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# The Influence of Literacy on the Lives of Twentieth Century Southern Female Minority Figures

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The Influence of Literacy on the Lives of Twentieth Century  
Southern Female Minority Figures

The Influence of Literacy on the Lives of Twentieth Century  
Southern Female Minority Figures

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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Arkansas Tech University  
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## Abstract

The American South has long been a region associated with myth and fantasy; in popular culture especially, the region is consistently tied to skewed notions of the antebellum South that include images of large plantation homes, women in hoop skirts, and magnolia trees that manifest in television and film representations such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Juxtaposed with these idealized, mythic images is the hillbilly trope, reinforced by radio shows such as *Lum and Abner*, and films such as *Scatterbrain* (1940). Out of this idea comes the southern illiteracy stereotype, which suggests that southerners are collectively unconcerned with education and the pursuit of knowledge. In an effort to examine this idea in the context of literature, this thesis addresses the historical research done in this field that argues southerners were reading and writing. Further, this thesis analyzes three southern novels in which the protagonists use their literacy skills to manage issues in their lives. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) presents the author's narrative of using literacy as an outlet for the trauma she experiences in her life, including racism and sexual abuse. Erna Brodber's 1994 novel *Louisiana* provides an interesting look at a young woman's attempts to enter unfamiliar multicultural southern communities. In the process, she must learn new literacies as she works to complete the oral history project she is assigned and embrace the Caribbean and southern cultures she encounters. Finally, *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010) by Monique Truong features a young Vietnamese woman coping with synesthesia and racial difference in North Carolina. These differences cause her to rely heavily on the written word, primarily letters, a form that is revealed to be incredibly significant to managing her entire life. Overall, the question that must be asked about the South is not "Were they literate?" but "How did they use literacy?" For the southerners discussed,

literacy is a skill, a social practice, and a tool that helps overcome trauma, navigate culture, and communicate more effectively.

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## **Introduction: Creating and Undermining the Southern Illiteracy Stereotype**

The South has long been a region associated with myth and fantasy; in popular culture especially, its constructions have relied heavily on skewed notions of the antebellum South. Images of large plantation homes, women in hoop skirts, and magnolia trees are common in television and film representations such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Coupled with this idealized, mythic notion is the stereotype of southern illiteracy, which suggests that southerners are collectively unconcerned with education and the pursuit of knowledge. The study of literacy in the South in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is one in which extensive research is in relatively early stages, and historians such as Beth Barton Schweiger, Christopher Hager and Elizabeth McHenry, have only recently begun to publish prolifically on the topic. According to Schweiger, the reason behind the lack of research and knowledge in this area is not because people in the South were not reading: “by 1850, the region boasted one of the highest rates of literacy in the world” (331). Southerners produced all sorts of texts, including “diaries, letters, half-finished novels, bad poetry, receipts, recipes, lecture notes, speeches, love letters, commonplace books, and essays,” and they wrote them in droves (331).

As Schweiger argues, the image of an “illiterate South” was reinforced by a lack of widespread, free public schooling, “the growth of a highly capitalized publishing industry in northeastern cities” that seemed to be “little concerned with the South, suggesting to many that the South was little concerned with reading,” and skewed literacy statistics pushed by abolitionists eager to prove that slavery was detrimental to the region’s education (339). Elizabeth McHenry and Shirley Brice Heath agree that the facts are often misrepresented by a number of factors, writing that “since the 1960s, it has been more fashionable to valorize poverty,” especially among African Americans, than to discuss the historical contributions that middle and upper classes with better access to education made to the South and, subsequently,

the nation (261). The statistics that support an educated South have been largely overlooked or construed in ways that do not accurately reflect the fact that 80 percent of white southerners possessed the ability to read and write, an overwhelming majority (Schweiger 331). Schweiger argues that this is because “an ‘illiterate South’ stands at the heart of how we understand the history of the early United States” (335), and much of the writing and popular culture set in the South has done little to change this.

Though it originated in the 1800s, the stereotype of an ignorant, culturally devoid South persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In “The Sahara of the Bozart,” H.L. Mencken argued in 1917 that the South was “almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert” (157-58). Mencken laments the absence of good art galleries, orchestras, and theatres as well as a lack of poets, artists, and musicians. The lack of these is bad enough, he argues, but what makes the situation worse is that the South seems, to him, content without these markers of high culture, which Mencken cannot respect.

Popular culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reinforced Mencken’s arguments about a backward, uncultured South. The trope of the uneducated southern hillbilly emerged in various media in the 1930s, characterized as “poor, working-class, southern, barefoot, and ignorant” (Cox 73). Though the concept could apply to those outside the South, Karen Cox argues that the enduring image was tied to the region as “a separate ‘race’ of people” that represented whites existing outside the planter class who typified the moonlight and magnolias myth (73). Hillbilly music, radio shows such as *Lum and Abner*, and films, such as *Scatterbrain* (1940) and *Joan of Ozark* (1942), provided entertainment nationwide and portrayed southern whites as caricatures that were “at best primitive and exotic and at worst backward and dimwitted” (74). These popular images also served to distract from the fact that the majority of southern whites were literate and

educational attainment continued to increase throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “increasing numbers of people attended and completed high school” (Kaestle et al. 283) and functional illiteracy was “virtually eliminated among the younger generation” nationwide (93).

Doubts about southern literacy and education also stemmed from the region’s support of working-class culture, or “lowdown culture” as Pete Daniel refers to it (91). In the post-World War II South, lowdown culture embraced ideals of hard work, which usually equated to physical labor, rather than education and success as defined by the upper class. Rather than traditional academic subjects, the culture valued knowledge of cars, guns, machinery, and alcohol, characterizing its members as “untamed” with “no desire to acquit themselves in a way that made respectable people comfortable” (93). Lowdown culture represented the extreme in a perspective shared by most of the region which resisted the shift “from an education system based on church and family efforts to a universal, publically funded system” (Powell 10); formal education seemed to threaten or diminish the traditional, functional knowledge shared and taught among families and communities. In Daniel’s book, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*, southerner Rick Bragg reports, “It was common, acceptable not to be able to read, but a man who wouldn’t fight, couldn’t fight was a pathetic thing” (93). Physical ability and functional skills in both labor and social ventures were privileged over conventional public education for those participating in lowdown culture. While this is only representative of a portion of the citizens of the region, it contributes to the overall image of a region detached from traditional academics.

