historical relationship between race and slavery, opening up critical inquiry into other aspects of slavery that are often overlooked in current debates. In a country that enslaved an entire race of people less than two hundred years ago, there are still many vestiges of racism that must be overcome.

However, by writing about black slaveowners, Jones questions the way readers understand history and memory; his unique omniscient narrator further complicates the establishment of objective truth. As a southern novel, *The Known World* engages with elements of rurality and rural identity that are so often associated with southern literature. Specifically, his handling of rural privacy, conservatism, and limited perspective show how individual viewpoints are important in narrating the truth about slavery today. At its core, this novel suggests that objective facts are not the only way to know the world; storytelling is vital to understanding truth.

CHAPTER III – SURVIVAL AND THE RURAL BLUES IN BILL CHENG’S  
*SOUTHERN CROSS THE DOG*

Bill Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog* (2013) tells the stories of rural black characters who survive the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and attempt to rebuild their lives in its aftermath. The novel employs rural settings, but Cheng does not use the southern settings merely as backdrop for a drama about race and violence; instead, the isolated rural settings allow for the sustained psychological turmoil and feelings of imprisonment that the novel’s various blues heroes face. The first chapter establishes the location’s colloquial rurality, opening on a group of children cutting through the brush in “the woods behind Old Man Crookhand’s” (1). The landscape has a haunted history: “There’d been stories about dead Injuns and their ghosts living inside the hollows” (1). Cheng immerses the reader into the setting: soon the children are “skimming spider vines and breaking off bits of sweetbark from the trunks to chew and spit” (1). Throughout the novel Cheng often mixes sensations into a kind of synesthesia, as when “the scent of calla lily grew thick and heavy. He could feel its weight in his mouth, like a lump of sugar on his tongue” (37).<sup>20</sup> Cheng’s thick prose descriptions of the rural landscape imply that the South described in this novel must be based on experience, not just imagination. However, in an NPR interview on *All Things Considered*, Cheng states that when researching he spent a lot of time reading old books that “in terms of facts and things and textures . . . [lent] a certain confidence to the writing” (“A Tale from the Delta”)—because ironically, Cheng, a Chinese-American living in New York City, never visited

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<sup>20</sup> Another novel written by an Asian-American that also employs southern modernist techniques, Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), is about a character who lives with a secret extra sense, the ability to taste words, which she learns is a type of synesthesia.

Mississippi before the publication of his novel. In addition to his thick prose descriptions of the rural southern landscape, Cheng also applies the stylistics of the blues novel, southern modernism, and the Southern Gothic to make the novel more “authentically” southern. Bill Cheng uses pastiche in *Southern Cross the Dog* by appropriating tropes from both African American blues literature and Southern Gothic literature to address the plight of African Americans and other marginalized groups in the United States.

As a literary novel that borrows so heavily from various established genres of southern literature, *Southern Cross the Dog* seems ripe for critics to analyze and discuss. Yet besides passing mentions, this novel has been largely ignored by academics.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps this is because Bill Cheng’s non-southern background is still somewhat unusual among writers of southern literature. Although little writing that questions the relationship between authorial background and southern literature has been published, Suzanne W. Jones’s “Who Is a Southern Writer?” examines the field of contemporary writers of the American South. Describing the New Southern Studies, Jones states, “Instead of worrying about who qualifies as a ‘southern writer’ or rigidly delimiting ‘southern literature,’ we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), what stories they are telling, what images they are conjuring up, and most importantly why” (1). Jones identifies the categories of international writers, immigrant writers, Americans from other regions, and southerners abroad in her consideration of qualifications for being a southern writer. Bill Cheng, however, does not fit neatly into any of the categories described in the essay, for

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Martyn Bone only briefly mentions Cheng’s novel in “The Faulkner Factor: Influence and Intertextuality in Southern Fiction since 1965,” as does Denise Cruz in “Monique Truong’s Literary South and the Regional Forms of Asian America.”

each of Jones's categories assumes firsthand experience with the South. As someone who never visited the southern states, Cheng's experience with the South could only be mediated through other means.

Cheng is certainly not the first nonsoutherner to write about the South. According to Sylvia Shin Huey Chong in her keyword "Exceptionalism," "Further diluting the regional-racial specificity of southern identity is the ability of 'outsiders' to claim membership in the New South, from foreign interlopers in the country music scene such as Keith Urban (Australia) or Shania Twain (Canada), to new Latino/a and Asian urban enclaves in iconic southern cities" (312). However, within the framework of southern literary studies, the author has traditionally been expected to exhibit some political or social relationship with the content of his or her work. In the Introduction to *Southern Writers at Century's End* (1997), Jeffrey Jay Folks and James A. Perkins still recruit Toni Morrison as a southern writer even though she does not live in the South: "[for] Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed, whose experience of the South is largely indirect, the writing of fiction reflects, at least imaginatively, an intimacy with the land [and] an identification with nature and the physical environment" (5). Toni Morrison could claim racial affiliation with her protagonist and other characters in the southern novel *Beloved*; however, Bill Cheng shares no racial relationship with the black and white characters in his novel.<sup>22</sup>

In 1967, Roland Barthes published "The Death of the Author," a foundational essay in literary studies that argues against considering the intentions and biographical

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<sup>22</sup> Historically, many Chinese immigrants moved to the Mississippi Delta in the early 1900s. Yet Bill Cheng does not write about Chinese characters, and in his interviews he does not elaborate on how his own ethnicity affects his narrative.

context of an author in interpreting a text. The ideas in Barthes's essay have become commonplace in the humanities, but southern literary studies still tends to place much importance on the author's background. For instance, in his *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Romine argues that the figures of "Faulkner," "Welty," and "Hurston" are written about so much that the actual authors and their works have become obscured (232). Since the mid-twentieth century, southernists have tried to simultaneously affirm and deny the author. Ironically, it is the New Critics, the group that essentially established the cult of Faulkner, who invented the term "intentional fallacy."<sup>23</sup> Until very recently, a vast majority of the writers concerned with the American South have been from and have lived in the region, offering no resistance to Quentin Compson's response to Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "You cant understand it. You would have to be born there" (260). Some texts have been written by authors that challenge Quentin's statement, such as V.S. Naipaul's *A Turn in the South* (1989) and Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic* (1998), two travel narratives in which the narrators journey to the South in order to better understand it. However, the implicit assumption remains that the only true knowledge of the South must be experienced by a southerner.

In an NPR interview on *All Things Considered*, Cheng states that his childhood love of the blues was the impetus for writing his novel. He describes *Southern Cross the Dog* as "a love note to those blues players" ("A Tale from the Delta"). It is important to

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<sup>23</sup> This term, coined by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), refers to the (erroneous) view that the author maintains authority over the meaning of a text after it is published: "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (468).

note that Cheng uses the blues, once a distinctly African American form that has a long history of appropriation, as an entryway into writing a southern novel. Even though true knowledge of the South is assumed to be a southerner's experience, true knowledge of the blues has become unmoored from its history of being an African American experience. Adam Gussow notes in *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (2017) that "the American blues scene was undergoing a significant transformation between 1983 and 1986" (236). Gussow discusses how Stevie Ray Vaughan, a white blues guitarist, won not one but two W.C. Handy awards in 1984—Instrumentalist of the Year and Entertainer of the Year. This moment symbolically appropriated "authentic" blues artistry from black musicians and offered it to musicians of other races, and for the next several years, white blues players won the most prestigious awards in blues music. For Bill Cheng, the blues, as a genre that has already been wrested from the culture that created it, serves as an entryway into the genre of southern literature.

From the novel's first sentence, it is clear that the primary style that Cheng borrows from in *Southern Cross the Dog* is the blues. Robert Chatham, the novel's main protagonist, states in a one-sentence paragraph, "When I was a baby child, they put the jinx on me" (1). In this one line, Cheng brings together traditional ballad meter (four beats in the first half of the line followed by three beats in the second half), southern dialect ("baby child"), a reference to hoodoo (the "jinx"), and a hint that what will follow will show how the protagonist will suffer as a result of his jinx.<sup>24</sup> As the blues is a

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<sup>24</sup> See Albert Murray's *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* (1997) and *Stomping the Blues* (1976) for good analyses of blues stylistics.

distinctly black musical form that developed in the Jim Crow South, blues music's first-person protagonist often sings about personal suffering resulting from racial oppression. In *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (2002), Adam Gussow explains that "the black male blues singer, vocalizing the shared experience of his cohort, is the subject of his own song: his fears, his hopes, his sexual hungers and romantic losses" (3). By narrating personal experiences, the blues singer is able to tap into suffering that is shared by others in the community. Also, according to Carolyn M. Jones in "Race and Intimacy: Albert Murray's *South to a Very Old Place*," "The blues offers a form of communication between 'self' and 'other' that breaks stagnant binary and hierarchical structures" (66). Thus, in crafting a blues novel, Cheng is able to tell a story capable of eliciting powerful emotions in the reader that can not only bring about catharsis but can also potentially spark empathy for fellow sufferers.

The blues is more multifaceted than a mere musical form. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Houston A. Baker describes the blues as "a synthesis (albeit one always synthesizing rather than one already hypostatized). . . . [constituting] an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (5). Since the development of the blues as a musical style, many writers have used the blues to structure their works. Poets such as Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown have used the blues as a formal compositional method, while novelists such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray have used the blues as more of an ethos, grounding their worldview in and using tropes from the African

American literary traditions of the early twentieth century<sup>25</sup>; Ellison states that “the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (264). It is in this way that Bill Cheng inserts himself into the blues literary tradition, using the blues ethos in his novel to highlight the suffering of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Some of the most significant aspects of the blues novel that Cheng employs in *Southern Cross the Dog* are the use of “blues heroes” to narrate a profound sense of anxiety in the face of the constant threat of lynching and the reality of natural disaster and the illusory possibility of migration as a means for escaping racial injustice.

In blues literature, the protagonist’s function is that of a “blues hero,” a character who works both as an individual and as an everyman with whom the reader is expected to identify and thereby more deeply relate to the hardships he experiences throughout the narrative. In *South to a Very Old Place*, his memoir about returning to the South to trace his roots, Albert Murray coins the phrase “the blues idiom” to describe the convention in blues novels of including a blues hero who acts both as an individual and also as a representative of the community to which he is connected. For Murray, the literary blues hero coincides with actual blues musicians whose first-person accounts of their sorrows allow their audiences to identify with them and to experience catharsis as a result. Although he is no blues singer, Robert Chatham is the novel’s most prominent character who embodies the blues hero in *Southern Cross the Dog*, partially because he suffers so

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<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* (1926), Sterling A. Brown’s *Southern Road* (1932), Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974).

relentlessly throughout his life, and also because he is in no way responsible for his hardships. As a result of the jinx he believes to have been put on him, Robert seems fated to suffer. Throughout his life, Robert survives the Great Mississippi Flood, abandonment by his father, a fall from a three-story roof, and even having his throat cut. Yet even though he wishes for death, Robert finds that he is unable to die and put an end to his troubles.

In Part Five, “Etta,” Robert’s father discloses that one reason for Robert’s self-destructive urge is psychological trauma over the lynching of his brother, Billy. After an incident in which Billy and two white hunters clash over who shot a prize buck, the hunters steal Billy’s rifle. Billy later grows up to act recklessly and contemptuously around whites. Not long after Billy leaves home, he is lynched, and Ellis buries his son’s body by moonlight so that Robert and Etta will not have to witness the burial. This chapter appears late in the novel, but it occurs before events in the previous chapters, which gives the chapter the power of delayed explanatory value for Etta’s catatonia, Ellis’s abandonment of his youngest child, and Robert’s suicidal impulse. Faced with the threat of lynching, blues musicians used music as a creative outlet for unburdening their anxieties about racial violence and oppression. Gussow explains that blues music emerged partially “as a social response to the grievous spiritual pressures exerted on working-class black southerners by the sudden eruption of lynching-as-spectacle” (*Seems Like Murder Here* 3).<sup>26</sup> In Cheng’s novel, though, Robert Chatham does not sing the

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<sup>26</sup> In his analysis of a variety of blues songs and texts, Gussow examines the way that the blues genre is almost always about minor suffering in comparison to actual lynching, but that singing about these small misfortunes operated as a coded and socially acceptable way to express anxiety about the constant threat of lynching. In this way, the blues genre exhibits a convention of the spirituals that came before it—longings for freedom coded into recitations of biblical narratives and references.

blues; instead, he cannot sing the blues to relieve his own constant suffering. After Billy's death, the young Robert broodily accepts his fate to live in a region marked by its penchant for racial violence. Ellis Chatham states, "Outwardly, he wasn't much changed, but inside, I saw storms. He didn't cry, but to everyone and everything, he cast a dark eye. To me, his solitude became frightening" (273). Robert comes to the understanding that as a black male in the Jim Crow South, he could just as easily suffer his brother's fate.

Set decades before the Civil Rights Movement, *Southern Cross the Dog* shows the state of race relations in the Depression-era rural South, especially through the characters' pervasive fear that racial violence can erupt spontaneously at any time. The typical blues novel narrates this heightened awareness through the insights of only one first-person narrator. For instance, in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the narrator uses the terms "white terror" and "the white-hot face of terror" to solidify the connection between whiteness and fear in the young protagonist's mind. Cheng undercuts this convention, however, by focusing not on only one blues hero, but by including many other protagonists whose sufferings rival Robert's: Eli Cutter serves time in Parchman penitentiary, Etta Chatham loses both her sons and suffers a mental breakdown, and Dora is sold into bondage to a salvager. Cheng also includes chapters that are narrated in third person rather than the typical first-person narration of traditional blues novels. Another difference is that the suffering of all of the novel's blues heroes stem not only from the region's history of racial discrimination, but also from the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. This disaster altered the rural landscape in ways that still resonate in current ideas about the rural South.

*Southern Cross the Dog* demonstrates the immediate, short-term, and long-term effects of the second most destructive natural disaster in United States history, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927; it was only after Hurricane Katrina directly hit New Orleans in 2005 that this disaster was surpassed in terms of destruction and cost.<sup>27</sup> The Great Flood swallowed entire communities and displaced more than 200,000 African Americans from their homes. Some survivors were forced to remain on rooftops for days until help arrived, and government aid was slow to arrive for the refugees. Families endured hunger, thirst, and violence directed towards them by state militias and civilians from other areas, as did the characters Ellis and Etta at Camp Mercy in Hollandale. This devastating event was a ready-made legend, quickly making its way into sermons, poems, and blues songs. Jayna Brown explains in her keyword “Performance” that the Great Flood was seen as “both nature’s revenge and the concrete effect of industrializing America’s neglectful policy toward its black population. The flooding of Mississippi in 1927 became a trope of Old Testament-style revenge for the self-serving materialism of civilization” (235). The flood appears in many important twentieth-century literary works, including Richard Wright’s “Down by the Riverside” in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) and William Alexander Percy’s autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941). Almost a century later, cultural memory of the event is still powerful enough to inspire new works of literature, including Cheng’s novel and Tom Franklin and Beth Ann Fennelly’s *The Tilted World* (2013). These narrative depictions of the Great Mississippi

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<sup>27</sup> John M. Barry’s *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (1997) offers an excellent social and political history of this natural disaster.

Flood demonstrate how the flood marks a crucial moment for appreciating the rural landscape as well as for acknowledging the destructive power of nature.

Bill Cheng presents the reader with rural characters who spend fourteen years in misguided efforts to cope with the Great Flood and its crushing aftereffects. Interestingly, the novel begins in the peaceful hours just before the levees break and the flooding begins. But rather than recounting the characters' experiences before the flood, the novel opens with the flood in order to obscure the previous manifestation of the landscape and the characters' way of life. Nor is there significant description of the landscape before the flood; however, Cheng describes the actual flooding itself in great detail. The river is personified as angry and explosive: "It groaned and roiled, eating the banks, crusting against the rocks . . . screaming like a train, its roar sucking up the sky, a voice crowning open like the Almighty" (14). The novel's dramatic depiction of the flood in the first chapter provides a basis for the characters' psychological trauma and sets the tone of the succeeding chapters. And although the novel only hints at what came before the flood, Cheng makes it especially clear that the peaceful Mississippi Delta region suddenly and unexpectedly changed forever, and those left stranded after the flood would feel its effects for years to come. The way that the settings of each chapter are described in the novel distinctly shows the interrelation between changes made to the landscape due to the Great Flood and the economic and psychological changes that the characters undergo as a result.

Cheng describes the floodwater's impact on the landscape and the population with his characteristic imagery-filled prose; all of the characters in *Southern Cross the Dog* are pitched into uncertainty as soon as the flooding begins. The flood's immediate effects on

the landscape and on the population appear in Part One, “The Flood,” Part Three, “Salvage,” and Part Five, “Etta”; each of these chapters is set in rural Issaquena County in 1927 near where the flooding was the worst. After the frenzied prose that illustrates the flooding at the beginning of the novel, the peaceful stillness of the flood waters on the countryside the next day becomes a sublime spectacle, with “the water going on and on forever in every direction save for the small stitch of telegraph line in the distance” (23). A later passage states, “In the days after the flood, it was so calm you could see clear through the water like it was a sheet of glass—torn-up roofs, stovepipes, drowned livestock made stiff and waxen” (45). Potential saviors or villains navigate on small boats and eventually shuttle survivors to government camps set up for the flood victims, where Robert’s father and mother are herded like cattle into “three and one-half acres of parkland, rowed with pup tents” (274). During a natural disaster, rurality equates with isolation; even though they are provided with basic necessities for survival, Ellis and Etta Chatham are not given any aid to handle their psychological trauma. Highlighting the continuing powerlessness of the flood victims even after the flood waters have subsided, this pitiful setting that the Chatham family inhabits is still preferable to the swamp where another of the novel’s blues heroes, Dora, is taken in Part Three.

Just as the peaceful description of the flood waters belies the destruction that has occurred below them, the forced stoicism that the novel’s blues heroes must maintain immediately after the flood masks their inner trauma. In Part Three, “Salvage,” the ruined landscape matches Dora’s psychological deterioration that occurs as a result of the flood. Lisa Hinrichsen notes in *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in the Post-Plantation South* that trauma “manifests itself as a structure, a repetitive patterning

of a life or text filled with gaps and ‘repeated imposition[s]’ that signal yet fail to fully illuminate the traumatic ‘event’ itself” (36). In other words, those who experience trauma are often forced to relive their experiences and are unable to move beyond them. In Dora’s case, the swamp to which she is taken represents the difficulty of getting out of her situation psychologically. Sold to an opportunistic salvager, Dora is held prisoner at a cabin in a leech-infested swamp, where mirrors are nailed to the trees surrounding the cabin to “keep away ghosts” (136). When her captor goes out to find more materials to salvage, Dora cannot simply run away. The swamp is too dangerous. The first time her captor leaves her alone, he states off-handedly, “Swamps are full of gators” (140). Later, after she becomes adept at navigating the swamp on foot, Dora still feels compelled to stay at the cabin. In her state of trauma-induced psychosis, she believes that the ghost of her grandmother has told her that in order to leave, she must first complete the Sisyphean task of blacking all the mirrors that are nailed to the trees around the cabin. She is so adamant in this belief that when G.D., her childhood friend, finds her and tries to rescue her, she cries out and thus blocks her only means of escape. Eventually, G.D. does rescue her by shooting her captor, but by this point Dora has already lost her sanity. Fourteen years later when Robert Chatham meets Dora and G.D. in the novel’s final chapter, Dora has still not recovered psychologically. No longer imprisoned in the swamp by the salvager, Dora remains imprisoned in her own mind: her trauma forces her to relive the events she experienced during and after the Great Flood. Echoing Dora’s fate, Etta, Robert’s mother, closes in on herself after she loses everything in the flood. The flood exacerbates Etta’s grief over the lynching of her oldest child, and she can see no escape from the troubles of her life. Taking care of Etta in the flood camp, her husband

confesses, “You got worse as the days went on, and I would not let on how bad it got. You muttered to yourself and barked like a dog. Didn’t dress nor bathe no more” (277). Thus, Cheng’s three chapters set immediately after the flood demonstrate that even after the floodwaters recede and the victims try to rebuild their lives, some psychological consequences cannot be repaired.