Additionally, as Tara Powell points out, the South is stereotyped as a place not only unconcerned with thinkers, but “notably, even fiercely, ‘anti-intellectual’” (1). As she argues, this stems partly from southern literature itself, especially that written before 1954, which often portrays “the exiled intellectual” due to “a lack of intellectual freedom” and closed-mindedness

aimed at maintaining the status quo (9). Literature also depicts intellectuals as ineffectual or objects of satire (14). Flannery O'Connor's famous short story, "Good Country People," published in 1955, displays the message that southern folks are easily duped. Hulga, though possessing a PhD in philosophy, does little with her life due to health problems, which include a wooden leg. When a Bible salesman named Manley Pointer lures her to the loft in her family's barn, Hulga accompanies him while she fantasizes about educating and seducing Manley. Once in the barn, Hulga finds that the suitcase contains whiskey and condoms rather than sacred books. The young man steals Hulga's leg, leaving her stranded in the loft. Despite her significant education, Hulga is deceived by charm and what appears to be an honest, hardworking young man, traits traditionally valued by southerners. As though thought and logic are powerless in the wake of southern values, Hulga is rendered defenseless before Manley. Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) features another failed academic in Jack Burden who neglects to complete his dissertation and "denies his complicity in the events of his own life and the lives of those around him" (Powell 16). John McCormick suggests that the preference to satirize rather than analyze intellectuals in literature might represent "self-hatred" of the writers, "striking out at themselves" as thinkers (242). Powell identifies southern writers as "professional intellectuals who are considered at best unintellectual by their nation because of their region's past, their region because of their self-image, their colleagues because of their definition of what constitutes academic work, and often themselves for a combination of all three reasons" (212). Instead of simplifying the authors' intents in portraying intellectuals in a negative light, however, Powell instead imagines such characters as the product of "a range of agendas" (17) that include making sense of displacement and exploring the complexities of intellectual labor (18) in a region where living "the life of the mind" continues to be complicated (212). Rather than shunning

intellectuals, therefore, such literature proves the South as a place that is constantly considering them and negotiating their position within the region.

While hillbilly portrayals, lowdown culture, and southern literature complicate ideas about the South's collective opinion of education and academics, statistical data reaching back to the antebellum period prove that illiteracy was not rampant and southerners were indeed doing intellectual work. Comparatively, the South did indeed have fewer readers than the North, but they were far from illiterate. By 1850, "81 percent of free people in the slave states . . . reported they could read and write" (Schweiger 333), giving the region "one of the highest rates of literacy in the world" (331). Post offices proliferated around the country, with Alabama alone gaining 716 "in the thirty-four years after 1825" (336). This reflected an increasing need to exchange written communication, which included personal letters, periodicals, books, and magazines (336). As educational opportunities improved, nationwide data shows that individuals were obtaining more years of schooling throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rate jumped especially in the 1940s and 1950s when "the median educational attainment of 25- to 29-year olds rose to 12.3 years" compared to eight years at the beginning of the century (Snyder 7). In addition to reading and writing skills, southerners were also participating in the technological innovation of agriculture, the dominant industry in the South. In 1902, the General Education Board (GEB), supported by the Rockefeller family, gave millions of dollars to public education and public health campaigns for farm families intended to eventually increase productivity and income at southern farms (Jones 17). Women in particular assisted in pioneering farming techniques that "helped build the foundation for the agribusiness poultry industry that emerged after World War II," taking advantage of increased demand for meat and eggs (82). Southerners' influence was far-reaching as they also changed the dairy market, making its commercialization possible

through innovative methods that improved production considerably (82). Literature was also flourishing in the South; the 1930s ushered in the Southern Renaissance, in which writers such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren, and Zora Neale Hurston produced iconic writing that is still widely read and taught today and inspired legions of subsequent writers. Just as historical data shows most southerners were literate, examining the range of intellectual activities that southerners participated in reflects a region not devoid of culture and education, but thriving in them.

While it is fairly easy to undermine the southern literacy stereotype for white readers, the case for non-white readers is far more complicated, primarily by political factors. For this group, learning to read and write posed a struggle, not cognitively, but legally. Only 10 percent of slaves were estimated to be literate in 1850 (Schweiger 331). More broadly, in the 1880 nationwide census, 70 percent of non-whites reported themselves to be illiterate, versus only 9.4 percent of whites (Kaestle et al. 125). Various anti-literacy laws made it unlawful to teach slaves to read and for slaves to engage in the act of learning literacy: “Anti-literacy laws in half of the slave states ensured that nine-tenths of all slaves would remain illiterate; local ordinances, custom, or the lash sufficed to discourage slave literacy in the others” (Schweiger 333). In addition, “free blacks were repeatedly barred from conducting and attending schools” (333). According to Heather Williams, the timing of anti-literacy laws often coincided with fears of rebellion, revealing “the close association in white minds between black literacy and black resistance” (13). Hints of insubordination or talk of abolition often resulted in heightened plantation surveillance and threats of severe punishment. Historical documents do show, however, that some slaves and many free blacks managed to learn how to read. According to Schweiger’s research, a planter in northern Mississippi told Frederick Law Olmstead that “all of

his slaves could read,” better than he himself could (336). He reported that a fellow slave taught them, and they bought religious books and novels with their own money (336). “From the 1830s forward,” write Elizabeth McHenry and Shirley Brice Heath, “African Americans formed literary societies that encouraged reading and writing by their members, and developed a literary community with authors, editors, and publishers throughout the nation who shared an interest in literature” (262). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) provides an early example of a literate slave; Tom reads his Bible fervently, even when it means he will receive punishment for doing so. The autobiographies of African Americans such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs reflect that slaves did learn how to write and used these skills to produce personal narratives that would eventually find wide audiences. Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) sold about thirty thousand copies in America and Britain during its first fifteen years in print (Matlack 15). Douglass not only published his autobiography but also went on to produce other abolitionist writings, newspapers, and books about his life. As Robert B. Stepto writes, the voices in slave narratives are striking because “the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape” (3). Being literate gave slaves and later, free blacks, agency in the ability to exert control over the retelling of their own narratives. However, emancipation also led southern blacks to consider the future of both race relations and their place in a changing nation, leading to the realization that “white society did much of its business in writing, and securing a place in the postwar United States would require navigating a world replete with texts” (Hager 9-10). Literate black men became advocates of their race, citing literacy as an “urgent priority” for freed slaves emerging into a literate society (Williams 1). Literacy was an important tool for empowerment but also essential to survival.

While thousands of slaves learned to read and write, only 272 left documentation of their literacy experiences (Cornelius 315). Sometimes owners educated their slaves for religious reasons, what historians refer to as “Bible literacy” (315). This usually included reading instruction but not writing. As such, slaves could read the Bible and other texts but were prevented from writing their own thoughts as such ability might “threaten the social order” (315). Of the slaves who could read, about one-third of them could not write (318). Like Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Bible literacy allowed for slaves “to assume religious leadership within the slave community, where reading and preaching were closely associated” (315). On a more personal level, the often-secretive nature of learning to read and write also “subverted the master-slave relationship and provided a private life for those who were owned by others” and the potential to upset the hierarchy of power on the plantation (Williams 7).

It is difficult to know exactly how many slaves learned to read or how they achieved it since these activities were unsafe for anyone who engaged with them, whether a black learner, black teacher, or white teacher. White owners who taught their slaves were ostracized and sometimes targeted with violence from their communities. According to Janet Cornelius, slaves who learned to read and write were commonly whipped or had fingers amputated (317). Williams references a man named Gordon Buford who recorded that “he and fellow slaves never learned to read and write because their master threatened to ‘skin them alive’ if they tried” (18). Such tactics were used to ensure that the desire to read would not grow in other slaves, but often this only resulted in more secretive operations. In Mississippi, underground “pit schools” were dug by slaves and hidden using vines and leaves (Williams 20). Some hid books under their hats or resorted to natural materials like bark to serve as easily concealed slates for writing (20).