One of the major consequences of the Great Flood of 1927 was migration away from the devastated rural areas, which in the first half of the twentieth century led to new developments in art and literature as African Americans began to populate other parts of the United States. Although the Great Migration began in the years following World War I and continued for decades, the outflow of the population increased drastically immediately following the Great Flood. LeRoi Jones notes in *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music the Developed from It* (1963) that with the arrival of African Americans in Chicago, Detroit, and New York City came the new style of urban blues, created out of a fusion of “the new learning” with the older southern traditions (120). Robert Chatham does not migrate to a major northern city, but he is displaced from his home and settles in the (relatively more) urban Bruce, Mississippi.<sup>28</sup> It is in Bruce that Robert has his first encounter with blues music and the bluesman Eli Cutter, yet another of Bill Cheng’s blues heroes. Even though the characters in *Southern Cross the Dog* never leave Mississippi, Cheng still explores the way that natural disasters

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<sup>28</sup> Keith Halfacree’s “Rural Space: Constructing a Three-Fold Architecture” describes how rurality and urbanity are not polarities, but rather coexist in the collective imagination. Many locations have both rural and urban characteristics and can be viewed according to either. In this case, although some aspects of Bruce, Mississippi are described as rural, Cheng uses the town primarily to contrast with the rurality of the novel’s first chapter.

lead to urban migration, and he incorporates migration's influence on blues music's development into his narrative.

Eli's displacement and subsequent arrival in Bruce demonstrates how musicians' migration from rural to urban areas affects traditionally rural music. By incorporating an actual blues singer into Part Two, "Hotel Beau-Miel," Cheng further establishes *Southern Cross the Dog* as a blues novel. This chapter takes place primarily at the whorehouse where the teenage Robert works, but it opens on an interesting scene at Parchman penitentiary, where Augustus Duke has come to free Eli in hopes of becoming his manager. Eli's life follows a pattern established by real blues singers from the Mississippi Delta. Echoing the career of the blues artist Leadbelly, Eli begins the novel as a convict who is sprung from prison by a white music producer. Augustus tracks down Eli with excitement, thinking that "there was a fortune to be made. First, here, in these hick backwaters—then up north, to the Roxy Theater, the Paramount, Carnegie Hall" (79). Bruce is a part of "these hick backwaters," but the town is also a stepping stone for Eli to be invited to play in larger cities. Also, like Robert Johnson, the blues musician who apocryphally sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads at midnight in exchange for musical skill and fame, Eli also has ties to the supernatural. When Augustus first hears other musicians reminisce about Eli's talents in a music hall in Chicago, their assessment of Eli is tied to conjuring and the demonic: "They said he was a black jinx, that when you shook his hand, you could feel a bad wind move through you. Chill you to the core. . . . Kept goofer dust in his shoes and a bag full of devils. It wasn't natural, how good he could play, frenzying from chord to chord, from note to note" (80). At the end of the chapter, Eli sings "my baby's gone, my baby's gone," a familiar subject in blues music,

as he dramatically beats on the keys of his harmonium. As Eli plays for his white audience, he thinks, “They wanted blues. So he let them have it. *Boom. Boom.* Like a hammer at their skulls. *Boom. Boom. Boom*” (123). While Eli’s music is rooted in the Mississippi Delta, it is also evocative of the consumer-oriented urban blues that developed out of the Great Migration.

*Southern Cross the Dog*’s second chapter also shows why migration was necessary; the land is slow to recover from the disaster that struck five years earlier. Cheng’s description of the rural landscape surrounding the prison includes such images as “the old colored church, burned-out and gutted” with “walls charred black” and “strands of millet growing through cracks in the floor” (34). The state of the church highlights the hopeless plight of the inmates, young black men who, after losing everything in the flood and having no jobs or other means to survive, were forced into crime and violence. After this brief introduction at Parchman, the action of the novel moves much farther east to Bruce, Mississippi, in and around the Hotel Beau-Miel.

Located outside the Delta, the thick descriptions of Bruce, Mississippi, are different from those of Issaquena County in the first chapter. In Bruce, “bees, fat and honeyed, went drunk through the azaleas” (67) and “the tall loping forms of wisteria passed into the sky, and only the deep chatter of crickets marked the time” (89). It is clear that Bruce has been set apart from the persistent poverty that the rural Mississippi Delta region is known for. Instead of distantly-spaced farm houses, “out toward Bruce, rows and rows of gabled roofs held the last of the greasy sunlight” (90). The setting of the novel’s second chapter provides a stark contrast to the flooded Issaquena County in the

first chapter, but for the novel's principal characters, migrating from the rural countryside to the town does not allow them to overcome their suffering.

Even though it was not directly impacted by the Great Flood, the town of Bruce, Mississippi, has been affected by the influx of refugees from the Delta region. Some of the displaced flood victims became convict labor for projects designed to fix the levee system and restore the countryside, but many simply moved to towns and cities like Bruce to find work. The Hotel Beau-Miel houses many of the flood victims, including Robert and Eli. After Augustus Duke and Miss Lucy agree to let Eli play his harmonium for entertainment, the Hotel Beau-Miel is on the verge of becoming a popular music venue as well as a house of ill repute. The hotel is conspicuously located in the Negro quarter alongside jukeboxes and gambling halls, where any flood refugee who is able to make money is encouraged to squander it on liquor, gambling, and prostitutes. For example, during Eli's stay in Bruce, he "burned his money on drink and women—fifteen for a girl and three for a handle of gin" (95). In this chapter, Cheng hints at the historical reality that those who were left homeless by the flood were not able to recover financially for many years.

This chapter gives insight into the origins of racial economic inequality in America; for African Americans, state and institutional economic policies had a profound impact on individuals' wealth. In *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (2006), Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro define wealth as what people own rather than what they earn from working or receive from retirement or social welfare. One important concept in Oliver and Shapiro's analysis is the historical "racialization of state policy" that includes slavery, Jim Crow laws, and de jure

segregation prior to the 1950s, along with more recent governmental policies and actions that have promoted “homesteading, land acquisition, home ownership, retirement, pensions, education, and asset accumulation for some sectors of the population and not for others” (4). One of Robert’s tasks working at the Hotel Beau-Miel is to wash the prostitutes’ clothes. Because of segregation, Robert has difficulty purchasing the special Dr. Sloan’s washing powder that is available only in the “Whites Only” general store. At first, the grocer refuses to serve Robert, saying “Son, you ain’t got coin enough to get me to sell to you” and “As far as you’re concerned, the shelf is empty” (72). Robert’s persistence causes the grocer to sell him the washing powder, but he is charged thirty-five cents instead of the seventeen cents that is written on the box. The practice of overcharging African Americans for basic necessities prevents them from accumulating wealth; thus, the novel’s African American characters who migrate to Bruce operate on a vastly different economic scale than their white counterparts.

Cheng illustrates this economic reality in a short passage involving Robert’s finding and subsequently losing a gold tooth. Swimming in the river, Robert spies something glinting in the water. At first, he “let himself dare that it was a half dollar” (73), thinking back to his experience with the grocer at the “Whites Only” general store. The passage treats his discovery as insignificant, and it seems as though Robert does not even suspect that the tooth holds any value. In the next paragraph, Robert finishes the task that brought him to the river in the first place: washing his friend’s ruined dress. Robert’s discovery of the gold tooth offers a textual counterpoint to his having to pay twice as much for the powder—the money he spent is devalued, worth less because of Robert’s race. In this case, the hoped-for half dollar symbolizes the income needed for

day to day expenses, while the gold tooth symbolizes personal wealth. This scene shows that, unlike the more affluent white characters in the novel, Robert must rely on happy accidents and strokes of luck for gaining wealth in order to recuperate his losses in income. After Robert finishes washing the dress, five white boys taunt him for having to wash a dress in the river. They fight, and Robert is left beaten. Only then is the tooth mentioned again: “The tooth, he realized, was gone. Either stolen or knocked in the water” (75). This short passage illustrates the dire economic situation in which many flood refugees found themselves embroiled. And without a clear value for their labor, the flood refugees often choose to turn to crime and debauchery—activities that touched not only the Delta region but also the towns and cities to which the refugees migrated. Five years later, even a beautiful, peaceful town like Bruce, Mississippi, cannot escape the effects of the flood.

In addition to themes from its traditional blues stylistics, *Southern Cross the Dog* contains others that are informed by southern modernism. Specifically, Cheng uses the southern modernist conventions of fluid chronology and multiple perspectives to create an overview of the historical effects of racial oppression. In *The Nation’s Region*, Leigh Anne Duck argues that in the 1920s and 30s, southern modernism developed as a subgenre of southern literature that “mobilized formal innovations designed to explore the potentially unsettling experience of modernity’s multiple temporal forms” (8). As mentioned in Chapter II, according to Duck, the ideology of southern backwardness, which explained racist governmental policies and social practices in the region, stood in stark contrast to the rapid modernization that was occurring throughout the nation. Southern modernist writers used “conceptual depictions of imagined worlds [combined]

with representation of the ways such spaces and times are experienced, as demonstrated through plot, imagery, and characters' thoughts and behaviors" (7-8) to explore the disconnect between the conflicting chronologies of nation and region. Cheng's narrative structure in *Southern Cross the Dog* brings the novel into conversation with conventions used in earlier southern modernist works as well.<sup>29</sup>

Instead unfolding chronologically, *Southern Cross the Dog*'s development is thematic, based on the way the characters cope with losing everything they own in the flood and the way they navigate real and imagined imprisonment. Beginning with the Great Flood of 1927, the novel shifts ahead in time to 1932 in Part Two, "Hotel Beau-Miel" and again to 1941 in Part Four, "A Shining New South." The narrative shifts backwards between these chapters to the aftermath of the 1927 flood in Part Three, "Salvage," and in Part Five, "Etta." The penultimate chapter, "Etta," is especially important for the way that the novel is organized. Chronologically, this chapter belongs right after the first. Narrated in first person from Robert's father's point of view, this chapter explains how Robert came to be abandoned/employed at the Hotel Beau-Miel and provides details about what happens to Robert's family immediately after the flood. Thematically, however, the chapter belongs near the end of the novel: it incorporates Robert's father's guilt and penitence, which foreshadow Robert's own feelings in the novel's final chapter when he is reunited with G.D. and Dora. Also, Eli's, Dora's, and Robert's fight against their literal imprisonment in previous chapters makes Etta's loss of

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, William Faulkner famously disrupts the order of plot development in works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and other writers, such as Robert Penn Warren in *All the King's Men* (1946) and Jean Toomer in *Cane* (1923), experiment with their novels' timelines and points of view.

hope in the fifth chapter that much more powerful when she chooses psychological imprisonment, as she remains locked in her own mind after the lynching of her son and her other losses in the flood. These chronological shifts may be disorienting, but by the end of the novel, the reader is able to piece together the underlying themes of suffering and longing for community that run through the timeline of the novel.

Another typical convention often used by southern modernists that Cheng uses is employing different narrators for each chapter.<sup>30</sup> For example, Part One, “The Flood” is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator. This narrator is given a distinct voice, using clipped sentences to demonstrate the frenetic pace of the impending flood and to show the characters’ anxieties about the future. Part Two, “Hotel Beau-Miel,” is also narrated by a third person omniscient narrator, but the pace slows considerably, providing for more thorough descriptive passages and character development. Part Three, “Salvage,” is told by Dora in first-person dialect: “So I read Nan Peoria’s Bible and I pretended it was Bible times and we was on what they call an ark, and every bird I seen I pretended they was doves till Uncle Reb sighted one up and felled her. And so I didn’t play Bible after that” (130). The use of a first person narrator in this chapter gives insight into Dora’s interior life, and it also allows Cheng to explore on a more personal level the limits of religious belief as a comfort for the hardships suffered in this novel.

When Cheng shifts narrators among and within sections of the novel, the reader becomes better acquainted with uncanny, and often conflicting, aspects of the same character. For example, “Robert Chatham” becomes “Rowbear Shah-tome” in the

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<sup>30</sup> This technique, used by Faulkner in many of his novels, appears in a great deal of twenty-first century southern fiction. See, for example, Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017).

phonetically-spelled dialect of Frankie L'Etang, a creole fur trapper in the swamp in Part Four, "A Shining New South." Frankie's narration of Robert/Rowbear's risky behavior contrasts with Robert's first-person account, in which he believes he cannot die so long as he wears his "devil," or mojo bag, around his neck. Robert thinks that his life must have some unknown purpose, for the felt bag around his neck "had protected him. He did not die. . . . He'd been saved where others had not" (232). Yet Frankie sees that Rowbear "was dangerous and reckless. When he dove into the river. When he ran toward the bull. He wanted to die" (227). Although Robert/Rowbear's actions are performed only once, they are interpreted twice, viewed through two distinct narrators. Thus, "Rowbear's" actions are understood differently than "Robert's"; Robert feels as though his life has meaning, but Frankie believes that Robert/Rowbear does not value his life. These southern modernist conventions of a nonlinear chronology and multiple perspectives permeate the text. But perhaps the most significant way that southern modernism informs *Southern Cross the Dog* is novel's use of the early twentieth century's modernist twist on the Southern Gothic and the southern grotesque.

*Southern Cross the Dog* employs all of the characteristics of the Southern Gothic: grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility.<sup>31</sup> It is partially because of the novel's isolated rural settings that these gothic elements are able to appear in the narrative at all. Eric Gary Anderson notes in "Raising the Indigenous Undead" that, although gothic elements are not inherently rural, "gothic manifestations gain much traction in

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<sup>31</sup> These elements are identified in Molly Boyd's entry in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (2002).

isolated, lonely settings, whether the place is an old dark mansion cordoned off from the world or a hardscrabble moor or a backcountry graveyard that you probably do not want to walk by, let alone through, after the sun sets” (330). Throughout *Southern Cross the Dog*, characters find themselves in a variety of gothic settings, such as the salvager’s home where broken mirrors are hung in the trees to keep ghosts away and the L’Etangs’ fur camp hidden deep in the woods. Robert faces his greatest fear, a black dog that he believes has been chasing him for most of the novel, in an isolated forest. Southern Gothicism and the blues were both born in rural areas characterized by a history of slavery and racial oppression; the famous blues crossroads story has its roots both in blues legend and the Gothic tradition.<sup>32</sup>

*Southern Cross the Dog*’s gothic rural settings also affect the characters’ psychology: as with Roderick Usher in Poe’s early Southern Gothic short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” what happens to the landscape literally also happens to Cheng’s characters symbolically. In each instance in which the landscape is threatened, the characters find themselves threatened as well. For instance, Dora and Uncle Reb are held at gunpoint and robbed by Pat Stuckey during the flood (133). However, the southern landscape is not only shown as threatened; it is also *threatening*. At the center of the Delta region’s fertile, pastoral farmland is the Mississippi River, which always has the potential to wreak havoc on the surrounding areas. Yet the Delta was formed by regular flooding of the river; it always has the potential for widespread disaster. Likewise, the swampland of “A Shining New South” may hold the promise of future industrial

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the connection between the blues and the demonic, see Adam Gussow’s *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (2017) and Jon Michael Spencer’s *Blues and Evil* (1993).

development, but it is also home to panthers, spiders, alligators, and wild dogs. This attribute of the novel's rural setting can also be seen as a metaphor for the psychology of the characters who inhabit it. Just as the landscape is partially formed by dangerous elements with destructive power, the characters in Cheng's novel are all shaped by one dangerous psychological characteristic that they all share: the belief that their fate is already determined and that there is nothing they can do to change it.<sup>33</sup>

The characters' strong belief in the immutability of their fate is revealed most notably by the gothic, supernatural elements in the novel, specifically the use of hoodoo. Although *Southern Cross the Dog* does not allow for fantastic elements to be real, the presence of hoodoo does have material consequences for many of the characters in the novel. Eli Cutter is the character most closely tied to hoodoo practice in the novel. Eli begins the novel imprisoned at Parchman penitentiary because he accidentally poisoned a white woman with a hoodoo potion he concocted for her. Later, Eli creates a mojo for Robert to wear around his neck, and Robert believes that the magical talisman will keep him from death. As a result, Robert acts recklessly throughout the novel, leaping from the roof of a building in Part Two and jumping into a river in Part Four. Robert is another character who is closely tied to hoodoo; his journey throughout the narrative is essentially an account of his first trying to run away from the jinx he believes has been placed on him and later trying to face it head-on.

The power of this magic, as demonstrated in Cheng's novel, is not inherent in the rituals, potions, and talismans themselves; rather, the power stems from the characters'

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<sup>33</sup> Many southern modernist works contain characters who are resigned to their fate, often to violent ends. For example, In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Mr. Compson refers to Charles Bon as "that indolent fatalist" (105).

own belief in it. This is demonstrated through the novel's narrative strategy: although at times Cheng poetically affirms the existence of the supernatural whenever the characters are allowed to narrate portions of the novel, it is always in the context of the character's thoughts and not through a third-person omniscient narrator. In other words, hoodoo magic does not exist anywhere except in the characters' minds. For instance, at times, Robert questions his own senses when they do not match his belief in the supernatural. Immediately before making his decision to stop running from his fate and trying to run toward it, Robert wonders, "Was this living? Always having to decide between the two. This is real. This is not. He touched the devil [talisman] through his shirt. And this? So many square inches of worsted yarn" (232). Eventually, his belief in the supernatural trumps what he perceives with his own senses when he leaves his "devil" with Frankie as he escapes in search of his own inevitable fate. Robert's belief blinds him to the fact that his misfortune is actually derived from a devastating flood, an oppressive caste system in an economically depressed region, and a history of slavery and racial discrimination. By blaming his trials on hoodoo magic, Robert does not have to face the reality that the economic and cultural system in which he lives is flawed and that there is nothing he can do to change it.

Robert's belief in hoodoo and the supernatural may withstand his own questioning, but his final meeting with Eli puts Robert's beliefs in direct contrast with objective reality. At the end of Part Four, Robert finds that Eli has traded one set of beliefs, hoodoo, for another, Christianity. After hearing Eli's sermon in a town church, Robert speaks to Eli and confesses that he has been haunted by a black dog that follows him everywhere he goes. Robert has carried this belief with him since Eli used hoodoo

potions to help bring Robert back to health after his jump from the roof of the Hotel Beau-Miel back in 1932. Eli tells Robert the truth about the origin of his beliefs: “You were a boy! It was just something to say to a boy. Something I made up. You say a dog is following you?” (258). Faced with the conflict between his fantasy and reality, Robert storms out of the church and into the night. This event is the novel’s climax, but the reader is presented with two more chapters, one which explains Robert’s parents’ past, and another which explains Robert’s future. Ending the novel with these two chapters reminds the reader that irrational belief is not limited to magic or the supernatural, but that all characters do have strongly held beliefs that, unfortunately, do not give them any real help, such as money, education, or any other means of overcoming their persistent poverty and loss. Part Five, “Etta,” concludes with Robert’s father choosing to remain with his catatonic wife, hopeful that she will recover from her malady. Part Six, “Home,” shows that despite the profound effect Dora’s imprisonment has had on her psyche, G.D. is hopeful that she and Robert can have a good life together. Near the end of the final chapter, G.D., whose name is reminiscent of “G-d,”<sup>34</sup> celebrates Robert and Dora’s reunion with a night of drinking and dancing before he unexpectedly departs the next day. With G.D. gone, Robert takes over his job at the bar, and metaphorically, he takes over the protector role that G.D. (“G-d”) played for Dora. The bleak hope contained in the novel’s final two chapters is tainted with the reality that both Etta and Dora will never be whole again and that all of the characters in the novel will remain imprisoned in their situations.

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<sup>34</sup> Many religious sects render the name of God in this way as a token of reverence.

Eli's incarceration at Parchman, Dora's captivity with the salvager, and Robert's captivity with the L'Etangs reflect how their literal imprisonment is related to the way they are symbolically imprisoned by their beliefs. Specifically, these African American characters are all confined to their rural southern surroundings, which in turn has shaped their ideology and therefore their sense of self. Similarly, Riche Richardson notes that Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* "shows how the rural variably defined what blackness was within a racist imagination and demarcated what it was not or should not be within ideologies of uplift. Therein, among blacks and whites alike, it emerges as a sign of quintessential otherness and pronounced difference" (154). In her *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (2007), Richardson demonstrates that the rural/urban distinction is the broader context in which hierarchies of race and class are couched in much of southern literature. Rurality is seen as something that is very difficult to overcome because it has more to do with the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors embedded in the individual psyche than with geography. Literal imprisonment can be overcome—all of the characters in Cheng's novel who were physically confined are able to be physically freed. Likewise, anyone living in a rural area can easily move to an urban area to try to eliminate feelings of isolation and imprisonment inherent in rural life. Yet Robert Chatham's firmly held belief in Eli's hoodoo magic represents another kind of imprisonment that is common to all of the characters in *Southern Cross the Dog*; everyone needs an escape from suffering. Just as Etta and Dora retreat into insanity as an option for trying to escape suffering, Robert retreats into his belief that he is jinxed and that the talisman he wears protects him from death. This novel points out that harsh conditions may create the need for escape, but they do not supply the means.