Despite the many deterrents, as documented in Cornelius’ study, “203 whites taught or

helped teach the 272 ex-slaves” who documented their experiences, and “three-fourths of these whites were slave owners, their children, or teachers they hired” (319). In general, literate slaves were found most often in urban areas and worked in the master’s house (317). Of slaves that could read, 75 percent identified themselves as domestic help (318). Reasons for teaching varied. Some white children taught their slave playmates to read or even write as they learned the skills at school. As portrayed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, while at the St. Clare plantation, Tom struggles to write a letter to his wife and children. Tom learned how to read from his previous owner, but writing causes him “anxious thought” (Stowe 233). When young Eva sees this, she laments that she has forgotten her letters. Despite this, “the two commenced a grave and anxious discussion, each one equally earnest, and about equally as ignorant” (233). Though Stowe’s novel has been criticized for being unrealistic, according to Cornelius’ research, such a scene could have easily taken place between white and black children especially. As for other motivations, some slave owners simply believed in education, while others taught for practical reasons, to have a slave available to take messages in the house or keep field records (Cornelius 321). Williams identifies Henry Juett Gray, a blind slave owner who commissioned the Virginia state legislature to pass a special law in 1842 allowing his slave, Randolph, to learn how to read (19). Gray was blind and required the services of someone who could read and write, so the exception was allowed, though the Gray family was to be held responsible for any “possible injury which might be apprehended from the misconduct of said slave” (19). In Cornelius’ work, however, religion was the most common answer given to the question of the teacher’s motivation (315). Though the religious aims were most likely provided as a way of instilling Christian morals and values in slaves, it also gave them the liberating opportunity to read the entire Bible and other works rather than the select passages chosen by owners that seemed to validate slavery. As Cornelius writes,

“Slaves who learned to read and write were exceptional people who used their skills in literacy in exceptional ways” (325). Some used their skills to teach other slaves: at least five in Cornelius’ study used writing to escape, and many used their literacy after slavery to secure leadership positions in their communities, like Frederick Douglass who worked for abolition through both speaking and writing (325). Slaves recognized the importance of education to their potential for mobility, success, and personal worth.

The post-Civil War era brought far more educational opportunities to African Americans and literacy rates reflected this: nationwide data shows that illiteracy among blacks decreased by 36 percent from 1870 to 1900, a rate which continued to drop until becoming equal to white illiteracy in 1979 (Snyder 9). Still, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the higher overall rates of illiteracy made African Americans a target of literacy tests aimed at disenfranchising “forty-nine out of every fifty colored men,” according to a prominent US senator (Klarman 33). Court cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) “declared separate but equal constitutional” (Hale 163), legalizing and reinforcing segregation efforts nationwide, including in schools. The “separate but equal” doctrine was not reversed until *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), but this decision “had little effect upon the South until Congress in 1964 authorized the withholding of federal education funds from districts that continued to segregate the schools” (Klarman 95-6). Educational access remained a battle for African Americans through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, making their progress toward mass literacy slower.

Like African Americans, Asian Americans struggled with intellectual stereotypes and access to education in the South. Arriving in southern states such as Arkansas and Mississippi in 1870, Asian Americans initially held an uncertain place in race relations because of the strong white and black binary that was already established, dictating societal rules for whites and blacks

only (Bow 6). This did not mean that races that fell outside this binary were treated as equals, however:

Whether characterized as sojourner, foreigner, or ‘cultural isolate,’ those who could not be placed as either white or black were not exempt from the complex social formations of the American South. Nor were they necessarily central to it. Jim Crow culture’s treatment of Asians, American Indians, or mestizos does not fundamentally alter our historical understanding of segregation; they may simply be positioned as anomalies to the overall functioning of white supremacy in the South. (3-4)

Asian Americans could not be classified as white and were therefore seen as a part of the other in society. In 1927, the status of the Chinese as “colored” was legally established by the Supreme Court case *Gong Lum v. Rice* “which assigned members of the ‘Mongolian Race’ to ‘colored’ schools” (Cohen 96). The decision denied Asian Americans from attending white schools, relegating them to the “separate but equal” schools established primarily for African American students. The struggle for access not only to education but also to citizenship characterized much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the Asian race in America.

Functionally, Asian education in America is difficult to pinpoint prior to 1950 and even more difficult to narrow to the South. Much of this is attributable to American anxieties after the Pearl Harbor attacks during World War II (Pavlenko 165) and a variety of anti-immigration and naturalization laws. For instance, the Chinese Restriction Act of 1882 suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years and did not allow men laboring in the US to bring their wives into the country (Cohen 139-40). The act was further solidified by the Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States, commonly known as the Geary Act, which was passed in 1892 and “continued for 10 years all laws in force prohibiting and regulating the entry of Chinese persons and persons of Chinese descent” (140). Due in part to the restrictive laws, Chinese men were valued as cheap labor that came unencumbered by growing families (151). However, the limitations on Chinese immigration led to men intermarrying with other races, and

according to Lucy Cohen, provided them “a path through which the descendants of the Chinese merged with existing groups in society” (166). Despite their integration into American culture, Asians were not allowed to become citizens until 1943 (Quan xii). The number of Asian Americans in the country also continued to change rapidly throughout the century: while 3.7 million Asians or Pacific Islanders were living in the US in 1980, 7.2 million were reported in 1990 (Kirsch et al. xi).

Studies done on Asians living in the American South have shown a dedication to education and links to high achievement. Robert Seto Quan’s 1982 study of Chinese living in Mississippi found that all of his subjects could read and write Chinese and had learned English as well. Subjects over 60 years of age, had received “only three to five years of grammar school education” as “[h]igher education was available only to the wealthy” (Quan 12). Of Quan’s subjects who identified as “businessmen,” all spoke both English and Cantonese, learning both in formal schools and at home (68). College students that Quan interviewed, from their mid-teens to mid-twenties, spoke primarily “Delta Southern English” and limited Cantonese (115). As a group, they perceived school as work, not holding jobs outside of school, and most studied “business, engineering, architecture, computer science, science, or math” (117). Quan’s study reflects a growing importance of education to later generations and an increased access to higher education. Broader studies conducted during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century can give some idea of the group’s literacy as compared with other races. Data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics in the 1990s does show that across prose, document, and quantitative literacy, the gap between Asian Americans and whites is smaller than that between blacks and whites (34). Additionally, Asian Americans reported 13 average years of schooling, more than whites with 12.8 years and blacks with 11.6 years (35). By 2000, in the South specifically, 81%

of Asian Americans over age 25 held a high school diploma or higher compared with 80% of whites. In the same year, 47% of Asian Americans over age 25 held a bachelor's degree or higher, nearly doubling the percentage of whites with the same educational attainment at 25% (United States, *Educational Attainment*). Such figures prove that in the South, higher education is greatly valued by Asian Americans and reinforces ideas about increased access toward the turn of the century.

Considering access to schooling is a significant factor in southern literacy across all races, as access to public education was not always available and has not always been equally granted to all citizens. Schools were unregulated and scattered around the antebellum South, as widespread public schools were not established until reconstruction. In North Carolina, for example, "education was primarily a local enterprise that served to integrate children into webs of personal relations defined by kinship, church, and race" (Leloudis 6). Some plantation owners built schoolhouses or churches in which hired teachers taught lessons. Sundays were especially used for instruction as Sunday school sometimes involved literacy instruction as well (Cornelius 322). North Carolina established a public school system in 1839 through an established Literary Fund that supported 3,488 districts and instructed "more than 100,000 children—roughly half the white school-aged population" (Leloudis 6). The Reconstruction Constitution of 1868 provided schooling for African Americans in North Carolina as well. However, as would be the case for years to come, African American schools differed widely from those for whites.

Public schools were established throughout the South during Reconstruction, though they were not available in all areas until the mid-1920s (Powell 10). Additionally, these public schools were still legally segregated until 1945, and many remained de facto segregated for years to come, contributing greatly to the literacy gap between whites and blacks. Statistically, access

to education is reflected in nationwide census data, which reveals that for “those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, 12.9 percent of whites in 1920 had fewer than five years of schooling, compared with 44.6 percent of blacks” (Kaestle et al. 125). Sixty-five years later, in 1985, those rates had stabilized with both races reporting only .7 percent, due in part to Supreme Court intervention. It was not until the 1970s, through cases such as *Serna v. Portales* (1974), *Rios v. Read* (1978), and *M.L. King Jr. Elementary v. Ann Arbor School District* (1979), that schools were legally bound to accommodate language minority children and those speaking African American English (Wiley 93). *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), considered a landmark case, “was filed by non-English-speaking Chinese students alleging that the San Francisco school system failed to adequately provide them with equal educational opportunities” (Watson and Skinner 174). The students involved claimed that all the educational materials provided to them were in English without any prior instruction in the language. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas cited the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in his ruling, stating that “requiring students to enter the educational system with needed skills before they can benefit from educational programs defeats the purpose of offering public education” (174). The case did not issue a national mandate but allowed schools to take care of the issue at the local level and required that students’ language needs be met, creating English as a second language and bilingual programs in public schools.

Though the prevalent southern illiteracy stereotype and educational shortcomings in the region can produce doubts about the intellectual work happening there, 20<sup>th</sup> century southern fiction and non-fiction often employs literacy as a tool for many characters. These figures, like the individuals I will discuss, are not only literate and educated, but they employ their knowledge and skills to manage a variety of issues in their lives and as a means to gain cultural capital. In connecting the potential implications of antebellum literacy and schooling to the education of

future generations of southerners, my research is focused on minorities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two of my chapters focus on African Americans, a group that is very significant to the South and historically at an educational disadvantage. My final chapter focuses on an Asian American protagonist, of a race that is statistically linked to high intellectual achievement but experienced some of the same struggles as other minorities in securing equal treatment and an equal education in America. In the books I have chosen, reading, writing, and communicating take a central role as the protagonists use these skills as tools for dealing with a range of issues.

In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969 and focusing on the 1930s and 40s in Arkansas and Missouri, Angelou grows up in Stamps, Arkansas with her grandmother, where she discovers a love of learning and literature. Her literacy provides an outlet for the trauma she experiences in her life, including racism and sexual abuse. After being raped by her mother's boyfriend at the young age of eight, Angelou testifies during the trial, though the man is released. When he is murdered shortly after, Angelou feels that her role in speaking his name against him led to his death, and she fears the death of others around her: "If I talked to anyone else that person might die too. . . I had to stop talking" (87). Angelou nearly becomes mute, as she fears the outcome of her own speech and is unable to adequately process her trauma. She draws away from the world until the intervention of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who provides a safe space in which Angelou rediscovers literature, what Shirley Brice Heath would refer to as a "literacy event" (445). Here, I explore Bertha Flowers' role as a literacy sponsor and the reciprocal nature of that relationship. Further, Luis C. Moll and Norma Gonzales's concept of funds of knowledge is significant in considering the role Flowers plays in the community. In further examining the nature of Angelou's experiences, I employ trauma theory, focusing on Judith Lewis Herman's work, *Trauma and Recovery*, Cathy Caruth's discussion of trauma and

narrative, and Audrey Droisen and Emily Driver's research on child sexual abuse. Jenny Horsman's pedagogical work in developing literacy learning methods for trauma survivors also assists me in explaining Angelou's use of literacy in overcoming trauma.

Erna Brodber's 1995 novel, *Louisiana*, follows protagonist Ella Thompson, a native of the Caribbean, as she does anthropological work in Louisiana folklore, including voodoo and the supernatural. In her research Ella employs multiple modalities, including speech, writing, tape recordings, and eventually mystic communication with the dead. As she travels from a university atmosphere in New York City to communities in southern Louisiana, Ella must acquire a new Discourse (Gee 526) in order to adapt to the new culture, find acceptance within the community, and complete the oral history project she is commissioned to do. In this chapter, I examine the idea of Discourse as defined by James Paul Gee in relation to Ella's journey to become culturally and spiritually literate in a community that values storytelling and supernatural communication. I also consider the multiple modalities Ella employs using Carey Jewett and Gunther R. Kress' work in multimodal literacy, and consider the reasons behind these choices. Additionally, I consider Brodber's message that any one modality or genre is deficient in revealing the intricacies of culture and personal histories.

Finally, South Carolina in the 1970s and 80s serves as the setting for Monique Truong's 2010 novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, in which the protagonist, Linda, has synesthesia. "Many of the words that I heard or had to say aloud brought with them a taste," Linda explains, "unique, consistent, and most often unrelated to the meaning of the word that had sent the taste rolling into my mouth" (Truong 21). This colors every interaction that Linda has with others, and leads her to use reading and writing as an outlet that is unencumbered by additional sensory details. She constantly thinks about words, their connotations, and often craves them for both their

meanings and their tastes. In addition to her synesthesia, Linda copes with being Asian American in a predominantly white southern community. In managing her inner and outer differences, Linda often resorts to written language. She communicates with her best friend from an early age through letters, a tradition the two carry on into college, and later finds that her biological mother and adoptive father exchanged letters before her adoption. In this chapter, I explore synesthesia, relying on Patricia Lynne Duffy's examination of synesthesia in literature, connecting it to Linda's Vietnamese heritage through Maureen Ryan, Lisa Lowe, and Nahem Yousef's works on Asian American immigrants in the South. Finally, I focus on the significance of letters with David Barton and Nigel Hall's ideas about letter writing as a social practice and Truong's 1991 short story, "Kelly."

As historical context shows, the question we must ask about the South is not "Were they literate?" but "How did they use literacy?" For the women I discuss, literacy is a skill, a social practice, and a tool that helps overcome trauma, navigate culture, and communicate more effectively. Literacy events stand out in each novel, exemplifying the type of intellectual work southerners have always been participating in, whether it has been widely recognized or not.