In addition to using Southern Gothic elements to reveal how rural black characters in the Jim Crow South dealt with psychological trauma, *Southern Cross the Dog* invokes elements of the southern grotesque to demonstrate how rural poor white characters suffer the loss of their way of life to urban development.<sup>35</sup> Many of the scenes and images in Cheng's novel are grotesque, forcing the reader to consider the human body and the many ways that it can be manipulated, punished, or used for material gain. Patricia Yaeger argues in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2002) that "although the grotesque body is constructed to shock, distracting the reader from self-soothing abstractions, its impact also works unevenly to accentuate the 'doubleness of social being' that can become a habitual response to situations of political cruelty" (236). In this view, the grotesque should jar the reader out of his or her complacency with the status quo of social injustice. Cheng's earnest use of the grotesque is perhaps excessive—for instance, when Frankie L'Etang reaches into Robert's gaping throat and pinches off a gushing artery in order to save his life—but it elicits compassion for the rural dwellers' plight as their way of life is slowly superseded by urbanization, speculation, and land development.

The novel's most grotesque characters appear in Part Four, "A Shining New South." The harsh, unforgiving swamp around the Mississippi River is home to the L'Etangs, a group of French creole trappers who eke out a meager existence by selling

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<sup>35</sup> Lucinda MacKethan states that "often the terms Gothic and Grotesque are interchanged when applied to the South (the only place to which both rubrics have been consistently applied as literary denominators)." Both of these subgenres overtly attempt to shock and disturb the reader and combine "obscene exaggeration with sometimes gratuitous violence, often within representations of physical deformity or sexual deviance" ("Genres of Southern Literature"). In this chapter, however, "gothic" is used to describe the supernatural haunted quality of the rural landscape, while "grotesque" is used to describe the animalistic behavior of some of the rural dwellers.

pelts to traders. Members of the L'Etang clan include Bossjohn, the large and grizzled leader of the fur trappers; Roan, Bossjohn's sneaky, murderous, and ambitious brother; and Frankie, the masculine daughter of Sweet Till, one of the original Cajun fur trappers in the area. Bossjohn and Frankie have an incestuous relationship that is both sexual and violent. Even the way the L'Etangs eat is abnormal: "There were no spoons. No forks. Bossjohn fished out a strip of pink glistening meat with his fingers. He dragged it along the thick yellow sauce and ate, craning his neck out to catch the drippings" (194). The trappers are descended from the first people who arrived in the area and tried to extract resources from it in order to exchange them for money. According to Frankie, the L'Etangs had migrated to the swamp a generation before, and they had quickly grown accustomed to living there: Frankie "learned to trap and snare and shoot and muck and tell sign on the soft earth. She could tell muskrat from coon from possum. She could read the wind and pick them all by smell" (222). Essentially, the L'Etangs must become like animals just to be able to survive in the harsh rural landscape; their grotesque behavior results from having to adapt to their environment. Cheng includes these grotesque characters as a contrast to other characters in the chapter, specifically the land speculators and developers who work to drain the swamp and make way for industrial and economic development in the region.

The novel's fourth chapter is set in 1941, fourteen years after the events of the first chapter. Yet far from fading into obscurity, the Great Flood continues to impact the area. In a region still crippled economically after both the flood and the Great Depression, industrialization promises new economic development and hope for the region while simultaneously ensuring that old ways of life will become obsolete. This chapter opens

with an emotionally-charged speech by one of the developers about his vision for the South:

Think. All the modern comforts of New York and Chicago. Lightbulbs. Frigidaires. Electric irons. Radios. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's voice in every hick son of a bitch living room from Podunk to Jerkwater. Imagine, at every dinner table an ice cold Coca-Cola, the Lone Ranger on the wireless, rich chocolatey Ovaltine chilling in a brand-new General Electric. Money changes hands. Businesses grow. There is solvency. Jobs. A shining new South. (164)

Mentioning New York and Chicago in the speech, the two largest cities in the United States at the time and two major destinations in the Great Migration, underscores the stark urbanity of these aspirational developments in the region. Bringing "modern comforts" to the South would conceivably improve living conditions, but it would do nothing to erase the hierarchical distinction between the urban and the rural, as expressed in the derogatory language used to describe the southerners: "every hick son of a bitch . . . from Podunk to Jerkwater." The last lines of the speech, written in short, simple sentences designed to drive home a crucial point, affirm that the increase of capital is the real reason for bringing urban "modern comforts" to the South. In the effort to increase profits and thereby remake the rural South in the image of the urban ideal, the rural landscape must be changed to make room for these new developments. Specifically, the land developers must drain the swamps to pave the way for new economic activity.

The fourth chapter's title, "A Shining New South," implies the long history of swamp and wetland exploitation in the United States: the mention of something "shining"

and “new” conceals what was once dark and ancient. For early colonists, swamps’ unnavigability made them seem not only dangerous but also immoral. According to Ann Vileisis in *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America’s Wetlands* (1999), European colonists “projected a moral landscape onto the physical landscape of the New World” (30) because the low-lying swamps contrasted with their vision of the New World as a “City on a Hill.” Later, swamps became safe havens for oppressed people groups such as Native Americans and runaway slaves. In the 1800s, landowners discovered that draining swamps provided access to an abundance of timber, and technological innovations caused them to redouble their efforts to drain swamplands. Draining the swamps proved disastrous for wetland ecology: according to William B. Meyer, wetland drainage is “very attractive for many wetland owners, for it can leave a net profit, while many of the costs—increased flood heights, dirtier water, impoverished wildlife, disfigured scenery—are passed on to others” (112). By the early twentieth century, wetlands began to disappear at an alarming rate. Anthony Wilson states in *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (2006), “Once developers discovered the wealth to be had, they moved to reap it with remarkable speed, creating a dizzying flurry of logging activity that transformed the economies of wetlands and swelled their populations with stunning speed, then left a wasteland in its wake as the ‘inexhaustible’ timber supply was, by the mid-1920s, all but exhausted” (104). In *Southern Cross the Dog*, Cheng displays the negative effects of swamp drainage in the mid-twentieth century, using the grotesque L’Etangs as a focal point for injustices caused by exploitative ecological practices. Ironically, the more the swamp is developed, the more the L’Etangs regress to a more animalistic way of life. Yet Cheng’s novel reveals

how, even though they are antagonistic towards one another, the lives of the L'Etangs and the lives of the developers are both filled with danger and violence.

What distinguishes the developers and the L'Etangs is their relationship with the land: for the developers, the swamp is merely an obstacle to be overcome, but for the L'Etangs, the swamp is a sublime wilderness. In order for the “modern comforts” to come about, developers must build a dam and modify the natural landscape; Part Four is filled with descriptions of the way these modifications are accomplished. For example, Robert is assigned to demolition duty, and “for months they turned chunks of green country into a fine burnt powder” (180). Robert and the other men in his outfit are required to “level this dam, bury that hill, fill that gully” (180) with no regard for what they are destroying. The text quickly glosses over the destruction these developers bring to the region; instead, the focus is solely on the future and what will be possible once the rural landscape has been obliterated. Yet also in this chapter, Cheng provides a counterpoint to the rhetoric of capitalistic development by describing the swamp landscape in vivid detail. Cheng draws on the nineteenth century cultural signifier of the sublime gothic swamp as a shorthand for a variety of southern miseries, especially slavery.<sup>36</sup> As Frankie L'Etang traverses the swamp, “She cast[s] her gaze around the empty woods, the shelves of mushrooms growing on the bark, the sunlight breaking through the thick wet air” (223). Even though Frankie is ready to leave the region and

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<sup>36</sup> Rebecca McIntyre notes in her essay “Promoting the Gothic South” that in antebellum America, the colonial image of the “dismal swamp” gave way to the idea of the “sublime swamp”: “A sublime scene was one that awed the viewer with its power, its grandeur, or, in the case of the swamp, its dark, forbidding atmosphere” (37). Even though the swamp is a threatening locale in the dominant white southern consciousness of the antebellum South, for escaped slaves the swamp is a place of protection. Narratives such as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) show escaping to the swamp as dangerous and uncomfortable, but still preferable to being recaptured and brought back into slavery.

therefore does not appreciate the beauty and ecological diversity in her world, these images remind the reader of what will be lost when the demolition team reaches this part of the swamp. Later, when Robert tries to escape Frankie's capture, he finds that "the deeper [into the swamp he goes], the more tangled the disease, twisting and knotting into itself, throwing up ropes of kudzu and creeper, and on that rope, bright purple flowers that burst open like sores" (231). Also, Frankie muses that in the swamp, "nothing moved. The mud would catch you and hold you till it dried you up and snapped you like a reed" (223). The beautiful but dangerous setting comes to personify the difficulty Robert has trying to run away from his captors. Thus, although the rural landscape may be threatened by industrial development, it can also threaten anyone who ventures into it.

The sublime swamp's inhabitants exhibit many of the the grotesque characteristics of the swamp, but the southern grotesque denotes more than just monstrosity, violence, and gore; it also includes situations that can simply make the reader uneasy. Cheng uses these characteristics to elicit compassion for the L'Etangs. Flannery O'Connor states in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" that "even though the writer who produces grotesque fiction may not consider his characters any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is, his audience is going to" and that "the general reader has managed to connect the grotesque with the sentimental, for whenever he speaks of it favorably, he seems to associate it with the writer's compassion" (42). *Southern Cross the Dog* includes grotesque moments that invite the reader's empathy. For example, in Part Three, instead of giving up his rifle to a salvager, Uncle Reb sells his young niece to him so that he can keep his gun. This grotesque situation not only shocks but also raises compassion for the young Dora's suffering. Of

all the grotesque fur trappers, Frankie earns the most compassionate response. After saving Robert's life, Robert finds himself falling in love with her: "At the end of his life, he would hold to this image, her face obscured, her body at rest as the world tore itself apart around them. . . And it was funny, that they call it falling, because that was what it was" (234). Frankie falls in love, too, and she imagines a life in which she and Robert can have an interracial relationship. However, when Frankie asks Robert to go north with her, he states simply, "I can't." Frankie is heartbroken: "Something inside her snapped free and plummeted. The color rose to her face. She wanted to ask why, but the question was small and stupid. She was small and stupid" (316). These and other parts of the novel present grotesque situations that establish tension in the narrative and create a foreboding tone, but they also invite compassion for the suffering characters.

More than the blues, the gothic, and the grotesque, *Southern Cross the Dog's* rurality provides the basis for Bill Cheng to explore the isolating effects of natural disaster and psychological trauma. Considering Cheng's authorial background, *Southern Cross the Dog* calls into question just how distinct a region the South can be if it can be convincingly written by someone who not only does not identify as a southerner, but who has never visited the region in the first place. Cheng's authorship challenges notions of what it takes to be an "authentic" southern writer and of who gets to write about the experiences of others; however, Cheng's portrayal of the lives of the rural folk in the wake of a natural disaster in the early twentieth century echoes the difficulties faced by marginalized groups throughout history. Using the blues, an art form that has a history of appropriation, as well as southern modernism, the Southern Gothic, and the southern grotesque, all subgenres that are increasingly becoming untethered from their roots in the

Southern Renaissance, Cheng constructs a novel that resonates with a number of cultural issues. Yet even though Cheng uses traditional southern literary tropes and southern identities to create a novel that vividly describes the Mississippi Delta during an important historical era, it is his use of rurality that best ties the novel to contemporary southern literature.

CHAPTER IV – CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AS RESISTANCE TO URBANITY  
IN KAREN RUSSELL’S *SWAMPLANDIA!*

In *Swamplandia!* (2011), Karen Russell examines how even the most remote rural wilderness areas are exploited and subsumed in an increasingly urban-dominated society. Deep within the Ten Thousand Islands of western Florida, the Bigtrees’ alligator-wrestling theme park capitalizes on the wild swamp environment in which it is located. Accessible only by ferry, *Swamplandia!* features alligator wrestling shows at the Gator Pit, a Reptile Walk, and a dangerous Swimming with the Seths<sup>37</sup> show. The park is operated by the Bigtrees, an enigmatic family who live at the park and assume a particular social status based on their special relationship with nature. The “tribal” surname the family has adopted is part of the narrative they cultivate in order for the park to seem more authentic: Chief Bigtree, the family’s patriarch, creates a false Native American identity and forces his family to play Indian as part of the theme park experience. The novel follows the lives of the Bigtree children, Ava, Ossie, and Kiwi, as they cope with the loss of their mother and the park’s subsequent closure. As the characters make similar descents into very different underworlds, the novel alternates between chapters narrated from Ava’s naïve point of view that are set in the rural swamp and third-person chapters that follow Kiwi on the urban mainland. Russel’s juxtaposition of these settings contrasts the sublime, perhaps even fantastical, natural landscape with the artificial World of Darkness to expose various cultural distinctions, including rural/urban, island/mainland, and Native/non-Native, to subvert the hierarchies that these distinctions support. This chapter will examine the rural aspects of Russell’s novel,

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<sup>37</sup> “Seth” is the nickname the family has given to all of the alligators in the park.

specifically the ways in which *Swamplandia!* depicts rural locations and identities as sites of resistance to capitalism's encroachment on all space.

Much of the criticism of Russell's fiction discusses her use of fantastic settings, such as the mythic swamp of the Florida Everglades, as imaginary spaces in which adolescents journey from childhood to adulthood.<sup>38</sup> Russell says that she is "drawn to imaginary places because it's an architecture that any reading consciousness can enter" ("An Interview"). Russell may create spaces designed to be accessible to all readers, but the imaginary setting in *Swamplandia!* is based on a real place: the novel is filled with references to actual local history and ecology. As the Bigtrees appropriate Native American stereotypes as proto-rural dwellers with unique ties to the land, the novel suggests that in contemporary culture, all identities, including those based on the land, are social constructions that are chosen for a specific purpose. In the decline of the Bigtree "tribe," the novel implies that in performing difference from and resistance to neoliberal capitalist culture, rural identities are always already included in the capitalist enterprise, and that ultimately, even though the Bigtrees must leave their home and assimilate into mainstream culture, their rural experiences leave them better equipped for urban life.

Rural localities possess the potential for resistance to the dominant neoliberal capitalist system, and swamps, as spaces that are naturally difficult to tame, are prime examples of this kind of locality. Rural studies currently views localities as one component of understanding rurality. As mentioned in Chapter I, Keith Halfacree calls for a conception of rural space that consists of localities, formal representations, and

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Christopher Rieger's "From Childhood to the Underworld: Native American Birdman Iconography and Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*" and Lori Cornelius's "Into the Swamp: An Examination of Folk Narrative Structures and Storylines in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*."

everyday lives and that challenges “the mainstream trajectories that the production of the rural is taking in the global North” (“Rural Space” 125). Rural localities are often identified with agriculture, but, Halfacree argues, other rural activities, such as forestry, environmental education, and craft industries are needed for his “trial by space” of radical rurality (132). As shown in Chapter III, the swamp is one of these rural localities that naturally resists the threat of homogenization and can provide other rural activities as alternatives to mainstream culture. Anthony Wilson states in *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* that referring to a place as a swamp is “an evaluative description of land that resists reclamation for agricultural or development purposes” (xiv). Swamps’ natural resistance to development has made them ideal depositories for the marginalized or those who are deemed unfit for society. However, in more recent years, these sites of resistance have been transformed into protected spaces, especially in light of ecological tourism.

Throughout most of *Swamplandia!*, the rural Florida swamp strongly resists capitalist development. Even though the novel is populated with offbeat swamp-dwellers, some critics consider the unnavigable landscape of Ten Thousand Islands in southwestern Florida to be the novel’s central character.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is the novel’s setting, the physical space of the swamp, that supports the existence of both the *Swamplandia!* theme park and the Bigtrees’ way of life. Although that space is very resistant to intrusion from sources that seek to drain the swamp, it is not left as untouched, pristine wilderness. As Ava narrates several historical attempts humans have made to tame the unruly swamp, she also describes the region’s ecological history as one of environmental degradation. In

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Robert Ziegler’s article “Lost and Found in Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*.”

*Swamplandia!*, humans' interaction with nonhuman nature takes several forms, including developers' doomed attempt to dredge a canal through the swampland all the way from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico and the Army Corps of Engineers' attempt to drain the swamp by introducing the invasive melaleuca tree into the region. In both cases, the swamp did not succumb to the efforts at development, but the landscape was left with the marks of its struggle. After the swamp becomes disfigured in the first half of the twentieth century, it finally yields to capitalist enterprise when it is converted into a destination for ecological devastation tourism. This theme of resistance, devastation, and eventual transformation of the swamp sets a pattern for the lives of the islanders who live there.

Chapter Nine, "The Dredgeman's Revelation," demonstrates one way that the swamp in *Swamplandia!* operates as a site of resistance to capitalist development. This section at the center of the novel provides insight into early twentieth-century capitalist urges that made not just the landscape but also human lives disposable due to the developers' relentless pursuit of profits. The bulk of this chapter tells the story of Louis Thanksgiving, a young dredge worker who dies in a boiler explosion. This story describes how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. government agencies employed large dredges to dig canals throughout the swamps of western Florida, leaving lasting scars on the terrain. Early in the novel, one of these ancient dredges washes up on the shore of the Bigtrees' island, and Ava muses about what caused it to be abandoned long ago: "I could guess what the Chief would say: Girls, that dredge crew just ran out of money. The Gulf route got cut short because this Model Land Company couldn't finance it. Nothing supernatural about *that* fate" (103). Ava's explanation of this

uncanny event demonstrates her familiarity with doomed enterprises in the Florida swamp. Her comment illuminates an implied history of companies using the land and leaving it in a worse condition whenever their ventures become too dangerous or no longer profitable. When Louis Thanksgiving's expedition ends in death and disaster, the project is abandoned, leaving behind the deserted dredge and a permanently altered landscape. "The Dredgeman's Revelation" represents one of the many ways in which conflicts between the environment and the capitalist impulse not only mar the landscape but can also destroy people's lives.

Another way that the novel depicts the swamp as a site of resistance to capitalist development is through its descriptions of the invasive melaleuca tree brought over in the 1940s. Ava makes several observations about the threat of the melaleuca tree encroaching on the native species in the swamp, stating "We islanders worried about the menace of the melaleuca woods—the melaleuca, or paperbark tree, was an exotic invasive species that was draining huge tracts of our swamp to the northeast" (7-8). Ava expresses her concerns about a melaleuca tree monoculture when she journeys deep into the swamp: "Some hours later I realized that we hadn't seen a melaleuca in miles. No more threat of 'monoculture,' as the scientists called it. The trees out here were a dark variety" (244). The novel offers a brief history of the introduction of melaleuca into the region by the Army Corps of Engineers, who later turn their efforts to removing the melaleuca infestation. The U.S. government hired small aircraft pilots, known to the swamp dwellers as the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, to better distribute the melaleuca seeds:

They dumped thousands of Australian melaleuca seeds from the windows of low-flying Cessnas, shaking them all over the salt marshes and the saw-

grass prairies and the tree islands. Would-be farmers dreamed of nights lit by fragrant globes of citrus, yellow fields of corn, and Angus cattle black as jackboots, the worthless saw grass vanquished, the alligators dead, the water drained. (176-77)

The imagery used in this passage emphasizes the privileging of profit-driven agriculture over the natural environment: the “fragrant globes of citrus” and “yellow fields of corn” are contrasted with “worthless saw grass” and dead alligators. When the melaleuca tree was introduced in the 1940s, local residents initially praised the new species because they believed it would allow the unusable swamp to become profitable for agriculture. However, the project was unsuccessful, and the melaleuca tree became an “apocalypse” and a “plague” on the land. The swamp was never transformed into farmland, but the landscape would forever be changed as indigenous plants and wildlife, as well as the humans who depended on them, were forced to adapt to the melaleuca tree invasion.