**Chapter 1: Reading and Speaking Toward Trauma Recovery and Control in Maya  
Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

In Maya Angelou's 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she recalls a one of the most exciting days of her childhood: graduation from the eighth grade in 1940. The black school Angelou attended, the Lafayette County Training School, was distinctive from the white school not only in its students: unlike the white school, Angelou's campus did not have "lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy" and "were set on a dirt hill" with a field to the left for baseball, basketball, and other physical activities (*Caged Bird* 170). The speaker at the ceremony was a white Baptist minister, Mr. Edward Donleavy, who began his speech by remarking that he was glad "to see the work going on just as it was in the other schools" (178). He spoke at length about the white school's planned improvements, distinguished teachers, and new technology before turning to the accomplishments of the black school: their talented athletes. "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises," Angelou writes (179). When it came to recognizing the accomplishments of the students of the Lafayette County Training School, academia was not the focus of Donleavy's speech. That was reserved for the white students elsewhere in the region with their manicured lawns and state of the art microscopes.

The speech bothers Angelou, her fellow students, the faculty seated among them, and the parents watching from the audience. The magic of graduation, of receiving the diploma, "was nothing. . . . Donleavy had exposed us. We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous" (Angelou, *Caged Bird* 180). The speech reflects a sentiment echoed throughout southern culture since the antebellum period: that African Americans are mentally inferior and are predisposed to physical activities, a comforting reassurance to slaveholders who told themselves that nature itself had

determined that the fields were where blacks belonged. Such racism was only intensified by racial intelligence tests performed by psychologist Carl Brigham during World War I, published as the “widely read *Study of American Intelligence*” (Jackson 35). Brigham’s findings showed that “only the Nordic race from northern Europe performed adequately on intelligence tests” while “[e]astern and southern Europeans (the Alpine and Mediterranean races) were sub par, and ‘Negroes’ fared even worse” (35). Brigham’s study supported Jim Crow laws and the disenfranchisement of African Americans, yielding his recommendation “that segregation and miscegenation statutes be strictly enforced” (35). Other types of experiments were conducted in order to determine the physical predispositions that blacks had to lower IQs. In 1849, anthropologist Samuel George Morton “filled over 1,000 skulls with packing material to measure endocranial volume and found that Blacks averaged about 5 cubic inches less cranial capacity than Whites” (Rushton & Jensen 255). His work was replicated by other scientists in 1923, 1934, and 1942, all confirming Morton’s results. Other studies examined external head size measurements and brain weights across a variety of races in an effort to prove that blacks had smaller brains and were thus less intelligent (254-55). Though “[m]ost American social scientists believed that segregation was harmful to the psychological development of school children and that there were no fundamental differences in intelligence between the races,” the scientists who stated otherwise gave segregationists a seemingly concrete source that supported their racism (Jackson 11). Angelou’s story reflects the persistence of this line of thinking in the South, though it was sometimes hidden under the guise of praise for athletic achievement, as Donleavy’s is. Young Angelou allows herself to give in to Donleavy’s words in the moment, feeling that the work she had done and the excitement she feels for graduation is all for naught. However, both

historical data and personal accounts, such as Angelou's book, prove that the sentiments are false.

History reflects that the belief that African Americans were not doing intellectual work is unfounded, as members of the race were forming literacy societies as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Though they have been largely forgotten and only recently studied by scholars like Elizabeth McHenry, free blacks established literary societies in the late 1820s and early 1830s that "became important institutions precisely because they encouraged discussion and created a forum for debate on issues of racial and American identity" (23-24). Not only were the societies used to improve literacy in the black community by providing and disseminating texts to members, the groups also stimulated critical thinking and dialogue about the texts themselves, using literacy skills in a social context. As McHenry writes, "Contemporary studies continue to emphasize the deficient functional-literacy skills of segments of the black population and point to their low test scores as proof of the 'traditional' weakness of literacy skills in the black community" (5). Such studies gave segregationists and eugenicists license to ignore the historical context and discount individual literacy narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, and Angelou's autobiography as uncommon. While the stories of these authors are extraordinary in their details, statistics on American education show that the number of educated African Americans was steadily rising throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The gap between white and black enrollment in school narrowed from 23 percent in 1900 to 7 percent in 1940, virtually disappearing by the early 1970s and remaining stable (Snyder 6). Educational attainment also increased for black youth, posting comparable numbers to white students for number of years of school completed from the mid-1970s forward (9). Such progress can be attributed in part to

integration of schools put in motion by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and a decade later mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Black students were then given access to a better quality of education, complete with the same teachers, books, and educational technology as white students. Further, the “views of the segregationist scientists fell into increasing disrepute after 1964,” helping to discredit ideas about black mental inferiority (Jackson 179). Angelou attended school while segregation was still legal, and her personal narrative recounts the significance of her childhood education from 1933 into the mid-1940s. Her recollections are threaded with the importance of literacy and learning to dealing with her traumatic rape at age eight and her recovery from that abuse. Angelou’s narrative aligns emotionally with many scholars who write about the effects of child abuse, but her narrative of recovery differs in its methods, as Angelou did not have access to prescribed and monitored treatment. As she responds to trauma by ceasing to speak, her version of therapy utilizes her love of literature to help her regain use of and confidence in the power of her personal voice.

Angelou grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, where she lived from the age of three with her paternal grandmother who ran a general store in town. There, she gained practical knowledge that included making change, filling orders, and measuring dry goods for customers. Angelou’s formal education at the Lafayette County Training School grew in her a love of literature. She read “Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray, and Henley” and felt “young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois” (13-14). Angelou “met and fell in love with Shakespeare,” despite the fact that she knew her grandmother would disapprove of his whiteness (13). Angelou’s narrative is full of literacy events, most significantly her reading aloud of poems and novels with Mrs. Bertha Flowers as part of her trauma recovery. Shirley Brice Heath defines “literacy events” as “any occasion in which a piece

of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (445). Often, reading appears essential to Angelou's perception of the world as she associates many events with genres, plots, and characters from novels she has read.

It is difficult to deny Angelou's well-read mind at such a young age despite the fact that she is recounting events from an adult perspective. In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou stated that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiography speaking directly to her personal experiences rather than an autobiographical novel (Tate 153). "I try to tell the truth and preserve it in all artistic forms," Angelou said (158). The accounts of her childhood do not seem unbelievable, and the autobiography manages to capture the simplicity of a child's thought processes while still reflecting her genuine giftedness. Her experiences in a larger St. Louis school serve as a testament to the quality of education she received in Stamps, even if much of her knowledge came from her own endeavors in reading and working outside of school. At age seven, Angelou returns to St. Louis to live briefly with her mother and enrolls in the Toussaint L'Ouverture Grammar School. Immediately, Angelou and her older brother are "struck by the ignorance of [their] schoolmates" (*Caged Bird* 63). Angelou and her brother have advanced math skills from working in the Store, "and [they] read well because in Stamps there wasn't anything else to do" (13). Angelou does not recall learning anything new at the school, although she attended for a year. However, Angelou gets her first library card in St. Louis and spends many weekends there reading. Books provide an escape from the unfairness of everyday life that Angelou experiences as a young black girl in the South, cultivating an active imagination in her and a penchant for creating and controlling her own inventive narratives.

Angelou's narrative shows that she was not just reading; her various references to novels when describing people and places indicates her engagement with the classics even as a young

girl. She compares a woman in her town, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, to “women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were),” bringing to mind the landscape of Emily Bronte’s novel, *Wuthering Heights* (Angelou, *Caged Bird* 95). One of her best friends, Louise, reminds her of Jane Eyre, the heroine of Charlotte Bronte’s novel which Angelou mentions reading more than once over the course of the novel (140). Other literary influences show Angelou’s desire for control in her life, which motivates her to emulate male heroes. She wishes to be like the main characters in Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches stories, who “were always good, always won, and were always boys” (75). The comics in the Sunday paper were also influential, as Angelou “admired the strong heroes who always conquered in the end,” like Tiny Tim (76). Her veneration for these characters prompts her to read more about them and reflects a personal need to feel powerful.

Throughout the autobiography, a recurring theme is Angelou’s perceived lack of control over her life. Angelou is keenly aware from an early age of race differences and much of the discrimination that came along with them, writing, “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (*Caged Bird* 4). Her everyday struggles are rendered that much more difficult, like when she had a cavity her grandmother could not manage herself: “It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness” (187). In addition to a lack of control due to living in a society in which racism persisted, Judith Lewis Herman writes that “traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (33). These systems of care, including family and community support, can fail to stop ongoing abuse, neglect to provide adequate assistance to abuse victims post-trauma, or even serve as sources of abuse

themselves. Compounded with an already weakened sense of power, Angelou experiences trauma within the supposedly safe space of her mother's home that further deteriorates her perception of control. One of the most significant passages in Angelou's book is her narrative of sexual abuse from her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. The abuse takes place over several weeks, involving multiple incidents and culminating in a rape that puts Mr. Freeman on trial. In her trauma narrative, literary allusions are relied on to describe the event rather than personal emotions, indicating Angelou's psychological disconnection to her abuse.

The first incident occurs when Angelou has spent the night in her mother's bed due to nightmares, a situation that was not uncommon for her. Her mother's absence in the morning gave Mr. Freeman the opportunity to take advantage of Angelou, who realizes, "I knew, as if I had always known, it was his 'thing' on my leg" (*Caged Bird* 72). The next few moments are full of childlike observations, considering her vague knowledge of sex and worrying that Mr. Freeman's heart would beat so hard that he would die there, leaving Angelou possessed by his ghost. She links the moment with horror stories she has read, imagining herself displaced from the current reality and into a familiar literary setting. "Finally he was quiet," Angelou writes, "and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last" (73). In the absence of her biological father, Mr. Freeman serves as a paternal figure to her, representing trust and the feeling of "home" that she associates with him. The juxtaposition of unwanted physical contact and worry with the feeling of safety is confusing for Angelou, who is unsure why the event happened, what part she played in it, or if it is a normal part of the father-daughter relationship she had previously been unable to experience. Her confusion is only

increased when Mr. Freeman accuses her of peeing in the bed when she knows she did not and implicates her in the preceding action: “If you ever tell anybody what we did, I’ll have to kill Bailey” (74). Angelou questions the entire event, “What had we done? We? I didn’t understand and I didn’t dare ask him. It had something to do with his holding me” (74). Mr. Freeman’s threat confirms to Angelou that what happened is not normal, and his threat to her brother guarantees her secrecy.

According to Emily Driver, confusion is a “constant and lasting response” to a child who experiences sexual assault, causing “insecurity” and “shak[ing] her trust in her own instincts, so that she becomes a stranger and an outcast to her own body” (Driver 109). Angelou’s trust of Mr. Freeman, feeling as though he is a father to her, leads her to doubt that he would intentionally do anything to hurt to her, another standard response of abused children. Mr. Freeman, on the other hand, exploits a family power imbalance in which he takes advantage of his position as the head of the household, “focus[ing] his domination only on [the child], for he does not have the capacity to face his adult partner with his complaints or emotional needs” (Blume 35). Angelou is aware that what is happening is wrong, “and yet the trust and authority with which the rest of society has invested [the father] tell her that it is for him a right” (Driver 109). As a result of this confusing position, Angelou reasons that she is being punished for an unknown transgression and is thus a bad judge of what is right or wrong. This is reinforced by the offender, “who seeks to transfer all sense of responsibility onto the child in order to secure her silence and ensure his continued exploitation of her confusion” as Mr. Freeman did by referring to the act with the consensual “we” (110). Angelou chalks the strange event up to “the same old quandary” of the adult world, “whose motives and movements I just couldn’t understand and who made no effort

to understand mine” (*Caged Bird* 74). Still, Angelou knows that whatever happened with Mr. Freeman was strange and must remain secret.

A sexually abused child’s confusion about what is happening can also lead to the appearance of consent in children who are unsure of what is happening with an adult they trust. “The lack of consent stems from the child’s relative ignorance of the implications of adult sexuality and from absence of any real choice in a relationship where a child is forced to rely on adults for her well-being,” writes Driver (4). The situation, by definition, is an unequal power structure in which Angelou is at the mercy of her mother and Mr. Freeman in nearly every way, and “[she] will do whatever [she] perceive[s] to be necessary to preserve a relationship with [her] caretakers” (Herman 27). When the adult in control, Mr. Freeman, makes requests of Angelou, her answer must always be yes. This is evident several months later when the rape occurs. Angelou returns from buying milk at the store when Mr. Freeman demands she come to him: “‘No, sir, Mr. Freeman.’ I started to back away” (*Caged Bird* 77). Angelou’s refusal is ignored as he persuades her, telling her she enjoyed it before. The confusion returns as she acknowledges internally that she did like when he held her and the feeling of safety it brought, though this is not something she wants to admit to anyone. His physical hold on her is coupled with the fantasy that she will be saved by “mother or Bailey or Green Hornet,” but the rescue never comes (78). The ability to fantasize allows her to disconnect from the present moment and project her experience onto a scenario in which she controls the narrative and is saved. It is this imagination and fantasy, culled from reading many books, that allows Angelou to dissociate.

In her narrative, Angelou removes herself from the actual moment of rape, describing only the pain, “a breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart” performed on “an eight-year-old body,” a nameless “child” (*Caged Bird* 78). Her connection to the event through

the pronoun “I” occurs in the narrative only before and after the traumatic moment. Janet Liebman Jacobs refers to this separation of body and mind during abuse as dissociation, in which “normal awareness is transformed through an alteration in consciousness in which the child ‘leaves her body’ during the act of sexual violence,” serving as a “complex psychological coping mechanism that serves to protect the child from an unbearable reality” (129). This ability to remove herself from the event initially may be because previous abuse was not directed at violating Angelou physically. When the rape occurs, Angelou is able to dissociate her body from the act mentally, bracing herself until the comparably pleasant time afterward that she remembers from the first violation. Though the first encounter was strange, unwanted, and confusing, the trade off was a few moments of feeling safe, comforted, and needed. The physical pain is unexpected for her. In contrast, Mr. Freeman now violates Angelou physically, with violence that she does not associate with her own body until the abuse is over she is alone.