Despite its longstanding resistance to drainage for agricultural use, the Florida swamp finally gave in to the capitalist impulse via ecological tourism (as opposed to the cultural tourism of the early twentieth century). The campaign to use the melaleuca tree to drain the swamp failed, but it did not counter the capitalist profit motive that inspired it and indeed provided a reason for profits to be extracted from the land. The story of the way swamps have become commodified in the U.S. has followed a trend outlined by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). After explaining how the state produces spaces throughout its territory via primitive accumulation, Lefebvre notes: “Later, perhaps towards the end of the period of accelerated growth, these same countries are liable to discover how such spaces may be pressed into the service of cultural

consumption, of ‘culture itself,’ and of the tourism and leisure industries with their almost limitless prospects” (360). Ecological tourism has grown in recent years, which provides a justification for preserving environments but does so by producing idealized spaces.<sup>40</sup> In *Swamplandia!*, however, entrepreneurs derive profits not by selling an experience of pristine nature, but rather from showing off the effects of the melaleuca invasion. The negative environmental impact of the melaleuca tree, according to Russell, was not widely recognized until it was televised in the 1980s. Ava recalls a hellish scene on the television: “A haunting slide show commenced: acres and acres of new forests composed of a single multiplying tree, the melaleuca; fires burning on the drained land in northern Florida, where blue-green sheets of water used to flow” (177). This scene reveals how the experience of viewing the ugliness of decimated ecosystems can be repackaged as a product to be consumed through ecological devastation tourism. At its last point of resistance, the swamp can still be assimilated into the capitalist system; thus, the rural swamp’s potential to resist capitalist development shrinks when it is coopted by the late capitalist tourism and leisure industries. The swamp’s shift from site of resistance to site of transformation is mirrored in the lives of the swamp’s inhabitants, the Bigtrees.

Just as the rural swamp follows the trajectory of resistance, devastation, and eventual transformation, the lives of the Bigtrees follow a similar path. Through its use of ecological diction, *Swamplandia!* implicitly connects the rural locality of the swamp with the other two components of Halfacree’s three-fold model of rural space, the everyday lives of the rural dwellers and the representations of the rural. This connection is revealed when Russell uses language suggestive of the swamp’s ecology to illustrate the economic

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<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Adam Keul’s “Tourism Neoliberalism and the Swamp as Enterprise.”

principles that underlie the decline of the swamp culture. For example, Ava considers that “money appeared to be the one species that couldn’t take root in the swamp—and this blight was a killer of dreams, the Chief said, more potent than the red cotton borer” (250). In this example, the comparison between money and plant life shows the Bigtrees’ belief that investment is supposed to produce growth, but their inability to generate large profits is because of some nebulous “blight.” Using similar language, Ava explains the Chief’s plan to bring tourists back to the park, which he calls Carnival Darwinism: “[The Chief] was going to buy us adaptations: wings and goggled eyes, skin suits, new tridents for hooking Seths. . . . Soon the *indigenous* Bigtrees would be able to compete with our niche competitor, that *exotic invasive species* of business, the World of Darkness” (76, italics mine). These implied comparisons between economics and ecology blur the difference between the two: whereas the World of Darkness is able to grow uninhibited, Swamplandia! is held back by its owners’ conflation of ecology and economics.

The story of the Florida swamp’s initial resistance to capitalism followed by its transformation into an ecological tourist destination reflects the Bigtrees’ resistance to mainland culture and eventual absorption into it. The Bigtree family represents another component of Halfacree’s three-fold model, the everyday lives of rural people. Ching and Creed discuss rural identities as sites of resistance to urbanity: “rustic identities . . . are not symptoms of incomplete development or inadequate education. Rather we see a clear attempt on the part of rustic people to assert their value and place in a world dominated by urban(e) others. Such an assertion challenges the cultural preeminence of sophisticated urbanity by its very expression” (28). In Ching and Creed’s view, it is not necessary for rural dwellers to act against urban culture; instead, their very identities include resistance

as a component. The Bigtrees embrace identities that likewise are inherently resistant to the dominant culture. The axis along which the Bigtrees embody their distinction is fundamentally rural/urban, but they express this distinction as islander/mainlander and Native/non-Native.

The Bigtrees are firmly attached to their identity as islanders, referring to themselves and the swamp's other inhabitants as such. The Chief believes that mainlanders are naturally weaker than islanders because of their access to amenities: "all the mainlanders got so grumpy when they didn't have hot water, [when] a Bigtree could shower in a Seth's spit" (109). Also, the Bigtrees view the mainland as a place devoid of life. Ava sees the urban landscape as a place of inauthentic homogeneous culture, while the swamp allows her to be herself: "I would vanish on the mainland, dry up in that crush of cars and strangers, of flesh hidden inside metallic colors, the salt white of the sky over the interstate highway, the strange pink-and-white apartment complexes where mainlanders lived like cutlery in drawers" (70). In opposition to the bland mainland culture, Ava considers their way of life to be more "authentic." For example, when Ava describes writing a letter to the fictional commission that sponsors national alligator wrestling competitions, she states, "I made sure the commissioners understood that I was the real deal; I wasn't some unserious church girl from Nebraska who had only ever handled pet-store geckos, or some inlander, 'Rebecca' or 'Mary,' a pigtailed zoo volunteer" (57). Ava's disdain for inauthentic girls' roles goes as far as to mock being designated by traditional girls' names, which are implicitly contrasted with the nontraditional names Ava, Osceola, and Kiwi. Despite the islanders' opposition to mainland culture, they must rely on the mainland for their survival. For instance, Gus

Waddell, the ferryboat captain, brings tourists to the park as well as food and provisions to the Bigtree family. The islanders also depend on the mainland for educational materials, books, and entertainment. Ava describes the Library Boat, a houseboat that contains scores of books for the islanders' use, as "another link to the mainland, although the boat never moved" (25). The independent islanders' dependence on the mainland highlights the way that marginalized groups depend on the dominant group for their very existence; however, this dependence is usually seen as one-sided.

The model of the dominant group exploiting the marginalized group is common throughout human history. Specifically, both the dominant group and the marginalized group operate within the same economic system, but with its superior status, the dominant group uses the marginalized group to attain more power, knowledge, and resources.<sup>41</sup> This model is played out in the way the Bigtree clan arrives in the swamp in the first place. Born Ernest Schedrach, the family's patriarch who later becomes Grandpa Sawtooth Bigtree is lured to the region by flyers featuring an artist's sketch of the "post-drainage" swamp. Grandpa is a poor white man who loses his job in Ohio, and upon arriving in the Florida Everglades, he "changed his name to outwit his old boss" because "he owed a sizable amount of money to the mill foreman" (30). When he arrives at the property he bought sight unseen, he is disappointed that the farmland he had imagined "turned out to be covered by six feet of crystal water. Stalks of nine-foot grass glittered in the wind, in every direction, the drowned sentinels of an eternal slough. The only real habitable 'property' in sight was the island he later named Swamplandia!: a hundred acre

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<sup>41</sup> This idea, often referred to as conflict theory, informs much of Karl Marx's economic philosophy. See, for example, Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

waste (30). Sawtooth lacks the means to leave the island after he is tricked into buying it; he must somehow use the “hundred acre waste” to support his family. Ava describes the men who sold Grandpa Sawtooth the land as “cheerful northern realtors” who possess “a greed that aspired to poetry” (30). Thus, the Bigtree family’s background provided them with a memory of their own exploitation that they would need to imitate in order to survive in the “useless” swamp.

Stranded in the swamp with no real skills or access to resources, the Bigtrees had to find their own niche in the marketplace in order to thrive. The problem is that the Bigtrees have nothing to sell—except for themselves. Thus, the Bigtrees exploit an imaginary past to commodify a cultural experience that conforms to popular stereotypes. Martyn Bone argues in his introduction to *Creating and Consuming the American South* (2015) that “the rise of consumer culture provided opportunities to re-create and even repudiate ‘southern’ identities” (7). By the 1960s, cultural tourism had become a major employer and wealth-generator in the southern states, and historical sites such as the old French Quarter in New Orleans or the antebellum homes in Natchez, Mississippi were made part of a revisionist project through marketing and re-presentation. The tourism industry operates under the assumption that tourists are eager to consume a sanitized narrative of southern history in place of an accurate one. Likewise, the imaginary past of the south Florida swamp that the Bigtrees wish to sell to the tourists is one that never existed: the Bigtrees assume roles of Seminole alligator wrestlers who once operated tourist villages throughout Western Florida in the first half of the twentieth century. The Bigtree children understand the history of the native peoples of their home, but they are not clear about the implications involved in the way they appropriate Native American

culture. Ava Bigtree states, “Although there was not a drop of Seminole or Miccosukee blood in us, the Chief always costumed us in tribal apparel for the photographs he took. He said we were ‘our own Indians’” (6). In this way, *Swamplandia!* reveals how under late capitalism, even groups that are marginalized at one level can participate in exploiting other marginalized groups for profit.

The Swamplandia! theme park, then, is actually a simulacrum of a Seminole tourist village, its existence obscuring both the actual history of the Seminoles in the 1800s and the tourist version that the Native Americans themselves created in the 1900s, since, according to Patsy West in *The Enduring Seminoles: From Alligator Wrestling to Casino Gaming* (2008), “As the Seminole villages became some of Florida’s most popular and longest running pre-Disney attractions, they gave the Seminoles a legacy that promoted alligator wrestling, a growing appreciation of arts and crafts, and significant support of their ‘unconquered’ status” (26). She states that by 1930, these villages had become the most profitable tourist businesses in Florida (20). These villages were places of transition during a time of great change for the tribes after a series of “unnatural disasters” destroyed their economy. West describes how the completion of the Florida East Coast Railway attracted more developers and tourists to southern Florida, which led to reclamation projects that drained the swampland just as markets for alligator hides, the source of about seventy-five percent of the Indians’ annual income, disappeared (9). Tourists spent seasons at these villages, which in turn provided Native American families with a means to enact a form of their traditional culture. It seems odd that *Swamplandia!*, a novel that contains a very lengthy imagined account of a dredge worker from the early twentieth century, glosses over the history surrounding the origins of alligator wrestling

and tourist villages. It is equally puzzling that after Ava relates her family's "heritage" in the first few pages of the novel, direct references to Native Americans are absent from the rest of the novel.

The Bigtrees' appropriation of Native American culture also blurs the binaries between dominant and marginalized groups: the Bigtrees, firmly encased in the fringes of society, merge with another marginalized group for monetary gain. The Bigtrees' hybrid identities are unlike Homi Bhabha's conception of hybridity, in which identity lies not in Self or Other but rather in a liminal "Third Space."<sup>42</sup> In *The Real South*, Scott Romine notes the difficulty of maintaining a distinct identity while participating in society under late capitalism: "For all its academic traction, hybridity has proven more slippery in the real world, where individuals and groups continue, intractably, to practice binary and sometimes explicitly atavistic modes of identity" (108). The ease with which the Bigtrees can appropriate the Native American image points to the unmooring of identity from embodiment that has occurred in contemporary neoliberal society. In the first chapter of *Swamplandia!*, the Bigtrees are introduced as a tribe of "our own Indians," and their costumes for the park's promotional photos are catalogued: "buckskin vests, cloth headbands, great blue heron feathers, great white heron feathers, chubby beads hanging off our foreheads and our hair in braids, gator 'fang' necklaces" (6). Kiwi, the oldest of the Bigtree children, recalls struggling with his identity when he is taunted for being white, wishing he could tell his tormentors about "Chief Bigtree's 'Indian' lineage; how as a kid they'd put makeup and beads on him, festooned him with spoonbill feathers and reptilian claws; how at fourteen he'd declared: 'I'm a Not-Bigtree. A Not-Indian. A Not-

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<sup>42</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

Seminole. A Not-Miccosukee” (208). Kiwi senses a difference between the false “Indian” identity that he lived out as a child and the homogenous “white boy” identity that he is expected to comply with once he moves to the mainland. The bullies in his night class establish dominance over Kiwi because of his difference, but Kiwi begins to realize that in order to be accepted, he has to disavow his upbringing. Unlike his experience in the rural swamp, on the mainland, he cannot be both white and Indian.

Many factors influence the Bigtrees’ appropriation of Native American stereotypes. First, their low socioeconomic status plays a major role in their readiness to assume a false Native American culture; well-off people do not have to go to such extremes to meet basic needs. Ching and Creed note that class “is the dimension of contemporary identity politics most explicitly connected to rural identities” and that “the cultural devaluation of rural people often reflects their economic marginality” (26). Even though Swamplandia! is based on previous Native American tourist villages, those villages had already reached their height of popularity long before Sawtooth Bigtree first moved to the swamp. By the time Swamplandia! opened, the Seminole tribe had already transitioned from tourist villages to casinos. Swamplandia! is simply behind the times. There are many indicators in the novel that show the Bigtrees did not make tremendous profits even at the park’s peak. For example, before Hilola’s death, Swamplandia! “had an advertising campaign that was on par with the best of the aqua-slide attractions and the miniature golf courses” (7), but Ava and the Chief appear dumbfounded the first time they see a World of Darkness television ad. Still, in order for the Bigtrees to operate a theme park and remain in the swamp, it is simply more commercially viable for them to reproduce Native American stereotypes than it would be to create “authentic” personas

devoid of already-existing cultural associations. The park's closure does not occur because they have to compete with other outdated Native American tourist villages; instead they have to compete with the next major iteration of tourist attractions in Florida, the Walt Disney World-styled World of Darkness.

Another factor is that the Bigtrees' cultural appropriation is not without precedent; white southerners have a long history of usurping Native identities for their own self-serving purposes. In the national consciousness, Native Americans represent a kind of proto-rurality. In *Reconstructing the Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause* (2011), Melanie Benson Taylor argues that “the Native American exists in the cultural imagination as a befeathered, moccasined anachronism—a byproduct of colonial processes by which the original inhabitants of a territory must be co-opted and refigured in order to make the settler culture appear autochthonous” (11-12). Since the Americas were first settled by European colonists, Native Americans were conceived as “the Noble Savage,” a stereotypical Other who has not been corrupted by civilization and therefore symbolizes humanity's innate goodness. During the 1773 Boston Tea Party, many Bostonians appropriated this stereotype when they adopted Mohawk Indian disguises and destroyed shipments of tea in protest of British taxation. The stereotype of the native Noble Savage from colonial times persists today, concealing the bloody history of Indian removal in the early 1800s and eliding Native Americans from the national consciousness. The Bigtrees participate in this elision, as well: even though they play Indian, they never make reference to the real Native Americans who live nearby in Loomis County. By backgrounding the presence of actual Native Americans in her novel, Russell follows a tradition in much southern literature: according

to Eric Gary Anderson, “non-Native writers and other custodians of southern literature and history often downplay the longstanding indigenous presence in, as it were, their own backyard” (165-66). Thus, the Bigtrees’ appropriation of Native American identities serves to exploit and further marginalize the already marginalized Native American people.

If the real Native Americans are backgrounded in the novel, then the rural landscape foregrounded in *Swamplandia!* is another reason the Bigtrees are able to appropriate traditional Native American culture. Russell’s novel demonstrates how, despite being continuously reminded that identity is a social construct, marginalized people tend to cling tenaciously to their constructed identities. Ching and Creed note that “place identities are clearly linked to a particular kind of place, but even identities built upon the land are social constructions” (12). Yet Ching and Creed also point out that we must “recognize elements of what Bourdieu (1984: 372) calls ‘the choice of the necessary,’ an attempt to present one’s way of life, about which one may have few choices, as a conscious preference” (18). Ava, Ossie, and the Chief value their “Indian” heritage very highly, but for most of the novel, Kiwi recognizes and takes issue with the fact that the family’s cultural appropriation is a choice, whether conscious or unconscious. For example, when Kiwi compares a World of Darkness park greeter to his father, he thinks: “Even Chief Bigtree—an ‘indigenous swamp dweller’ who was actually a white guy descended from a coal miner in small-town Ohio, a man who sat on lizards in a feathered headdress—even the Chief seemed like a genius of self-awareness next to this kid Leonard” (92). Observations like these undermine the Bigtrees’ claims to authenticity and remind the reader that in modern culture, identity is fluid, not fixed.

Finally, it is especially fitting that the Bigtrees assume Native American identities because of two major components of their everyday lives that are often associated with Native American culture: a strong connection to nature and an oral history. According to Joy Porter in *Native American Environmentalism: Land, Spirit, and the Idea of Wilderness* (2014), “It is generally recognized that native peoples had, and in many cases continue to have, a unique ecological awareness and understanding of complex environmental interactions” (xiv). The Bigtrees also have a strong desire to preserve and protect nature. For example, after Kiwi once found “a punky infestation” of melaleuca saplings behind the Gator Pit, Ava narrates how “the Bigtree men swung axes into them, bled them flooding the world with the smell of camphor. We kept cutting them down, and the earth kept raising them” (97). Although the family has a financial interest in keeping a melaleuca infestation off their island, they also feel a sense of duty toward ecological preservation. Referencing her mother’s fate, Ava compares the melaleuca’s rapid growth to “a body making cancer” (97), and she worries that “*the swamp is writing her own suicide note!*” (97). Concern for preserving the natural environment is taught at an early age: Ava states, “If you were a swamp kid, you were weaned on the story of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, these men who had flown over the swamp in tiny Cessnas and sprinkled melaleuca seeds out of restaurant salt and pepper shakers” (96). The local legend of the Four Pilots is a part of a larger oral tradition that the Bigtrees use to establish their family history.

The Bigtrees’ connection to an oral history is concretized in the family history museum of the gift shop. The Bigtrees do not just perform their false Native identity for the tourists; they also assume a false Native history to convince themselves of their

difference from them. According to Judith Butler's conception of identity formation in her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* (1990), their constant performance sets the foundation for their identity.<sup>43</sup> Paul Chaat Smith states in *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (2009) that for Native Americans, "the tacky, dumb stuff" invented about Indians by non-Natives has become "the real thing now" (6). By dressing in cliched headdresses and wrestling alligators, the Bigtrees perform the stereotype, but that stereotype is what tourists expect when they pay to see "real" Indians. This kind of tourism has been popular in the United States. In an insightful examination of the Cherokee nation's long-running outdoor theatrical performance *Unto These Hills*, Melanie Benson Taylor states that "visitors must know, on some level, that these are real contemporary Indians only acting the part of their traditional ancestors; or do they? And what about the Cherokees themselves?" (129). Tourists view performances such as these to "forget" the actual Indians they are meant to represent. But it goes further than that—the actors can also "forget" that what they portray is false, and in their constant performance, incorporate their portrayal into their identity. The Bigtree children do not stop performing their Native identities whenever the tourists stop coming to the park because they have no other identity that they can revert back to.

The Bigtrees' reliance on an oral history allows them to create an alternative history to the established narrative. Since they are not actually indigenous to the region, they must invent reasons why the swamp is home. The Bigtrees' version of history runs counter to the official history of the region, and it seems that the Bigtrees' version

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<sup>43</sup> *Gender Trouble* does not specifically discuss the performativity of race, but Butler expands her ideas to include other types of representation such as race and class in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993).

becomes more “real” to both the tourists and the family through its constant performance. The Chief is comfortable enough constructing a false history through his use of “authentic” artifacts displayed in the Swamplandia! museum. Ava realizes that their false history is constantly being rewritten: “Often the deck of our past got reshuffled overnight. [The Chief] took down Grandpa’s old army medallions, which did not fit with his image of our free and ancient swamp tribe. And nowhere did his posted descriptions of Hilola Bigtree’s many accomplishments mention her maiden name—Owens—or her mainland birthplace” (32). The false history may be primarily for the tourists, but it also has a profound effect on Ava, Ossie, and Kiwi. Ava states, “We kids cultivated a faith in all the Bigtree legends—I’d heard them so often from my parents that they seemed to me like memories I’d made myself” (247). The Bigtree children live with a permeable double-consciousness, and Ava is aware that in the museum “certain artifacts appeared or vanished, dates changed and old events appeared in fresh blue ink on new cards beneath the dusty exhibits, and you couldn’t say one word about these changes in the morning. You had to pretend like the Bigtree story had always read that way” (32). The children’s coercion is not forced; rather, Ava’s “you had to” refers to her parents’ expectation that the children would always participate in maintaining their sense of difference from the mainlanders.

In addition to the false history the Bigtree children perform, the rural setting allows them to learn a local history of the region that is more accurate than the official historical record. For example, Ava discusses the details of her spotty homeschooled education: “Grandpa Sawtooth, to his credit, taught us the names of whole townships that had been forgotten underwater. Black pioneers, Creek Indians, moonshiners, women,

‘disappeared’ boy soldiers who deserted their army camps. From Grandpa we learned how to peer beneath the sea-glare of the ‘official, historical’ Florida records we found in books” (250). This passage reveals that, even though some of the Bigtrees’ history was consciously invented, other portions of it actually occurred. The Bigtrees give their false past an almost religious significance; for example, Ava feels a deep violation when her father rummages through the museum just to find Ossie a birthday present. For Ava, the artifacts in the museum represent a longed-for past (that never existed), but her emotional attachment is what allows her to “forget” that it was all made up in the first place. Ironically, though, the real history of the region is placed in the same category as the invented history of the Bigtree family because of its relationship to the established historical narrative of the mainlanders. For the Bigtrees to maintain a sense of difference from the dominant mainland culture, they must first embrace this alternative history and perform it both for the spectators and for themselves.