Herman writes, “At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (33). Herman’s wording here brings mind Angelou’s description of the rape, which links her experience to biblical text: “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (*Caged Bird* 78). Overcome by force, the body gives involuntarily, disconnected from the commands of the brain. Mary Vermillion connects this description to its biblical origin describing how Angelou “subtly links her rapist with the wealthy man whom Jesus warned would have had a difficult time getting into heaven” (66). Vermillion argues that this not only connects her rape to issues of the impoverished, but also “transforms her rape into a symbol of the racism and somatophobia,” or fear of the body, “that afflict Maya and her race throughout much of *Caged Bird*” (67). In the analogy, minorities, the poor, and rape

victims all stand at a disadvantage, lacking power and control; those in power then forcibly strip away any lingering agency. As Angelou presents it, though the needle, or victim, has little or nothing to give, it is forced to submit because it does not possess the control or autonomy to act otherwise; there are no other options. Significantly, when Angelou dissociates from her personal feelings, she gives the events a textual basis, returning to literature in order to communicate the experience. For Angelou, the rape, simply between “the child” and “the violator,” ends with her seemingly emerging from a dreamlike state while Mr. Freeman bathes her. Angelou’s awareness of the intensity of her physical wounds does not come until she is alone, forced outside the house by Mr. Freeman.

For Angelou, the wound of the rape primarily manifests and endures as psychological trauma though she suffers the physical implications as well. Trauma, by definition, violates “the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity” (Herman 52-53). As Angelou walks with difficulty, her narrative turns from a focus on the physical act and pain of walking to thinking and willing herself through each step: “After two blocks, I knew I’d never make it. Not unless I counted every step and stepped on every crack. . . . Thrum . . . step . . . thrum . . . step . . . STEP ON THE CRACK . . . thrum . . . step. I went up the stairs one at a, one at a, one at a time” (*Caged Bird* 79). Whereas the rape was an act on the body disconnected from the mind, the aftermath becomes a task for the mind to will the body forward. Angelou’s mind begins to associate her walk home with words rather than the pain, turning it into a narrative which she is determined will end safely, in her own bed. The focus switches to the function of the mind and consciousness, which is also fractured from the abuse.

Angelou’s state of mind after the rape is what Jacobs might refer to as a “divided consciousness . . . wherein the victimized daughter internalizes both the identity of the powerful

father as well as a representation of the self as powerless victim” (121). Jessica Benjamin refers to this state as a “fraudulent and stolen” identity in which the abused female child wants to be like the powerful male (111). These identities “become evident in fantasies of maleness and the imitation and modeling of the father” (Jacobs 77). Angelou’s idealization of men and maleness is expressed when discussing Horatio Alger’s works shortly after recounting the first episode of abuse: “I read more than ever, and I wished my soul that I had been born a boy” (*Caged Bird* 75). The desire to become male, related to the feminine Oedipal complex, “places the daughter in a passive relationship to her father” (Driver 92). The daughter’s interest in the father “does not develop out of an earlier bond with the father as caretaker” (57). In Angelou’s situation, the bond with father or father figure as caretaker is limited due to the lack of his presence. She does not meet Mr. Freeman until age seven, making her bond with him tenuous and negotiated through her mother. Herman writes that the female interest in the male father is rather “a reaction to the girl’s discovery that males are everywhere preferred to females” and are in a superior position for power and control, one of Angelou’s most intense desires (Herman 57). Often child victims like Angelou recreate themselves in the aftermath of trauma. Female victims in particular relate to males because “as a victim, and a female, she associates her vulnerable state with defenselessness; males, however, are seen as physically stronger, and not easily targeted for victimization” (Blume 85). Jacobs reports that in her interviews with survivors, many “reported a rich fantasy life through which they escaped the entrapment of abuse and the constraints of the feminine gender role,” as Angelou did with novels about heroic males (Jacobs 78). Angelou’s propensity for fantasy and imagination is quite strong, and she can partially attribute this trait to her love of books. Through the imagination and the desire to regain power, Angelou is able to relate with both the male aggressor’s control and the experience of her own victimization.

The dual identification with both the perpetrator and the victim creates a conflation of control and helplessness that brings about psychological complications for Angelou who does not understand her role in the abuse. Angelou's response to her trauma is similar to what Elaine Scarry relates to the pain of torture: "Torture systematically prevents the prisoner from being the agent of anything and simultaneously pretends that he is the agent of some things. Despite the fact that in reality he has been deprived of all control over, and therefore all responsibility for, his world, his words, and his body, he is to understand his confession as it will be understood by others, as an act of self-betrayal" (47). Though the victim is forced to submit to the will of the captor and is unable to make her own choices, the forced action is read as a choice from the outside. Any actions or confessions are out of Angelou's hands, though she ultimately feels responsible for whatever acts she commits. Considering the power differential between adults and child victims especially, Driver writes that "there is no choice open to the child other than to say 'Yes'" to the abuse, and yes to staying quiet afterward (Driver 4). Mr. Freeman implicates Angelou in the acts through his use of "we," leaving Angelou feeling at least partially responsible for the abuse, though she is unsure what part she played. No matter what role Angelou assumes for herself, the personal guilt remains the same.

Angelou's confession, the vocalization of what happened to her, cannot occur partially because of fear. She cannot risk Mr. Freeman following through on his threat to kill Bailey, the person she professes to love most in the world. Additionally, Angelou worries that her family will reject her for what she sees as her own participation in the rape: "Could I tell [Mother] now? The terrible pain assured me that I couldn't. What he did to me, what I allowed, must have been very bad if already God let me hurt so much" (*Caged Bird* 81). Roger W. Shuy writes that in its simplest terms, confession involves three steps: "to confess, be forgiven, and avoid punishment"

(1). Angelou's position as a victim complicates the idea of confessing, which is usually related to admittance of guilt in an effort to seek absolution and avoid reprimand. Though the abuse was inflicted upon her, Angelou's confusion about her role in it leads her to think of talking about the events as a confession of her own action rather than a testimony of another's transgressions against her. The act of confessing places the confessor in a position of defense in which they must have "explicit and factual recall" of the events, something that is difficult for Angelou to determine (Shuy 4). A verbal confession also places her in a reduced position of power in which those that Angelou confesses to have the ability to react, ask questions, and turn the confession into a sort of interrogation. Confession makes the trauma story "public [and] potentially communal," creating the potential for "psychic reintegration" but can also leave the confessor feeling exposed, ashamed, and threatened (Henke, "Trauma Narrative" 113). Angelou does not worry about her confession's consequences to her abuser because the repercussions against herself are potentially so great; it seems to Angelou, as Scarry writes, an act of self-betrayal. In Angelou's mind, the confession seems as much against herself as it is against Mr. Freeman. Audrey Droisen writes that many child abuse victims "are not sure if they have any rights," making the idea to assert those rights "selfish," especially in light of the potential implications to family and friends (164-65). In this way, Angelou does not want to bring shame upon her family, on people she trusts, or on herself. Even after confession, victims still worry about judgments against them. When Angelou returns to Stamps, she continues to worry about actions that will cause her grandmother to think she is being "womanish," a reminder of her abuse and a suggestion that she took part in it (Angelou 97). The potential lack of ability to control her own narrative without having it usurped or distorted by outside parties causes Angelou to retreat from any sort of personal communication.