Russell’s real Native Americans are found not in the swamp but on the mainland, where they operate the Pa-Hay-Okee casino. Near the end of the novel, it is revealed that the Chief makes money for the park after his wife’s death working as an announcer at the casino. Contrasting the Bigtree tribe with the Seminole tribe in the final chapters of the novel, Russell reveals that casinos, not tourist traps and theme parks, have become the way many Native Americans achieve prosperity now. The surprise revelation that the family of white southerners playing Indian at Swamplandia! is financially supported by actual Native Americans and their casino adds another layer of irony to the narrative. While the Chief tries to make money for his family the same way the real Native Americans had to in the early twentieth century, the real Native Americans had since

discovered that their exceptional sovereign status in the United States allowed them to invest in the much more lucrative gaming enterprises. However, this pragmatism is precisely the way by which many Native American tribes have been able to achieve economic security, which paradoxically allows these tribes to maintain their unique cultural practices. In *Swamplandia!* the Chief may have “envied [the Seminoles] in a filial and loving way” (238), but he never caught on that the Indians had moved beyond commodifying their culture and selling it.

It is important to note that the mainlanders in *Swamplandia!* are not opposed to the Bigtrees’ appropriation of Native culture; rather, the mainlanders are against their being different in general. *Swamplandia!*’s description of resistance in rural localities and the everyday lives of the rural dwellers works within the larger framework of critiquing late capitalism and its hostility toward any expression of individuality or authenticity.<sup>44</sup> The novel’s ecological problems are closely tied to the ideological problems that cause them, and both sets of problems are described in similar ways. For example, when discussing the threat of the melaleuca tree monoculture to the northeast of Swamplandia!, Ava also points out that “everybody had one eye on the sly encroachment of the suburbs and Big Sugar in the south. But it always seemed to me like my family was winning. We had never been defeated by the Seths” (8). Ava is perceptive enough to understand that her life in the swamp is a battle, but she believes her family’s battle is with the dangerous

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<sup>44</sup> Jon Smith discusses ecological authenticity in *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* (2013): “Despite all the recent espousal of ‘native’ species and condemnation of ‘invasive’ ones, the fact that [the tendency to assume the ecological history of the region begins with white settlers] constituted the most literal and complete invasion this land has ever seen” (128). Perhaps “authentic” authenticity does not exist, but the term can still be useful for analyzing behaviors and motives. I believe Scott Romine is right when he states that he is “less interested in defining terms such as ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ as metaphysical or psychoanalytic categories than in understanding how individuals and groups use these concepts in a region and an age compelled by them” (*Real South* 10).

natural world they face every day—she does not understand that fidelity to her family’s way of life is the means of fighting against the dominant cultural norms of the mainland. To Ava’s inexperienced point of view, capitalistic modernization is a foe that can be resisted and even beaten if she becomes strong enough to wrestle alligators. Conversely, Kiwi’s experience on the mainland causes him to eventually give up the struggle and assimilate into the norms of mainland life. He muses about the dominant culture’s hostility towards difference: “If you really were gay . . . how could you *possibly* live here in Loomis County? If you were a bookworm, a Mormon, an albino, a virgin . . . if you had any kind of unusual hairstyle, evangelical religion, a gene for altruism or obesity; if you wrestled monsters on an island, like Ava, or conjugated Latin, like he did, . . . how could you survive?” (371). In this passage, Kiwi points out how ideological monoculture does not allow for individual expression unless it is authorized by the consensus of the group. Ironically, on the surface, Loomis County might seem diverse. Kiwi attends night school with new arrivals from Ecuador, Pakistan, and Cuba, and his coworkers hail from diverse locations such as Canada and Trinidad. Yet, in the same way that the diversity in the flora of the swamp is transformed into the monoculture of the melaleuca tree, the surface diversity of Loomis County is undermined by the way in which any aberration from the norm is ridiculed out of existence. Just as the behavior of the L’Etangs is shaped by land development in Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog*, the swamp dwellers’ behavior is changed by the encroachment of urbanity in *Swamplandia!*.

The scene in which Kiwi sees his father working at the Pa-Hay-Okee casino underscores that the Bigtree children’s rural/islander/Native identities are meant to be maintained at all costs, even if it becomes necessary for their parents to put aside those

identities temporarily to allow the Chief to participate in demeaning labor on the mainland. When the Chief proposes to keep Swamplandia! afloat with Carnival Darwinism, he pours himself into his role as a provider, an “Indian,” and a theme park operator. However, throughout the novel, the reader glimpses the true way in which the Chief provides for his family and supports the park. The Chief does not radically embrace his Native identity at Swamplandia! despite all odds; instead, he debases himself and assumes another role working low-paying jobs on the mainland. He keeps his mainland identity a secret from his children, which shows that in a family context where he can (arguably) be himself, the Chief places utmost value on the way he is perceived by his children. Kiwi reflects on conversations with his mother: ““Oh, your father is meeting with the investors, honey. “Investors” are mainlanders who pay us more money than any one tourist. They are big fans of our show.’ As Kiwi got older and angrier, his mother would reveal a little more: ‘Your father is doing hard work for us on the mainland. He gets lonely in that hotel room’” (318). When Kiwi witnesses a confrontation between his father and a casino manager, the last of Kiwi’s illusions that his father is really a tough, alligator-wrestling Indian hero are shattered. The manager accuses the Chief of stealing money, and the Chief refuses to defend himself:

“Sammy!” It was an angry summons. The boss had a voice that carried crystalline across a room. The Chief listened with an odd smile. *The Chief is going to destroy you, guy.* Once, when Grandpa Sawtooth made some snide remark about his son, the Chief had bodily lifted the old man and chucked him into the slough. He waited for his father to throw the first

punch. What the heck kind of wrestling move was *this*? Kiwi wondered, watching the Chief's palms lift and separate. Some kung fu trick? (320)

At first, Kiwi cannot conceive of his father's double life. When he first sees his father in the casino, he believes the Chief is "disguised as an employee" (315). For Kiwi, the Chief's Swamplandia! "Indian" disguise is real; he is merely posing as a casino employee. Once the revelation sinks in, Kiwi begins to understand which of the Chief's identities is primary. After this encounter, Kiwi comes to the grim realization that the family's time at Swamplandia! is finally over.

Reflecting the experience of other rural dwellers, the Bigtree children have been trained to withstand threats from outside the island, but they are not prepared to withstand a threat from within. Even though there are numerous ways that the façade of authenticity is upheld for the Bigtree children, the façade crumbles when their mother dies. Until Hilola's death, the family provided the Bigtree children's sole means of socialization. However, their mother's death signals not just the end of their family as they know it, it also signals the beginning of each child's journey into self-discovery. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse identifies the "decline of the social function of the family" in late capitalism "under the rule of economic, political, and cultural monopolies" (87-88). The family's function as the primary means of socialization has been supplanted by "a whole system of extra-familial agents and agencies," which leads to the breakdown of the "*living links between the individual and his culture*" (94). In the absence of familial relationships, the children develop unhealthy methods of coping with their mother's death. After Hilola dies, each child negotiates his or her grief and subsequent loss of innocence in a different way: Kiwi with planning and determination, Ossie with denial

and psychosis, and Ava with incredulity and grim tenacity. These traits determine the ways in which each child faces the challenges of adapting to new circumstances.

Left alone in the remote swamp with no guidance, the children first look to cultural constructs for patterns on which to model themselves. The problem is that as rural dwellers, the homeschooled Bigtree children have had very little socialization outside their family, and they have not had opportunities to see adults in roles other than that of performer or tourist. The oldest and the first to notice just how silly his family appears, Kiwi responds with anger. For example, Kiwi thinks of how, back at Swamplandia!, “[his] mother used to powder his cheeks by the Gator Pit, using some sort of drugstore magic to transform her acned son into a wrestler of Seths. *This is fraudulent, Mom! This is a dubious project.* He’d pumped up his anger with big language like a bicycle tire” (260). Kiwi’s teenage anger is exacerbated after his mother’s death, and he carries it with him as it drives him to the mainland. At sixteen, Ossie is a year younger than Kiwi, and she searches for security in romantic relationships. However, Ossie cannot find a love interest on the remote island, so she contacts various ghosts using a homemade Ouija board to communicate with (and date) them. Ava seeks security in her father, but at times she sees the Chief not so much as a father but as a caricature: “The fan was blowing at the Chief’s headdress, flattening every feather so that they waved in place, like a school of fishes needling into a strong current. Something lunged in me then, receded. A giggle or a sob. A noise. I thought: *You look very stupid, Dad*” (54). Ava still searches for a father figure, and she briefly finds one in the Bird Man. Without parental authority, the Bigtrees’ false authenticity crumbles and the children are left to pick up the pieces.

The children's loss of identity precedes their departure from the island. Early in the novel, it becomes necessary for the Bigtree children to leave their home and descend into figurative or literal underworlds. The overt references to the underworld and to Dante, including an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* before Chapter Eleven, describe the Bigtree children's transition from living in the rural swamp as a kind of death/rebirth narrative. Russell's novel implies that such a transition requires an emotionally impactful ordeal, in this case shown by the characters' metaphorical death and rebirth represented as a descent into and eventual return from an "underworld." In order for the children to thrive in their new environment, they must give up their old rural identities and embrace new urban ones that incorporate only some of the elements of their old way of life. Kiwi, Ossie, and Ava each descend into their own underworlds and return transformed into characters who can live in mainland society yet still maintain their distinctive rural/islander/Native consciousness.

The first to depart from the island is Kiwi, the oldest child and the only Bigtree to realize that the family's financial troubles are insurmountable. In Chapter Six, "Kiwi's Exile in the World of Darkness," Kiwi begins working at the World of Darkness, Swamplandia!'s rival theme park that is based on various historical and literary representations of hell. Unlike Dante, Kiwi descends into his underworld with no guide, and his trials include fellow employees at The World trying to initiate him into their mainland culture by constantly belittling him and by giving him bad advice. For example, he earns the nickname Margaret Mead after his coworkers discover a copy of Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* in his locker, and the other employees taunt him relentlessly about his unusual interests. Although Kiwi suffers socially at the World, the tone of the

Kiwi chapters is light. Kiwi's entire stint at The World of Darkness could qualify as a "death" that would help him become reborn into his new role as a mainlander. Even though Ava and Ossie also undergo their own descent into the underworld and their own initiation and transformation, Kiwi's adventures serve as comic relief for their more serious narratives.

Unlike Kiwi's and Ava's proactive (yet misguided) attempts to save Swamplandia! through their actions, Ossie's "death" and descent into the underworld, told through Ava's limited first-person perspective, is a retreat from action. Ossie's descent represents the tendency of some rural dwellers to embrace a mythic rural fantasy of a "golden age" when they are confronted with difficulties. Ossie descends into her own world of darkness when she attempts to speak to her mother with a homemade Ouija board, but after failing to make contact, Ossie begins to summon "boyfriends," or ghosts of young men who died prematurely. Not long after her sixteenth birthday party, Ossie runs away to the underworld to get married to her "fiancé," the deceased dredger Louis Thanksgiving, whom the novel does not reveal as a real ghost or merely a figment of Ossie's imagination. Even though not much is mentioned about Ossie's experience in the swamp, when Ossie relocates to the mainland at the end of the novel, she does undergo a rebirth of sorts, but her transformation is less heroic than that of her siblings. Ossie visits a psychiatrist who puts her on "a variety of helpful, beekeeping-type medications . . . that were supposed to thin the ghostly voices in her head into a pleasant drone" (396). It seems as though she accepts that Louis Thanksgiving was only an illusion: Ava asks Ossie whether the ghost was real, and Ossie replies, "I thought so" (394). Ossie's

admission shows that she has given up the childish fantasies fostered by the rural swamp and is finally ready to participate in mainstream society.

Ava is the last to make her departure from the island in an attempt to rescue Ossie from her ghostly fiancé. Since neither her parents nor her older brother are able to search for Ossie, Ava feels as though she is the only one who can save her sister. In Chapter Eleven, “Ava Goes to the Underworld,” Ava asks the mysterious Bird Man who has recently appeared on the island to take her to find her sister. Although Ava trusts the Bird Man at first, he turns out not to be a guide to the underworld—instead, Ava soon realizes that the Bird Man is a fraud. After leading her deep into the swamp, the Bird Man sexually assaults her. Ava’s “rebirth” occurs when she runs away from the Bird Man and jumps into an alligator hole to try to escape from him. Just as Ava is about to emerge on the other side of the alligator hole, an alligator bites her calf and threatens to pull her back into the hole. Right before she drowns, held underwater by the alligator, Ava senses a power inside her: “My mother, before she died, really was training me to be her understudy” and she uses a “Bigtree escape maneuver” and escapes “with a strength that felt far beyond the limits of my small body” (383), and she kicks herself out of the alligator’s grasp. The power Ava finds through her “ordeal” is later described as coming from her mother. At the end of the novel, Ava states, “I believe I met my mother there, in the final instant. Not her ghost but some vaster portion of her, her self boundlessly recharged beneath the water. Her courage” (389). Ava’s recognition of her mother’s strength inside her allows her to keep something from the rural swamp within, even though she must move with her family to the mainland.

After their respective “deaths,” the Bigtree children must be reborn and assimilate into mainstream culture. The Bigtree family’s assimilation of course will not be easy. Ching and Creed note that many rural people do relocate to the city, “but once in the city they are often blamed for eroding the quality of life there. This kind of criticism can be seen as yet another veiled defense of urbanity since it denounces not the city per se but rather ‘matter out of place’” (19). Russell hints at this phenomenon in the novel’s denouement. Reminiscent of the traumatized flood survivors in Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog*, Ossie has to be medicated until she can psychologically cope with reality. In *Swamplandia!’s* final pages, Ava narrates how Ossie’s supernatural talents are viewed on the mainland as manifestations of psychosis: “Her ‘powers’ did not interest her anymore, because she was drugged” (396). Prescribing Ossie medicine to counteract the hallucinations she experiences exemplifies one way that any difference is dealt with in contemporary urban culture. As a result, the Bigtree family does not discuss their upbringing very often: Ava notes at the novel’s end that talking about their childhood at the park “would be as pointless as making a telephone call to say, ‘Kiwi are you there? Listen: my blood is circulating’” (397), but the experiences they shared are lasting. Thus, like the rural mindset held by the characters in Cheng’s *Southern Cross the Dog*, the profound sense of place the Bigtrees maintained at the park slowly fades, but it can never be completely erased.

Equipped with their experiences in the rural swamp, the Bigtree children can transition into their new lives with a kind of hope that not all people embroiled in mainstream culture can claim; it is essentially their rurality that enables them to do so. Echoing some of her first thoughts in the novel about her rural, quirky family’s struggle

against assimilating into mainland culture, Ava still believes that “the Chief was right about one thing: the show really must go on. Our Seths are still thrashing inside us in an endless loop. I like to think our family is winning. But my brother and my sister and I rarely talk about it anymore” (397). The Seths that the Bigtrees carry within them symbolizes all of their rural experience in the swamp; this sentiment confirms that Ava understands that the experiences on the island she and her family shared bind them together and serve as the basis for a strong relationship they would be unable to have without their unusual rural upbringing. Mark Fisher suggests at the end of *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) that the “very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. . . . From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again” (80-81). As a group that fights against the cultural hegemony of the “urban” mainland, the Bigtree tribe is one such alternative to capitalist realism. Russell’s novel demonstrates this belief: from the novel’s privileging of rural swamp life at the beginning to the smallest glimmer of resistance within the children’s assimilation into mainstream culture at the end, *Swamplandia!* reveals how even though rural people are seen as inferior, their way of life, even if indefensibly inauthentic, is in many ways preferable to the dull existence of late capitalist culture. *Swamplandia!* thus ends on a positive note, providing a possible alternative to the inescapable hopelessness of the rest of the novel. Rurality therefore provides that glimmer of optimism to a world that is increasingly shown to lack true intersubjective community and that is characterized by alienation and dehumanization.

CHAPTER V – AGRIBUSINESS, ALIENATION, AND COMMUNITY IN CYNTHIA  
SHEARER'S *THE CELESTIAL JUKEBOX*

In Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005), various immigrant groups gather to make up a diverse rural community in the Mississippi Delta. Set in Madagascar, Mississippi, a fictional small town south of Memphis, Tennessee, this novel features an ensemble of characters with a number of plot threads that intersect sporadically throughout the narrative. Some of the main characters with origins outside the United States include Boubacar, a fifteen-year-old Mauritanian immigrant who falls in love with American music and learns to play the steel guitar; Consuela Ramirez, a Honduran migrant worker who searches for her sister who was kidnapped and smuggled in sex trafficking; and Angus Chien, a second-generation Chinese immigrant who owns a small grocery store that serves as the hub of the community. In addition to the immigrants who arrive in Madagascar, the novel is populated by farmers, casino employees, gang members, suburban soccer moms, northern college students, and traveling blues musicians. Delving into the lives of this diverse cast of characters, *The Celestial Jukebox* presents a cross-section of the demographic makeup of the Delta region at the turn of the twenty-first century and examines the complexities of life in these conditions. However, Shearer's novel does more than simply explore the way contemporary southern demographics have radically changed from the black/white racial binary that has often been assumed about the South over the last century; it also reveals how rural conditions can still have a profound effect on people's lives, even when they live in the fringes of late-stage capitalism.

Given the transnational turn in the New Southern Studies in recent years,<sup>45</sup> it comes as no surprise that current scholarship on *The Celestial Jukebox* focuses on globalizing the U.S. South. For instance, Martyn Bone's "Narratives of African Immigration to the U.S. South" analyzes the way in which "the African diaspora continues to redefine the region" (66), and Karyn H. Anderson's "Dangerously Smooth Spaces in Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*" examines the way immigrant characters negotiate "the competing forces of cultural homogenization and heterogenization" inherent in a small town with such an ethnically diverse population (198). In *Where the New World Is: Literature about the U.S. South at Global Scales* (2018), Martyn Bone includes a chapter dedicated to Shearer's novel. Bone's study states that the transnational turn in New Southern Studies has been limited to the western hemisphere, focusing mainly on crosscurrents among the U.S. South, South America, Western Africa, and the Caribbean. As a corrective, his book resituates the South at various global scales: hemispheric, transatlantic, and transpacific. In his chapter on *The Celestial Jukebox*, Bone discusses "neoslavery," immigrant labor, and casino capitalism, tying each of these aspects in the novel to globalization. Yet *The Celestial Jukebox* does more than simply juxtapose various immigrant groups in a literary form. Fixating only on globalization and the novel's immigrant characters obscures other rich elements of the novel: using a combination of immigrant and non-immigrant characters, *The Celestial Jukebox* demonstrates that even though rural people involved in modern-day agribusiness

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<sup>45</sup> For example, see the collection *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, and the monographs *Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature* (2016) by John Wharton Lowe and *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (2007) by James L. Peacock.

can suffer from a profound sense of alienation, their active identification and participation in a community based on art and music provides the kind of intersubjective experience they need to overcome it. Furthermore, this novel demonstrates the way in which rural spaces are used in twenty-first-century southern fiction as sites for this kind of true intersubjectivity.

Many important plotlines, especially those involving the suburban mother Raine Semmes, the folk artist Bebe Marie Abide, and the college student Peregrine Jones, are tangential to the immigration experience narrated in *The Celestial Jukebox* and have thus escaped critical attention. Although *Where the New World Is* focuses on immigrants, Martyn Bone does include analyses of two native-born Americans: Aubrey Ellerbee and Dean Fondren are farmers who own large tracts of land. Bone points out that the way these farmers' participation in the agricultural economy "challenges and complicates oversimplistic oppositions between the southern agrarian tradition and (post)modern land speculation" (161). Yet Bone only touches briefly on the detrimental psychological effects they each experience as a result of their occupation as farmers. Bone also leaves out other characters in the novel who help to solidify themes and advance plotlines. For example, one of the novel's most interesting characters is Bebe Marie Abide, variously known by others as the Rose Lady and the Catfish Lady. The novel opens on Bebe Marie as a pregnant teenager who comes to live with a black man in the 1960s, and it is gradually revealed that she is the granddaughter of the plantation owner who once owned all the land in and around Madagascar. Considered mentally unstable, Bebe Marie lives alone, and she makes a living by creating artworks out of others' discarded items and selling them on the street in Memphis. Her art brings Raine, a middle-aged housewife

from Memphis, into Madagascar, which allows Raine to escape her bleak suburban life. Raine's chapters critique the excesses of modern suburban life and offer a stark counterpoint to the relative poverty of Madagascar's rural setting.<sup>46</sup> Without including a discussion of the way the Raine chapters express the dullness of excess the suburban dwellers experience in contrast to the gratitude the immigrants feel with their meager belongings, criticism of the novel feels incomplete. The narratives in which Bebe Marie and Raine are involved show that more is at stake in Shearer's novel than just the global South and the material conditions of the region's evolving economic situation.

From the novel's first chapters, Shearer signals that the South of *The Celestial Jukebox* is not exceptional, or merely a region defined in opposition to the broader nation. One way that Shearer shifts focus away from the nation/region dichotomy is by following the life of Boubacar from the first day he arrives from Mauritania. The reader is constantly reminded of Boubacar's status as a new immigrant throughout the novel. For instance, often, when he does not wish to be bothered, Boubacar grins broadly and explains that he is "*straight off the boat*" (Shearer 24). In the second chapter, as Boubacar travels from the airport in Memphis to the Celestial Grocery in Madagascar, he watches out the car window as the run-down urban scene before him fades into a rural landscape. When narrating Boubacar's experiences, Shearer repeats the phrase "America was" at the beginning of many of the paragraphs, emphasizing the novelty of Boubacar's first impressions of the United States. These metonymic observations highlight the way that

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<sup>46</sup> As explained earlier, rurality is often understood in terms of the rural/urban binary; however, suburban space, sometimes represented as the best of both worlds, has associations in the cultural imagination with "cookie-cutter" lifestyles and soul-crushing conformity. Shearer uses these associations as a backdrop against which Raine finds herself and begins to long for meaningful human interaction.

the experience of America is vast and multifaceted. On Boubacar's trip from Memphis to Madagascar, "America was a prism of voices, from televisions bunched like grapes near the ceilings" at the airport (17); "America was tattoo parlors and taquieras, pawnshops with black prison bars on their windows, and strip clubs with neon women's legs scissoring in the afternoon air" in downtown Memphis (21); and "America was old wooden buildings leaning precariously on stilts, like old cranes wading in the black water, facing the highway with an air of fatigue" on the way to the Celestial Grocery (25). Upon arriving in Memphis, Boubacar has no preconceived notions about the American South as a region, but he has already formed beliefs about the nation. He tells his driver, "*I will be having money in America,*" to which his driver responds, "*Delta is a good place to learn music, but ain't no money there. You want money, they ain't got it in Mississippi*" (24). Boubacar's naïve perception of America as one entity is validated, though, in the comparison of American abundance to Mauritanian poverty. For an immigrant who can be amazed by the "miracle" of indoor plumbing (42), economic distinctions between the South and the American nation overall are erased.

Shearer's continued use of the phrase "America was" in the Boubacar chapters also emphasizes that, not only is the distinction between region and nation a social construct, but also the supposed hierarchical dominance of urban over rural is a construct. Ching and Creed note that the rural/urban hierarchy is reversible, such as when the "gothic trope of urban danger" privileges the countryside as being less violent (17).<sup>47</sup> Shearer hints at the constructed-ness of this hierarchy in many ways. For example, many

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<sup>47</sup> Ching and Creed conclude, however, that the reversibility of the hierarchy still validates urbanity because the proliferation of urban violence stems from the very fact that there are simply more resources to contest in urban areas.

of the novel's descriptions of dilapidated urban areas are unflattering: "America was burnt-out stores and abandoned agencies for vague and now defunct social services" (250). Even more affluent urban areas are cast in a negative light: "America was a river of cars running two ways at the same time on Poplar . . . an endless ant-bed of automobiles" (333). In contrast, rural areas are often described more positively. One of Boubacar's favorite places in Madagascar is the Celestial Grocery. When Boubacar finds out that the jukebox in the store has a cup full of quarters beside it so that customers can play songs on it for free, America is said to be "so rich [that] money was lying around like water in paper cups" (48). Later, after Boubacar spends time stocking cans in the store, he relaxes and listens to rain falling on the tin roof, and America becomes "an honorable ache between the shoulder blades" (108). Boubacar's preference of the rural over the urban does not necessarily reverse the hierarchy between the two; as a new immigrant, Boubacar's impressions are free from the urban bias in American society. In this way, the Boubacar chapters invite the reader to take a fresh look at the region without automatically passing judgement on rural areas as being somehow less positive than urban areas.

Even though rural and urban spaces are contrasted throughout the novel, characters from both experience similar psychological states. Raine's chapters are filled with curt insights into the malaise of upper-class urban life that reveal how this lifestyle tends to be particularly unfulfilling. For example, when Raine shops at Big Heart, a big-box organic grocery store chain, "customers queued up accordingly with their credit cards, believing in the good life enough to purchase it at prices inflated enough to screen out undesirable customers, like a fence at a country club" (355). Price points serve as

segregation tactics, keeping out “whole warrens of unfortunates who’d never transcended the standard brands of childhood, *Nabisco, Nestle*” (356). Describing the cookie-cutter neighborhood where Raine lives, “you could peep through its Palladian windows and see the descendants of Big Cotton and the descendants of slaves now living side by side in separate but equal luxury homes” (75). These ironic passages point out that in the twenty-first century, while the race segregation of the plantation South may be gone, wealth blocks the possibility of relationship among those of different social statuses—which can quickly create very lonely people. Despite having economic security, Raine feels a deep sense of existential alienation. She is aware of her husband’s numerous affairs, and her unappreciative children treat her as their personal servant and chauffeur. Raine’s loss of self is only explicitly mentioned, though, when she develops romantic feelings for Matthew, a handsome jukebox repairman: “She had taken to wearing clothes she’d worn in happier times, before she became an appliance” (358). This quotation describes how Raine’s depersonalization has become so ingrained into her experience that she is able to accept her status as a piece of equipment used to satisfy others’ needs without further comment. As a result, reminiscent of Walker Percy’s Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1961), Raine embarks on a search for a cure for her malaise after she encounters Bebe Marie Abide and purchases one of her birdhouses on a street corner. Raine’s search leads her out into the country, and in Madagascar, she is finally able to consummate her relationship with Matthew on the banks of the river, an act that represents Raine’s freedom from the malaise of modern urban life.

Although the Raine chapters point out that suffering is not reserved for the poor, the marginalized, or the oppressed, Shearer’s novel also demonstrates that urbanites are

not the only ones who regularly experience existential alienation. Marginalized by an urban-oriented society, the rural dwellers in the novel experience similar kinds of psychological suffering. Even though *The Celestial Jukebox*'s rural-dwelling characters come from diverse backgrounds and hail from different countries of origin, the novel's melancholic tone pervades all of the various plotlines. Those who live in rural areas, and especially those who are associated with agriculture, exhibit a particular form of suffering that is described by Karl Marx as "the estrangement of the object of labor" (30). Related to existential alienation (as described by Sartre and other twentieth-century existentialist philosophers), the characters' estrangement from the products of their labor profoundly affects their psychological states. In this way, Shearer's novel demonstrates how, in the contemporary United States, farmers and farm workers face unique forms of alienation.

*The Celestial Jukebox* acknowledges that rural spaces are often also agricultural spaces that produce natural resources, and thus are spaces that can be exploited for profit. Even though not all rural spaces are suited for farming, the discipline of rural studies often focuses on agriculture in its publications. For example, the *Journal of Rural Studies* regularly includes articles that examine social aspects of rural life, but at the time of this writing, the journal's most-cited articles are about increased food production and sustainable food cultures.<sup>48</sup> On the surface, agriculture may be considered differently than other capitalistic enterprises because it provides for a basic human need and typically produces renewable resources. However, as Raymond Williams notes in *The Country and*

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<sup>48</sup> For example, see Isobel Tomlinson's "Doubling Food Production to Feed the 9 Billion: A Critical Perspective on a Key Discourse of Food Security in the UK" and Terry Marsden's "From Post-Productionism to Reflexive Governance: Contested Transitions in Securing More Sustainable Food Futures."

*the City* (1973), “there is a visible qualitative difference between the results of farming and the results of mining,” but “the results . . . are often very similar. The land for its fertility or for its ore, is in both cases abstractly seen. It is used in an enterprise which overrides, for the time being, all other considerations” (293). For Williams, capitalistic exploitation of rural places undermines their necessity in supporting life in all environments. Likewise, even though they argue that the cultural aspects of rural life are marginalized, Ching and Creed assert that “no degree of ‘development’ can obliterate the continuing economic importance and cultural distinctiveness of the countryside, where food is produced and human life sustained” (1). Not every rural space is necessarily agricultural, but no urban space can be agricultural in the same way that rural spaces can be. The vast majority of rural dwellers throughout history have relied on subsistence farming, but currently in the U.S. South, where agricultural workers typically do not grow food for their own use, it has become more difficult for agricultural employees and entrepreneurs to sustain themselves.

The history of agriculture in the U.S. South shows that farming practices have continually changed in response to global trends, social necessities, and new technologies. For example, in the 1800s, the invention of the cotton gin and the global demand for cotton textiles transformed the southern frontier into a series of single-crop cotton plantations. However, as Michael Kreyling points out in *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), the subsistence farmer superseded the plantation owner to become the face of southern agriculture after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930 (xii). *I’ll Take My Stand* was written in part as a response to the actual technological advances in agriculture that would necessarily change the social aspects of rural society. The

Nashville Agrarians posited that the sense of honest agricultural work was much more fulfilling than the boredom and monotony of northern industrialism. Although this foundational book's call for policy change quickly became outdated, Louis D. Rubin acknowledges the persistence of the collection's ideas far into the twentieth century, stating in his 1977 introduction that "the book's real importance [is] its assertion of the values of humanism and its rebuke of materialism" (xvii). Even today, the South maintains an (inter)national image as quaintly agrarian, despite the large-scale industrialization of agriculture that has grown in the last few decades.

Using the modern-day large crop farmers Aubrey Ellerbee and Dean Fondren as examples, *The Celestial Jukebox* demonstrates how agriculture in the twenty-first century is no longer the slavery-driven profit machine of the antebellum period, nor does the type of farming the novel describes adhere to the yeoman farming ideals of the Nashville Agrarians in the 1930s. Instead, the novel demonstrates how by the end of the twentieth century, agricultural production has turned into agribusiness. According to Shane Hamilton, the term *agribusiness* is more than an obvious conjoining of two common words. Instead, the word entered the English lexicon in 1955 when Harvard Business School professor John H. Davis coined it "to fundamentally transform the political discourse on farm policy, expunging populist and New Deal language from American farm debates and bringing the business-speak of corporate capitalism to the fore" (Hamilton 560). Even though the farmer and the market are both necessary for resource production, the shift from subsistence farming to agribusiness removes the focus of agriculture from the individual farmer and places it on the abstract rules of economics, which contributes to rural alienation. Thus, even the language used to describe farming

practices displays a development toward the capitalistic exploitation that the farmers in *The Celestial Jukebox* experience.

For landowners, the shift towards agribusiness determines in large degree not only the crops that must be grown, but also the daily and seasonal routines and the habits of mind to which the landowners must adhere in order to gain a profit. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams accurately predicts the way in which agricultural decisions are made in a late capitalistic society: “The industrial-agricultural balance, in all its physical forms of town-and-country relations, is the product, however mediated, of a set of decisions about capital investment made by the minority which controls capital and which determines its use by calculations of profit” (294-95). The farmers in Shearer’s novel continually demonstrate their lack of control over their enterprise through their thoughts and their interactions with other characters: talking with Angus Chien, Aubrey Ellerbee explicitly compares raising his crops to gambling (37), and Dean Fondren muses about why anyone would “buy a Mississippi strawberry when you could get it for a fraction of the cost in South America, where the government supplied the overseers and there was no minimum wage” (326). The consequences of the agribusiness model of farming are not reserved only for landowners, however. Shearer’s novel also describes the complex relationships among profit, landowners, laborers, and others who depend on the capital generated from modern farming practices.

Under capitalism, workers become alienated from the products of their labor, and indeed, insofar as their labor can be exploited and traded as a commodity, the workers become commodities themselves. According to Karl Marx in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, the market dictates what is produced, so that the

workers' "labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it" (72). Shearer shows that the Honduran workers' labor is merely a commodity to be exploited through Aubrey's comments to Angus about their legal residential status: "*I don't know nothing about 'em, except that they show up in the mornings and they leave in the evenings. If they ain't legal, it ain't my doings. If where they stayin' ain't up to code, it ain't my problem*" (35). Marx wrote *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* partially as a response to the work of Adam Smith, who advocated that the increased production gained by exploiting workers' labor would benefit everyone involved in the labor process. For Marx, however, alienation from the products of labor essentially alienates the workers from themselves, which leaves their lives dull and meaningless: "man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating . . . and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal" (73). This sentiment, which describes the L'Etangs' way of life in the wilderness in Cheng's *Southern Cross the Dog*, is the idea the Nashville Agrarians cried out against. They argued that the agrarian lifestyle would allow more leisure time for art and philosophy in contrast to the dehumanization of northern industry. However, *The Celestial Jukebox* describes how the estrangement of the worker from labor is necessarily the case under the agribusiness model. Aubrey's crops could be used to feed himself and his neighbors; instead, he must sell the crops for a profit in order to pay back outrageous debts he had to take on in order to create more profitable yields.

In addition to material alienation, people can also experience psychological and social alienation, or existential alienation, as a result of their inability to find a purpose or

meaning in their work. According to Marx, along with the estrangement from the products of labor comes the estrangement of man from himself, from his “*species-being*,” and from others (77). This more profound type of alienation is related to (but different from) the existential alienation from the self that has been developed by many existentialist philosophers. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), Kierkegaard emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual in his philosophy, and he describes suffering as conforming to societal demands rather than transcending them (102-03). Similarly, Heidegger’s notion of “inauthenticity” (xx) is a person’s normal “average, everyday” state (xv). Sean Sayers examines the connections between existential philosophy and Marxism in *The Concept of Alienation: Hegelian Themes in Modern Social Thought* (2011): whereas Marx would argue that the way humans find or realize themselves is in and through societal roles, Kierkegaard and Heidegger would state that humans tend to lose themselves in those roles. Also, for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, globalization and technological development further inhibit a person’s ability to break away from society to develop an authentic self. Marx, however, “does not regard the alienation and disharmony of modern society as a merely negative condition. . . . Although it results in the division and fragmentation of people at the same time it is also the means by which individuality, subjectivity, and freedom develop” (Sayers 13). In either case, alienation is a condition that can be overcome only through stepping outside the limits imposed by late-stage capitalism. *The Celestial Jukebox* provides examples of both types of alienation before suggesting a possible means for surmounting them.

Shearer’s novel contains numerous characters who are victims of modern-day agribusiness, but Aubrey Ellerbee is the character that most clearly demonstrates the

psychological danger of losing himself in capitalist enterprise. The novel contains a chapter that explains how Aubrey, a black landowner and the most successful large farmer in Madagascar, became interested in agriculture at an early age because of a close relationship with another farmer, Dean Fondren. When Aubrey's father is killed in the Vietnam War, the only characters who look past his race to help dig his grave are Dean Fondren and Angus Chien. Later, after young Aubrey tries to run away from home, Dean offers him a job doing odd jobs around his farm. Dean is more than an employer, though; he becomes a father figure to Aubrey, providing him with a place to stay in the barn and filling it with "a gyroscope, a Red Cross manual, some comic books, and the beginnings of a stamp collection. All this while he was paying him ten dollars a week" (196). This close relationship leads Dean to give Aubrey his start in farming, giving him the title to a half-acre of land so that he can grow vegetables for his family. Aubrey's new small portion of land creates a deeply satisfying connection to the products of his labor, since he owns both the means of production and the products themselves. However, the next steps in Aubrey's continued acquisition of land and farm equipment increasingly alienate him from the products of his labor, and thus from his sense of satisfaction with his work. Aubrey first goes into debt to purchase a crop duster, then a fleet of crop dusters, and then he begins purchasing large tracts of land. By the present time of the novel, Aubrey has completely psychologically disconnected the products of his labor from his personal lived experience.

One way that the novel narrates the existential alienation Aubrey experiences as a result is through his nightly visits to the nearby Lucky Leaf casino. After his wife dies, leaving him childless, Aubrey fills his nights with casino gambling after days of wagering

“every dime he owned on the next day, on the wayward variables of rainfall, the fluctuations of government subsidies, plus the migratory flights of the Hondurans” (199). Here, Shearer explicitly equates Aubrey’s reckless gambling with his work as a farmer. In *Where the New World Is*, Martyn Bone uses Aubrey to discuss the role of “casino capitalism” in rural land development, specifically mentioning the way in which Aubrey considers himself as a commodity: “it is disturbingly apt that Aubrey, gambling in the stock market from rural Mississippi, seeks his identity in stocks that are doubly abstracted by the constant online operation of the global capitalist casino” (Bone 162). Indeed, as Aubrey slides further into debt, some nights he “look[s] himself up on the NASDAQ as if to reassure himself he’d not been buried alive” (Shearer 199). When Dean finds out that Aubrey has wagered and lost several pieces of large farm equipment, he comes to into the casino to rescue him and, although Dean is concerned about the material aspects of what Aubrey is losing, he is ultimately interested in saving the man he helped to raise. Thus, Shearer’s novel critiques capitalism’s exploitation of rurality via the agribusiness model: the stark contrast between Aubrey’s proud beginnings as a subsistence farmer and his current status as a hollow, debt-stricken large farm owner shows the inverse relationship between estranged labor and personal fulfillment.

While Aubrey Ellerbee’s existential crisis can be partially attributed to the loss of his wife and the isolation he faces afterwards, *The Celestial Jukebox* reveals that existential crises are an epidemic among Delta farmers. Although he is at least twenty years older than Aubrey, Dean Fondren contends with many of the same worries that plague Aubrey throughout the novel. For example, when Dean thinks about the precariousness of his occupation, “it [is] an old knowledge in his bones now: he could

lose the land beneath his feet sixteen ways from Sunday, depending on several floating variables of rain, sun, and the federal government. He had learned to live with that knowledge, the way one learns to live with an old wound” (98). For Aubrey, it is a new wound: whereas Aubrey is coming to terms with the idea of his great debt, Dean has long since internalized it.

Another way that Dean’s cool acceptance of existential alienation is demonstrated is through his estrangement from his wife, Alexis. Alexis is absent for most of the novel, having taken several weeks to stay with their daughter to help care for a new baby. In his loneliness, Dean tries to devise a way to entice his daughter and son-in-law to move back to the Delta so that he can be near them. Dean anticipates his wife’s response: “He could already imagine Alexis’s objections: why would he want anyone else to be enslaved to the same piece of land he’d been a slave to most of his life? *Everybody has to be a slave to something*, he thought” (107). Using the word *slave* in this context exposes the difference between the way Dean sees himself and the way he is seen by Peregrine Smith-Jones, the character who consistently refers to him as “Big Daddy” in reference to his landowning status as the new incarnation of the old plantation owner. Dean can imagine living a different life, and often does, but his mind is made up about continuing to farm. As a younger man, Dean once told his friends at the Celestial Grocery that he and Aubrey would keep farming the land, even when all their children moved to Memphis to take on office jobs (198). Yet by the novel’s end, Dean realizes that his life as a farmer has been an uneventful, unimportant one: “And who was he? He was a man, alone, wearing a wrinkled shirt that he’d fished out of the dirty clothes that very morning. It all didn’t add up to much when there was nobody there to care whether your shirt was

wrinkled or your food was hot” (327). Dean’s existential alienation is best shown in the sequences in which he is alone with his thoughts; however, other characters experience alienation even though they only appear in scenes alongside other characters.

If alienation is connected to rurality through the agribusiness model, Shearer’s novel indicates that alienation among agricultural workers is not only limited to the landowners: despite coming from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, every *Celestial Jukebox* character who is associated with farming experiences a similar alienation. The low-paid migrant workers are particularly vulnerable. In *I Don’t Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South* (2007), Houston A. Baker notes that “in the U.S. South, squalid subsistence-living conditions are frequently the norm for Mexican and Central American farm workers; their labor and lives mirror in dark ways chattel slavery’s worst deprivations of body and spirit” (95). In Shearer’s novel, the Ramirez family represents this class of immigrants from Central America. The Ramirez family was brought from Honduras to Madagascar by Tomas Tulia, a shadowy “*coyote*” (134) who transports illegal immigrants and dabbles in sex trafficking. The migrant workers not paid enough to support their basic needs, but their unskilled labor is still foundational for the local economy. After developing a friendship with Consuela Ramirez, the family’s matriarch, and offering her a job at the Celestial Grocery to help defray her family’s living expenses, Angus Chien confronts Aubrey about his refusal to pay decent wages and provide adequate housing to his employees. Aubrey curtly replies that “*the whole country would go under if we paid real wages*” (135). Martyn Bone calls this practice of exploiting immigrant labor “neoslavery” but, unlike Houston A. Baker, Bone cautions against making a direct comparison with the chattel slavery that once

provided the basis for southern agriculture because using slavery as a metaphor causes “the historical specificity of slavery as a transnational system of labor [to disappear] from view” (Yogita Goyal qtd. in Bone 169). Of course, the primary way in which “neoslavery” differs from chattel slavery is that the laborers are not considered actual property, and thus can advocate for better treatment for themselves. The bleak labor conditions for the Honduran migrant workers compel Consuela and her son, Hector, to try to form a labor union, a phrase that “in that isolated part of Mississippi” is “used quietly, in the same manner one would raise the possibility of a deadly disease” (Shearer 125). Consuela’s plan for unionizing the migrant workers is thwarted, however, when Hector is kidnapped, beaten, and thrown off a bridge by Tomas Tulia’s thugs.

Shearer’s depiction of Consuela Ramirez demonstrates how migrant workers can experience existential alienation as well as economic alienation from the products of their labor. Midway through the novel, Consuela surprisingly reveals that she is an American citizen, “*naturalize in Houston, Texas*” (133). Her purpose for coming to America was not to find work, but rather to find her niece who had purportedly been kidnapped and used in sex trafficking. Thus, viewed in Heideggerian terms, Consuela has chosen an “authentic” existential life-project and has been single-mindedly working towards attaining her goal. However, her other obligations to provide for her other family members prevent her from making any real progress towards finding her niece. Consuela has become absorbed into the “they-self” of “average everydayness,” of which distraction from and forgetfulness of one’s life-project is characteristic.<sup>49</sup> The agribusiness system paradoxically creates the conditions for Consuela’s existential authenticity when her

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<sup>49</sup> These terms are taken from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927).

niece is kidnapped, but it simultaneously prevents her from achieving authenticity when she must give up the search in order to provide for the other members of her family.

Consuela's search for her niece is not resolved at the end of the novel, which signals that, just like farm owners, twenty-first century migrant workers are locked in a form of existential despair.

In addition to describing various forms of material and existential alienation, *The Celestial Jukebox* also suggests a way to transcend that alienation: active participation in an intersubjective community. Scott Romine argues in *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (1999) that a community "is enabled by practices of avoidance, deferral, and evasion" (3). Romine defines community as "a social group that, lacking a commonly held view of reality, coheres by means of norms, codes, and manners that produce a simulated, or at least symbolically constituted, social reality" (3). Viewed in this way, community is a descriptive term that can be applied to any group of individuals who agree upon a common view of reality. For Romine, the "lack" around which southern communities are formed is constantly filled by "producing objects in accordance with subjective demands" which thereby preclude "reflexive examination" of the lack itself (9). It would thus seem that absorption in Romine's southern community is the surest way *not* to escape existential alienation, for it requires adopting inauthentic values and hiding that their inauthenticity by their objectification.

Yet even under late capitalism, within this community one can find a way to transcend existential alienation by active intersubjective participation. Martin Buber takes up intersubjectivity in the philosophical work *I and Thou* (1923). Buber states that an individual always exists as part of a relation that can be described as either "I-It" or "I-

Thou.” Essentially, a person can be either a fragmented “subject of experience” in an “I-It” relation or else a whole “subject” in an “I-Thou” relation (3). The “I” in an “I-It” relation is self-enclosed and unable to truly participate in community with others. In contrast, the “I” in an “I-Thou” relation does not experience the “Thou” as a thing, but rather as a whole other, a subject. The “I” in this case exists in the relation between the “I” and the “Thou” (4). For Buber, a true community can only exist in “I-Thou” relationships.

*The Celestial Jukebox* shows that this kind of “I-Thou” relation is more easily attained in rural areas (or by doing “rural” activities) through the contrapuntal chapters about Raine. One episode in the chapter “Catfish Blues” demonstrates how an “I-Thou” relation can occur when people engage in the rural activity of fishing. In this chapter, Raine walks beside the unusually engorged Wolf River in Memphis and finds Bebe Marie Abide fishing off the river bank with a flimsy cane pole. When Bebe Marie hooks a catfish that is too big for her pole, Raine, “the man in the Brooks Brothers suit” (168) with whom Raine later develops a romantic relationship, and an old black man in overalls hurry to help Bebe Marie catch the fish before it breaks the pole. In the process, “the suit man” (170) rolls up his pants and wades into the river to net the fish. Shearer’s repeated references to the suit highlight the contrast between the man’s urbanity and the rurality of fishing: “He was dressed like a stockbroker, but his voice betrayed an acquaintance with country ways” (169). The man’s clothes are ruined when the “brown water lap[s] around his rolled cuffs” (169) and later when the fish splashes water on his shirt (170). Transcending race, class, and gender, the “I-Thou” relation manifests when they all work to bring in the fish. The experience persists briefly even after they catch the fish and the

old black man takes a photograph of them holding it. The sense of belonging and shared purpose that the characters share has a profound impact on Raine, and this chapter marks the moment when she embarks on her existential search for meaning outside of her bleak urban surroundings.

Shearer's novel implies that true intersubjectivity is more easily attained in rural communities: feelings of belonging and shared purpose are found on a much larger scale in rural Madagascar when people of different races, ethnicities, and countries of origin work together to build living quarters for the Honduran migrant workers. The plight of the migrant workers is for the most part ignored by characters in the first half of the novel, but Angus Chien brings public attention to their need after he hires Consuela. Angus begins to stock items that are culturally familiar and useful to the Hondurans, including "little tissue-wrapped bundles of incense," "tall candles in long glass tubes: *Spark of Suspicion, Fire of Love, Inflammatory Confusion, Weed of Misfortune, Beneficial Dream*" and "little black satin bibelots and green booklets, like the *Papa Jim Magical Herb Book* from San Antonio, complete with recipes" (122). These potions and herbs are reminiscent of hoodoo concoctions, but they have distinctive connections to Central American traditions. Later in the novel, Dean Fondren confronts Aubrey about the migrant workers living in an abandoned church on Aubrey's land: "*We all got the same rights. Me, I always thought a flush toilet was right up there with freedom of speech*" (207). Aubrey knows that he employs illegal immigrants, but, in staying out of their affairs, he believes he can avoid legal consequences by claiming ignorance. After much conflict, Aubrey finally agrees to let Angus begin remodeling the True Light Temple of the Beautiful Name, "a defunct little cinderblock church" (32), and he

provides an old Evinrude motor to pump water to it. Almost everyone in Madagascar has a part in the project: the Wastrel, Boubacar's uncle from Mauritania, uses an old-fashioned planer to smooth boards for bunk beds; "many of Tomas Tulia's workers dropped in at odd hours, quietly offering help, bearing sacks of nails, shingles, Quikcrete, brass shower drains, and an enormous electric nail gun" (277-78); and even Angus's daughter-in-law, Lisa, makes frequent trips to Madagascar to help with decorating the church. Each person involved with the project brings more than just labor and materials—everyone adds a touch of individual personality and culture that make the living quarters unique.

Although the plans for a worker's union fall through, the migrant workers are provided basic services through the efforts of the local community members. It is important to note that even though the church is on Aubrey's land, nobody actually owns it: Aubrey states, "*I don't own that church. I ain't even got no easement on it or nothing*" (208). When they work together to create the living quarters, there is no legal ownership, but everyone works passionately because each person feels a sense of ownership of it. All of the migrant workers, along with the other community members who work on the church, collectively own the products of their labor, which suggests a way out of the material alienation they experience working for Aubrey. Thus, the novel shows that rural spaces provide opportunities for community members to form "I-Thou" relationships with one another as they work together towards common goals.

*The Celestial Jukebox* goes a step further than this interpersonal "I-Thou" relation, though, through its specific use of music and art as sites for true intersubjective community. Specifically, "authentic" music and art are produced in rural areas, even if

they are sometimes enjoyed in urban areas. Romine's notion of community belongs to Buber's "I-It" relation, for the individual is always in relation to the agreed-upon reality in the community (the "It") as it is reified into commodities. Even within Romine's "I-It" framework of community, there are opportunities for interpersonal "I-Thou" relationships. Buber, however, proposes that the precondition for a true intersubjective community is that each member be in perpetual relation to an "eternal *Thou*" as its common center. Buber divides the "world of relation" into three spheres: our life with nature, our life with men, and our life with spiritual beings. These spiritual beings are related to Platonic Forms: "a man is faced by a form with desires to be made through him into a work" (9). At times Buber calls the eternal *Thou* "God," but more generally the eternal *Thou* represents the existence of relationality itself as an eternal value.<sup>50</sup> Buber states that dialogue with this eternal *Thou* occurs in moments of artistic inspiration; in these moments a person is compelled to transcend his or her present state of being through creative action. In Buber's philosophy, once a person is in a proper relation to the eternal *Thou*, only then the person can be a part of an intersubjective community: "Every sphere [in which the world of relation is built] is compassed in the eternal *Thou*, but it is not compassed in them" (101). Thus, true intersubjective community is one that is formed around each individual's participation in creative activity together, which is revealed in Shearer's novel through its characters' interactions with music and art.

Shearer hints at the importance of music and art through her use of titles in the novel. The novel's main title includes "Jukebox," a word loaded with historical

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<sup>50</sup> One major criticism that has been leveled at *I and Thou* is that its language is too poetic. Walter Kaufmann, in the introduction to his translation of *I and Thou*, states that the reader might be aesthetically swept into believing the text is more profound than it actually is because of the lyrical language (vi).

resonance. A jukebox connects the events of this twenty-first century novel to a previous time when jukeboxes in local stores and restaurants were common. This music player from the past does more than simply reproduce previously recorded music; it can also completely change the mood of the room when a customer selects a song. Elevating a jukebox to “Celestial” status invites the reader to consider the jukebox as a metaphor. If the metaphorical jukebox transcends the dimensions of the physical world, the “songs” the jukebox plays can change the mood of the spirit of the people. The novel’s chapter titles suggest that the main title is also a metaphor for the novel itself. Some of the chapter titles, such as “Catfish Blues,” “Baby Elephant Walk,” and “Fujiyama Mama,” refer to real songs. “Gasoline Sutra” is the title of a song written by Chance Semmes’s high school rock band. “Nocturne, with Black Escalade” and “Schottische” are not song titles, but they do refer to types of songs. Just like an actual jukebox can influence the mood of the room, the diverse musical genres referenced in the titles of these chapters reflect the mood of the chapters. Other chapter titles reference artistic works, such as “Still Life, with Shotgun and Oranges.” The titles “By the Waters of Babyland” and “In the Orchard of Abandoned Dreams” are phrases that are part of the artwork painted on the walls of the old Abide plantation house as part of a project by Bebe Marie Abide. These and other chapter titles help connect the content of the chapters to the idea that art and music have power to bring diverse populations together into true intersubjective community. Indeed, the title of the novel and the chapter titles imply a communal “I-Thou” relationship among the characters, since they each share portions of the novel.

Each time that Shearer’s characters connect with one another in an “I-Thou” relation, an element of art or music is always involved. For example, Angus first takes

notice of Consuela when he observes her dancing rapturously in a field: “she had a look on her face . . . full of the kind of light that only one man gets to see in a certain moment, usually in a bed” (40). Angus enters into an “I-Thou” relation with Consuela at the same moment she is experiencing an “I-Thou” relation with the eternal *Thou* through her dancing. Angus decides to offer Consuela a job at the grocery store after this encounter, and it is this moment that ultimately leads Angus to plan the remodeling project for the migrant workers later in the novel. Angus also employs Boubacar after he notices Boubacar’s pure joy from listening to the jukebox in his store. The music coming out of the jukebox is so entrancing to Boubacar that Angus says, “*You come of a evening, you help me get ready for the next day. Play the jukebox all you want*” (49). Boubacar’s exposure to American music in Angus’s store inspires him to learn to play the steel guitar and to begin playing with a local gospel group.

Even though Shearer makes a clear distinction between mass-produced and “authentic” (rural) art and music, she leaves both types open for the possibility for “I-Thou” encounters. In “Black as Folk: The Southern Civil Rights Movement and the Folk Revival,” Grace Elizabeth Hale states that during the Civil Rights Movement, “mass culture asked people to make a purchase. But the folk revival insisted that people participate” (130). Describing folksinging as example of an authentic art form, Hale states that it “required a person to feel someone else’s life, just for a moment, even if that life was more a product of one’s own imagination than a life lived in poor Mississippi” (132). Hale takes the burden of defining authenticity away from the circumstances surrounding a product’s creation and places it on the impact the product has on its recipients. Shearer’s novel suggests that same definition when it includes various

artworks and songs: in *The Celestial Jukebox*, authentic art and music are forms are more easily produced in rural areas in which everyone actively participates in either the creation or the enjoyment of them.

The novel does include many references to popular music that does nothing to facilitate, and in some cases negates, “I-Thou” relationships. For example, when Peregrine first comes to Memphis, she asks Chance Semmes, Raine’s son, where she can hear blues music. As discussed in Chapter III, traditional blues music has strong ties to perceptions of southern rurality; however, by the twenty-first century, there is a distinction between “authentic” blues music and inauthentic tourist blues: Chance asks Peregrine, “*What kind of blues? Tourist blues are down on Beale Street*” (53). Peregrine is more than just a connoisseur in search of “authentic” music that is true to the lives of its performers; she wants a kind of artistic experience that she can participate in through an “I-Thou” relation. After having that experience at the Harlem Swing Club, she decides to stay in Madagascar to trace her family’s roots. Presumably, the tourist blues on Beale Street would not have had the same effect. Yet although it may be more difficult to extract an opportunity for authentic participation in performing or enjoying popular music, popular music’s commercialization does not necessarily preclude “I-Thou” interactions.

The difference between “authentic” music and commercialized pop music is revealed in the difference between the ways Chance Semmes and Boubacar hear and play music. White, privileged, and residing in the upper-class suburbs, Chance is clearly a foil for Boubacar. Chance loses his grandfather’s National Steel guitar when a crackhead steals it from his car at the Harlem Swing Club, and Chance considers it no great loss.

Boubacar, on the other hand, resides in an impoverished rural area and must work at the Cloud Nine Club to purchase the guitar from International Pawn. After Cornelius “Steakbone” Booker buys the guitar for him, Boubacar treasures it as his most prized possession. For Boubacar, the guitar is not merely a commodity: “He would never smash the silver guitar, if Allah blessed him enough to own it. To smash an instrument was to destroy the spirits it harbored” (51). Chance, however, feels no remorse about losing the National Steel, even though it is a family heirloom. Chance instead simply borrows a red Fender Stratocaster, for which “he felt a certain amount of reassurance in the fact that there were thousands of guitars like it in the world, and thousands had learned to play them well. Some had learned to play powerfully. People had heard that Silverchair song and killed themselves. Now that was *power*, the boy mused” (61). Both boys recognize a form of power in their instruments, but the power in each case is qualitatively different. Boubacar’s ties to rurality allows him to enter into an “I-Thou” relationship with the National Steel, while Chance’s suburban sense of entitlement only fosters “I-It” relationship with the Fender Stratocaster.<sup>51</sup>

Boubacar’s “I-Thou” relationship with popular music contrasts with the view of popular music held by the Wastrel: “‘American music’ is merely a ‘commodity’ generating artificial desires in duped consumers tallies with his dim view of black

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<sup>51</sup> Buber does not explicitly state that one may have an “I-Thou” relationship with inanimate objects or works of art, but his three spheres in which the world of relation arises consist of life with nature, life with other humans, and life with spiritual beings (6). However, Buber’s example of life with nature in *I and Thou* is an “I-Thou” relationship between an “I” and a tree, which can be extended as an example of any inanimate object: “It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*” (7); and later, “Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual. The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience. . . . I encounter no soul nor dryad of the tree, but the tree itself” (8).

Memphians ‘owned by what they are driven to possess’” (Bone, *Where the New World Is* 171). Indeed, after Boubacar listens to the Wastrel play one of his father’s songs about Mauritania, Shearer includes short, one-sentence paragraphs describing Boubacar’s state of mind: “He wanted a bicycle” and “He wanted a boom box” (154). The Wastrel wishes for Boubacar to reject American cultural values, but exposure to Mauritanian music only makes his attachment to them stronger. Boubacar embraces American music and “figures popular music as a fluid and hybrid cultural form” that “retains a relative autonomy from commodification” (Bone, *Where the New World Is* 171). In Bone’s view, the commodified American music that Boubacar enjoys plays a double role. First, it encourages Boubacar to experience American desires, but second, as an unfamiliar form of music, it gives Boubacar a way to express himself musically in a way that is untainted by his Mauritanian background.

Unlike Boubacar, Chance is able to recognize the difference between popular and “authentic” music, but he prefers to listen to and perform commercial, angsty rock music. Chance plays in a band that represents the 1990s grunge music genre and its descendants, musical styles that supposedly questioned consumerism and capitalism, but were, according to Catherine Strong, “defused by the portrayal of youth as a time that should not really be taken seriously” (151). Chance’s band cares more about coming up with a name that fits the stereotype of their musical genre than about creating music together: after considering naming their band Deathwort, Pigfart, and Swineheart, the band settles on Deathpork (Shearer 160). One song they write together is “Gasoline Sutra,” in which the singer repeats “*I asked for water and you gave me gasoline*” (159). Although it is not mentioned in the novel, these lyrics are taken from a Howlin’ Wolf blues song, “I Asked

for Water (She Gave Me Gasoline),” which shows how original artistic works are recycled and repurposed in late capitalistic society. Martyn Bone describes this phenomenon in terms of “Theodor Adorno’s older Marxist argument that popular music is the cultural logic of capitalist ‘standardization,’ thinly obscured by the ‘halo of free choice’ that characterizes ‘pseudo-individualization’” (*Where the New World Is* 171). Paradoxically, Chance and his bandmates play music to assert individual identity by trying to fit in to stereotypical roles and by appropriating someone else’s life experiences.

Regardless of any song or musical genre’s degree of “authenticity,” Shearer’s novel reveals that music is universal, able to rise above time and space. As a result of his Muslim upbringing, Boubacar queries Cornelius “Steakbone” Booker, a blues musician in Clarksdale, about the morality of playing music produced by Jewish musicians and record executives. In response, Cornelius explains that “*if it wasn’t for Jews, wouldn’t be no jazz and wouldn’t be no blues. It’s just a natural fact. Hell, man, get you some Benny Goodman. Get you some Cab Calloway. Africa, Beethoven, it all fruit from the same tree*” (261). According to this view, any particularities that exist in music are merely superficial, which gives music its universal quality. In *Where the New World Is*, Martyn Bone points out how *The Celestial Jukebox* depicts American and African music sharing many cultural and racial continuities, but Shearer’s novel actually includes these North American and African cross-currents within a much larger framework. For example, when the young Aubrey Ellerbee works with Dean Fondren to dig Aubrey’s father’s grave, a man from the funeral home sings a spiritual, and the men match the rhythm of their shoveling to the song. For Dean, “It was like stumbling upon some old thing much older than they were, to work to a common rhythm” (190). Shearer’s use of the simple

words “old” and “older” in rapid succession emphasizes that music can transcend time: the connection to work that Dean feels as he is working lies outside historical time, hearkening back to some basic human rhythm.

Just as music is able to transcend time, it also transcends space. One night when Boubacar hears Reverend Miles preaching and singing on the radio, he knows “he had heard the pattern of it before, in a different language. It was the same cadence of the morning calls to prayer in Dakar, which he had heard exactly once in his life. It had a rhythm, you could rock to it. It was an odd, plaintive cry, but it telegraphed strength to all who heard it, whether they understood the words or not” (293). The Christian radio preacher and the Muslim muezzin speak and sing from the same musical patterns even though they are separated by the Atlantic Ocean. The universality of the call reflects not only its authenticity, springing from ancient prototypes that survive in contemporary religious expressions, but also its basis in “I-Thou.” The musical rhythm draws the attention of each individual.

*The Celestial Jukebox* also demonstrates that, like music, art can also be a universal language. It is significant that the first and last chapters that bookend *The Celestial Jukebox* depict scenes from the early life of the insane artist, Bebe Marie Abide. In the first chapter, “*Introit*,” teenaged Bebe Marie arrives at the home of her family’s former servants, Litany and Prophet Royal Pegues, to deliver her baby. Outside the house is the “Prophecy Garden of King Louis Narcisse,” a fenced in area that contains countless works created by Prophet Royal Pegues, such as “GROTTO OF ALL FACE, an old johnboat upended and shingled entirely with bottle caps” (7), “a swaybacked bottle-tree, shuddering under the weight of the bottles” (2), “whirring windmills made of an old

refrigerator” (9), several stovepipe animals, and “an old church pew that had been painted red and encrusted with paste jewels from dime-store necklaces” called “THRONE OF THE CHOSEN” (9).<sup>52</sup> The folk art that is in the yard is tied to race as much as it is to class, but later in the novel, these racially charged folk art projects influence the style of the birdhouses that Bebe Marie makes and sells in Memphis. Bebe does not simply appropriate black cultural forms, however. When Bebe develops romantic feelings for Prophet, she laments that interracial relationships are banned in the South and wishes that she were black, too. But Bebe Marie’s art is able to transcend racial barriers.

Bebe Marie’s art is not only influenced by rurality via black folk art; it is also influenced directly by European high art. When a Memphis police officer tries to make Bebe Marie stop selling her birdhouses because she does not have a license, she says that she is the daughter of Henri Matisse, the French impressionist painter noted for his use of bright color. Her claim is made plausible in the final lines of the novel’s last chapter, “*Benedictus*,” in which it is revealed that as a young child, Bebe Marie lived in Paris with her mother who took lessons from Matisse. As a teenager in Madagascar, Bebe Marie’s newborn is sold to a couple in Memphis, and she expresses her anguish through painting. The murals she paints on the walls of the old Abide plantation house are filled with foreboding images: “a shepherd with the face of a Tartar was being devoured by his own

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<sup>52</sup> This collection of art pieces is reminiscent of the home of Prophet Royal Robertson, a Mississippi folk artist who decorated his house with hundreds of signs, drawings, calendars, and shrines. Shearer integrates several details of Robertson’s life and work into the characters of Prophet Royal Pegues and Bebe Marie Abide. Like Bebe Marie’s wall paintings at the old Abide plantation, Robertson’s art includes many references to the Bible, and his drawings often included rambling, judgmental, ranting texts. Also like Bebe Marie, Robertson suffered from mental illness. According to Congdon and Hallmark’s entry in *American Folk Art: A Regional Reference* (2012), “Robertson had been previously diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, which seemed to manifest in the obsessive nature of his work and the recurring themes of victimization” (276).

sheep. A shade tree sprouted baby faces as fruit. A nun stitched mutilated dolls back together” and “a fiery mandala turned, made entirely of babies’ faces. Pigs sang to fish, turtles carried whales on their backs. A black Jesus was chopping up his own cross for firewood. Bibles burned, and bombers grew out of the earth on stems, drooping like heavy roses. Hypnotic green script swayed like tendrils in a wind” (268). Like Prophet Royal Robertson, Bebe Marie uses biblical imagery and violence in her painting, but she also exhibits the influence of Matisse when she paints with “colors no one in those parts had ever seen before” (11). This blend of high and low art forms in Bebe Marie’s murals, created in a time of emotional turmoil, shows that art exists as a universal medium that extends beyond race, class, time, and space.

Also like music, the visual arts are involved in various “I-Thou” encounters throughout *The Celestial Jukebox*. For instance, in the first half of the novel, Peregrine Smith-Jones assumes that the land-owning farmer Dean Fondren is a “Big Daddy,” a continuation of the antebellum plantation owners, and that he is racist and profit-hungry. However, in the chapter “Still Life, with Shotgun and Oranges,” a title that indicates the thematic significance of art, Dean and Peregrine connect with one another in an “I-Thou” relationship. When they seek shelter from a sudden rainstorm in the Abide plantation house, they view Bebe Marie’s murals together. Dean believes the murals to be of such great artistic value that he imagines “dismantling the house board by board” (261) and saving them from ruin. At the beginning of the chapter, Dean reminisces about how he and Alexis, his wife, fell in love the first time he brought her to see the murals. Dean remembers Alexis saying, “*Those walls should be in the Smithsonian*” (261). The chapter goes on to describe Dean’s loneliness in the absence of his wife, and after having an “I-

Thou” encounter with Peregrine, he feels “the first moments of companionable peace he’d known in quite some weeks” (276). When Peregrine states, “*These walls should be in a museum somewhere*” (276) at the end of the chapter, her repetition of Alexis’s sentiment connects Dean and Peregrine’s relationship to the relationship Dean and Alexis form when they first enter the Abide plantation house together. Peregrine is also interested in creating art with her photography, and she tries to capture Dean on film many times in the novel. It is only due to their “I-Thou” encounter in the rural setting of a crumbling plantation home that Dean allows himself to be photographed and become a part of Peregrine’s own artistic creation.

Bebe Marie’s folk art has a unique connection to the rural community in Madagascar that enables her artworks to have a particularly strong pull toward “I-Thou” relations. It is important that all of the materials that Bebe Marie uses in her artworks are all either donated by community members or found in her meandering travels through Madagascar. For instance, the roofs of her birdhouses are made from the covers of books she finds in the abandoned Abide plantation (13), and at one point, Boubacar muses that the bottlecaps that make up the walls are probably “retrieved . . . from the gutters of the very street they were standing on” (370). Also, Angus knows that Bebe Marie uses found materials in her artworks, so he leaves items near the dumpster behind his store: “Angus had learned to cull certain choice items for her. . . . Soon they showed up in her artwork. Angus saved all bottle caps from the Celestial, and from time to time set a paper bag or coffee can of them down on the ground so she’d not have to dirty her hands” (87). Angus’s contribution to Bebe’s artwork is important not just for the materials he provides, but also for the compassion he has for a motivation. Thus, not only do Bebe

Marie's birdhouses embody the characteristics of the rural place where they were created, but also the members of the community, former and current, contribute to the creation of Bebe Marie's art.

By extension, when Bebe Marie takes her birdhouses to Memphis to sell, she is selling more than just a commodity: she is offering the opportunity for her urban customers to participate in the complex network of rural relations that went into the creation of the artwork. In other words, Bebe Marie is selling the rural experience reified into a piece of folk art. Ching and Creed state that the popularity of folk art points to a real cultural value attached to rural places and people; however, they also note that this value is not inherent in the art itself. Instead, reminiscent of Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use," the value of folk art comes "from the judgements of highly visible urban consumers who use such objects to signal their class and cultural superiority" (Ching and Creed 21). When rural people try to aestheticize the things used in their daily lives, such as using a tractor tire for a flower bed, "they unwittingly provide further evidence of their laughable lack of taste" (22). Shearer places Bebe Marie's artwork in a liminal space between these two views. For example, when Raine brings home the first birdhouse that she bought from Bebe Marie, her son Chance says, "*I can't believe you actually paid money for that*" (73). Likewise, Raine knows that if she were to decorate her yard with homemade artworks like Bebe Marie's stovepipe animals and "gold Christmas-light cobwebs, like fiery piñatas," then "*the neighbors would tar and feather [her]*" (389). Yet at the same time, business executives hurrying to lunch meetings stop on the street to buy Bebe Marie's birdhouses, "examining each one very carefully before choosing" (69). Other urban characters see aesthetic value in decorating with rural art,

such when Lisa considers hanging the old hand-painted Celestial Grocery sign on the wall for decoration (284).

*The Celestial Jukebox* acknowledges the commodification of rural culture in folk art, but Shearer refuses to let folk art be viewed as a mere commodity. Instead, *The Celestial Jukebox* points to folk art as a means to escape existential alienation. It is significant that Raine's encounters with Bebe Marie's birdhouses have such a profound effect on her. The first time Raine is able to closely examine one of Bebe Marie's birdhouse, she finds lines of poetry scrawled on its inside walls: "*COME CLOSER ANYONE / EVER ABANDONED BESIDE THIS RIVER / HOW IS IT YOU WERE TAUGHT / TO DESPISE YOUR LIFE? / THERE IS FOOD FOR THAT FAMISHMENT HERE*" (81). These words speak directly to Raine's feelings of despair, and the birdhouse takes on supernatural properties: "It seemed to have grown hot in her hands. . . . She looked inside again, as if she were receiving secret forbidden instructions" (81). This initial experience with Bebe Marie's birdhouse drives Raine down a path that leads her into the country, and there she finally allows herself the freedom to consummate her relationship with the jukebox repairman she falls in love with (390). As long as Raine is in the city, she experiences alienation from her family and herself; it takes her going into the country in search of an "I-Thou" relationship for her to actually find herself.

The novel's climax brings together all of the various narrative threads. Music and art are at the forefront as all of the characters join in a celebration of the completion of the living quarters for the Honduran migrant workers on the Fourth of July. Angus Chien invites "everyone he knew, and some he didn't, to the bunkhouse dedication" (340). At this event, a diverse group of community members who do not normally interact socially

are brought together, and they have many unforeseen revelations about one another. For instance, Angus asks Sister Aurelia to say a prayer at the beginning of the event, and “to his surprise the little nun rattled off the blessing in Spanish” (341). Without prior preparation, language barriers are overcome when Sister Aurelia translates Angus’s dedication speech. Each community member contributes creatively to the event. The Ibrahim Bros. Funeral Home provides chairs, and Baptist and Catholic ladies bring “an arsenal of layer cakes” and “[seem] amazed they cooked from the same recipes” (341). When Bebe Marie Abide arrives, offering “the tiniest little bottle-cap birdhouse she’d ever made,” she is “in an agony of joy” as she “studies [everyone’s] happiness like an anthropologist might” (344). One of the biggest draws at the party is the music: Boubacar plays his National Steel guitar along with the Mighty Sons of Destiny, a gospel band that appears on the Clarksdale radio station. Even the Wastrel puts aside his religious prejudices when he joins in by playing his big Wolof drum. The music they create breaks down generic conventions and religious barriers, combining elements of southern gospel, African folk music, and blues. All superficial distinctions disappear when people participate together in intersubjective community. Shearer’s descriptions indicate that in this moment, all of the characters experience “I-Thou” relations with one another, and it is this true intersubjectivity that allows the characters to overcome their existential alienation, if only briefly.

*The Celestial Jukebox* demonstrates that even in the current multicultural, multi-ethnic South, rurality is still at its center. Agriculture is still a very important aspect of rurality, but new trends in agricultural practices have led to the material and existential alienation of rural people. However, rural spaces are still important in the twenty-first

century because they are also places that offer an answer to the material and existential alienation that comes along with neoliberal “progress” through true intersubjective relationships among people who work together in creative endeavors. Shearer maintains that everyone can take a lesson from rurality’s emphasis on close intersubjective relationships with all community members. The novel closes with a flashback to Bebe Marie’s childhood conversation with Henri Matisse. Bebe Marie tells Matisse that her mother uses too much black paint in her artworks because “*it is the end of the world*” (431). Matisse replies that her mother uses black paint because “*Black is what happens when you have only one subject*” (431). What Matisse knows is that art, like life, needs multiple subjects—everyone must work together in true intersubjective relationship.

## CHAPTER VI – CODA

In times of widespread transition, southern literature has often turned to rurality as a means of understanding, navigating, or resisting difficult changes. In the twenty-first century, rapid globalization has brought back a renewed interest in rurality among southern writers. At the same time many authors are emphasizing rurality in their works, rural areas are undergoing significant changes as well. This is shown by a number of different measures. For example, more people than ever have left rural areas and migrated to cities: as of 2018, eighty-two percent of the population of North America lives in urban areas.<sup>53</sup> Also, Cynthia Shearer's description of the Mississippi Delta's agricultural transition into agribusiness in *The Celestial Jukebox* is indicative of a broader global trend in food production. Small family farms have essentially vanished from the North American landscape. Many view these changes as evidence of a decline of rurality, yet despite that apparent decline, rurality still fulfills an important role in the national consciousness. The same can be said of the supposed decline of the pastoral as a useful mode of critique<sup>54</sup> and the decline of "the South" as a static category in recent decades: despite challenges to the durability of these concepts, they continue to exert influence on ways of understanding their subject matter. As I have argued throughout this study, representations of rurality can serve to criticize the neoliberal capitalist impulse to commodify everything. By foregrounding elements of rurality, the four novels I have

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<sup>53</sup> See the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs publication "2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects."

<sup>54</sup> In *A Book of English Pastoral Verse* (1975), John Barrell and John Bull argue that "the separation of life in the town and in the country that the Pastoral demands is now almost devoid of any meaning. It is difficult to pretend that the English countryside is now anything more than an extension of the town" (432).

analyzed in this dissertation expose manifestations of the urban/rural hierarchy and offer alternatives to the prevailing urban consciousness in today's global society.

The effects of rurality in contemporary southern literature share an implicit critique of increasing urbanization. Even though the novels examined in this study are set during different time periods, each novel deals with the profit-driven neoliberal motive most often associated with urbanity as it threatens to dominate rural landscapes and lives. For instance, in *The Known World*, Moses does not work towards freedom or equality for all after Henry Townsend dies, but instead, he wishes to become a slave owner himself and thereby promote an inhumane system by which he can acquire wealth. The rural plantation in Jones's novel is neither an idyllic paradise nor a place of torment for the slaves; it exists solely to exploit slave labor for profit. That motive is so strong that even the slaves are complicit in maintaining the institution of slavery. In *Southern Cross the Dog*, rural characters are forced to live in danger, and in Dora and Etta's case, madness, after their homes are destroyed by natural disaster. Left with no means of survival, the characters try to find work by migrating into towns where they are not allowed to accumulate wealth, or they retreat into rural swamps that become threatened by drainage projects. Likewise, in *Swamplandia!*, drainage projects threaten the Florida swamp and the Bigtree tribe that lives there. Their need for profit just to provide for their basic necessities keeps the Bigtrees in the swamp performing proto-rural Native American identities for tourists, but paradoxically, their reliance on profits forces them to retreat to the urban mainland after tourists stop visiting the park. In *The Celestial Jukebox*, agriculture gives way to agribusiness, and immigrant labor becomes a form of

“neoslavery.”<sup>55</sup> This novel depicts the lives of workers from Honduras in Central America and Mauritania in western Africa who must be willing to work in deplorable conditions so that their families can survive. In these ways, the novels included in this study show the negative effects of the neoliberal capitalist impulse to encroach onto rural space.

Yet instead of simply offering a critique of urbanity, each novel offers ways to neutralize the urban/rural hierarchy without necessarily dissolving the distinction between the two. Specifically, the positive rural elements included in these novels are not restricted to rural areas, even though they are usually associated with conceptions of rurality. For instance, one aspect of rurality highlighted in each novel is the importance of community. True intersubjective community in these novels is immune to exploitation: in *The Celestial Jukebox*, Raine Semmes finds glimmers of intersubjective community when she participates in the rural activity of fishing, but in order to achieve true intersubjective community, she must go into the countryside of Madagascar to find it. Raine’s observations about her loneliness in the bleak urban landscape of Memphis contrast with the vibrant sense of community she experiences in Madagascar. Similarly, in *Swamplandia!*, Kiwi tries to fit in with his peer group at the World of Darkness but fails miserably; his alienation on the mainland is contrasted with Ava’s desire to stay in the swamp where she once had intersubjective community with her family. Community may be a part of all human interaction whether in the city or the country, but these novels

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<sup>55</sup> See Martyn Bone’s *Where the New World Is: Literature about the U.S. South at Global Scales* for a discussion of immigrant labor as neoslavery.

suggest that true intersubjective community based on shared work and shared benefits can be more easily achieved in rural areas.

One way that all of the novels in this study point out that this kind of community can be achieved is through creating or enjoying “authentic” art and music. Each of the novels connects rurality with authenticity in some way—historical authenticity in *The Known World*, regional authenticity in *Southern Cross the Dog*, ecological authenticity in *Swamplandia!*, and existential authenticity in *The Celestial Jukebox*—and that authenticity is expressed through artistic creation. Like the notion of community, art and music are not only rural phenomena; however, as these novels have indicated, creating rural art and music often involves contributions from everyone in the community. For example, in *The Known World*, one of Alice Night’s tapestries depicts the Townsend plantation with all of its inhabitants, living and dead, standing in front of their homes. For Calvin, this tapestry’s value lies in its authenticity: Alice has created an artwork based on her interactions with all of the people who lived at the plantation. In addition to the whole community’s role in creating rural music and art, the most “authentic” art forms in these novels borrow from the materials and traditions of the rural areas they originate in. In *The Celestial Jukebox*, Bebe Marie’s birdhouses are crafted using bottle caps from the Celestial Grocery, books from the old Abide plantation, and other discarded objects that she finds around Madagascar. The fantastical scenes she painted on the walls of the old Abide plantation borrow from Prophet Royal Peagues’s aesthetic sense that she experienced earlier in life. Bebe Marie’s paintings require a kind of overarching artistic vision like Alice Night’s in *The Known World*. Likewise, the music that Boubacar plays in *The Celestial Jukebox* is based on the blues tradition that motivates many of the

characters in *Southern Cross the Dog*; even though they have vastly different life experiences, the blues connects Boubacar in the early twenty-first century to Eli Cutter and Robert Chattam in the early twentieth century. Thus, “authentic” rural music and art can be very valuable in ways that resist commodification—or at least in ways that cannot be mass produced.

Another feature of each of the novels examined in this dissertation is the motif of retreat and return. In Chapter I, I discussed the role that the pastoral mode has played throughout the history of southern literature. From the bucolic landscape of ante- and postbellum plantation fiction to the abject, fallow ground of Depression-era southern novels, the pastoral mode has informed literary depictions of the rural South. Although not all pastoral writing foregrounds rurality and not all rural writing is pastoral, the pastoral mode and rurality share many characteristics. The retreat and return motif is one aspect of the pastoral mode that appears in much rural literature: according to Terry Gifford, this motif is “the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the text, or in the sense that the pastoral retreat ‘returned’ some insights relevant to the urban audience” (1-2). This movement usually involves an urban character who visits the countryside and returns to the city by the end of the narrative, as with Mark Littleton’s visit to the Swallow Barn plantation. However, the novels in this study include rural characters who retreat further into rurality and then move to urban areas. For instance, Alice Night, Priscilla, and Jamie are able to escape to freedom in the North in *The Known World* because of Alice’s night wanderings through Manchester County. In *Southern Cross the Dog*, after Robert faces the “devil” that has haunted him for years in the rural swamp, he decides to stop running and instead settles in town with Dora. The Bigtree children move

to Loomis County in *Swamplandia!* with Ava's pronouncement that "I like to think our family is winning" (397), and Boubacar moves to New York after the 9/11 attack with his steel guitar in search of new opportunities in *The Celestial Jukebox*. In each case, the novels imply that these characters are better equipped to participate in urban life due to their rural experiences. Thus, the characters' enactment of the retreat and return motif in each of these novels critiques pure urbanity. In order to survive urban life, they must rely on their prior experiences in rural areas. Gifford also states that the pastoral's motif of retreat and return can denote the audience's "return" from a "retreat" into the pastoral via reading, which allows the reader to bring back insights into the real world. This effect of the pastoral may apply to literature in general, but it especially applies to the urban-attuned audience of contemporary southern literature: after reading about some of the issues that have been worked out imaginatively in rural space, the reader can reenter reality with knowledge and empathy that can then be used to live a better life.

It is interesting to note that none of the novels examined in this study offer either an idealized or an abject view of the rural South. Instead, each novel offers a fragmented narrative that is told from multiple perspectives, all of which help to construct a better understanding of rurality in the modern world. Thus, to return to a point made in Chapter II, in the twenty-first century, narrative truth has become at least as important as objective truth, and in an age of increased globalization, that narrative is formed by many different voices. Despite many assessments that assume the decline of rurality in the South in recent decades, the way that rurality is narrated in the twenty-first century is essential to forming a complete understanding of the rural South. As fiction and other forms of

literature and media take up rural concerns as subject matter,<sup>56</sup> this dissertation points out the need to return to rurality in critical discourse. There is still much that needs to be done to critically examine rurality in contemporary southern culture.

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<sup>56</sup> Memoirs of rural southern childhoods have become very popular in the twenty-first century. See, for example, Richard Ford's *Between Them: Remembering My Parents* (2017), J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), and Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999). Also, note the popularity of representations of rurality in other forms of media, such as Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015) and the *This American Life* podcast series *S-Town* (2017).

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