Angelou's inability to control the rape narrative itself only serves to intensify the lack of control she feels as a young black girl in the South. Herman writes that abuse "destroy[s] a victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation" (51). Certainly, Angelou's trauma destroys any feelings of security or trust Angelou might have had within her household in St. Louis. This leads to disconnection not only with family, but in nearly every relationship Angelou has with an adult, thus causing her near-complete lack of communication. Scarry writes that pain deprives a victim of control (4), and the rape intensifies a feeling of helplessness that dominates much of Angelou's young existence: "It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense" (*Caged Bird* 180). "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless," and Angelou feels this powerlessness deeply (Herman 33). Her strict southern upbringing, teaching her to be seen and not heard, carries over into the courtroom as Angelou is compelled to testify against Mr. Freeman.

Post-trauma, victims usually have feelings of shame and doubt, both of which are reflected in Angelou's courtroom scene. Herman writes, "Doubt reflects the inability to maintain one's own separate point of view while remaining in connection with others. In the aftermath of traumatic events, survivors doubt both others and themselves" (53). Effectively, trauma conflates Angelou's perception of her own experience with the judgments and assumptions of others around her. This makes it difficult for Angelou to separate what actually happened with Mr. Freeman from details that have been projected onto her memory, such as the degree of her involvement or willingness to participate in the abuse. As Herman writes, this doubt removes certainty about the abusive events from the victim's mind, as Angelou experiences as she

considers the perceived judgments of her family and other spectators in the courtroom. This leads to her near-complete silence during her testimony for Mr. Freeman's trial. For the first question regarding the defendant's clothes at the time of the incident, Angelou answers, "I don't know" and receives snickers from the defense lawyer. Subsequent questions render her silent as she considers internally the answers to the questions and what role she herself played in the rape, further complicated by the previous sexual abuse. "Mr. Freeman has surely done something very wrong, but I was convinced that I had helped him do it," Angelou writes (84). Her complicated reactions of feeling both repulsed and safe during her interactions with Mr. Freeman lead her to doubt her instincts about answering the questions. When asked if the defendant had abused her previous to the rape, Angelou finally testifies that he did not, feeling pressured by the many eyes focused on her. She worries that "all those people in the court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible," again linking her experience to text and assuming that her audience is viewing her as a perpetrator, having already put her on trial and found her guilty (Angelou 85). This marks a turning point in which Angelou's allusions to text are no longer part of her construction of an imaginative internal narrative that she controls. Her trauma and inability to process it have caused her to relinquish that control back to an inescapable reality.

The aftermath of the trial provides another significant source of trauma for Angelou. Mr. Freeman is charged with one year and one day of jail time but never serves due to his lawyer's intervention. The same day of the trial, a policeman visits Angelou's home to tell the family that Mr. Freeman was "found dead" (Angelou 86). This moment is incredibly significant, representing the instant that Angelou decides to cease all verbal communication. She links her lack of speech directly to the death of Mr. Freeman: "He was gone, and a man was dead because I lied," she writes (86). Rather than seeing Mr. Freeman's death as punishment for his actions,

she believes her speech has lethal power and vows to keep it controlled through silence: “I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved him so much I’d never hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die too” (87). The displacement of blame for Mr. Freeman’s death from him onto herself is further evidence of the disconnect she feels with her sexual abuse. She continues to blame herself for both negative events, identifying with the attackers in power and the pain they inflict more than her own position as a victim and the pain she is experiencing. “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language,” writes Scarry (4). Angelou’s attempts to communicate pain seem to only end in additional trauma, a cycle she decides to break by remaining silent.

Ironically, though Angelou feels powerless throughout most of her life, she assumes a position of negative power that she feels little control over. The complicated relationship between perceived power and a continuation of a lack of control leads Angelou to shut down in an effort to minimize the damage to those she loves. Her family initially treats her silence as “post-rape, post-hospital affliction,” but when her doctor pronounces her “healed” physically, the expectations for her normalcy return (87-88). “When I refused to be the child they knew and accepted me to be, I was called impudent and my muteness sullenness,” Angelou writes. “For a while I was punished for being so uppity that I wouldn’t speak; and then came the thrashings, given by any relative who felt himself offended” (88). Cathy Caruth writes that trauma “simultaneously demands and defies our witness” (5). The details of trauma are often secret, and victims like Angelou want to be supported and understood but lack the psychological ability to provide others the ability to “witness” what has happened without prior therapy and support. In

this way, trauma can cause its victim to feel immobile, caught between a lack of understanding and care and the inability to obtain such support. Angelou's silence prevents others from understanding her trauma but brings more attention to her behavior in its divergence from normalcy. She silently demands that her family acknowledge her struggle, but they simply recognize her behavior as disobedience. In effect, this paralyzes any recovery that might be possible for Angelou for several years.

Not offered any sort of therapy for her continued psychological strain, Angelou is left to deal with the complicated process of healing alone. This leads to her continued silence until the intervention of a woman in town. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, "the aristocrat of Black Stamps," helps Angelou cope with the issues that are rendering her silent (*Caged Bird* 93). Importantly, "Angelou stresses that Flowers magnificently rules both her words and her body," in contrast with Angelou's young self, who feels powerless over both (*Vermillion* 68). Her ability to seemingly transcend the limitations of the South on black women is admirable to Angelou and represents the type of control she desperately wants to claim for herself. Mrs. Flowers does not teach her to read; Angelou is already a competent reader with an impressive backlog of classic literature. When Mrs. Flowers brings out a book for her, Angelou recognizes it, stating, "I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up to my standards for a romantic novel" (*Caged Bird* 100). Mrs. Flowers' influence comes through her instructions of what to do with the literature. As she instructs Angelou to read aloud, Angelou recalls, "I heard poetry for the first time in my life" (100). Mrs. Flowers' methods bring to mind Freud's talking cure, "a psycho-analytic working-through of repressed memories brought to the surface and abreacted through the use of language and free association" (Henke, *Shattered Subjects* xi). However, Angelou's refusal to speak beyond short phrases when directly addressed makes the talking cure model not ideal for

her. Mrs. Flowers, instead of forcing Angelou to speak her own words, offers her literature and requests that she read it aloud. Differing from the talking cure, Angelou is not speaking about her own experiences or even vocalizing her own thoughts. This particular avenue for therapy, whether Mrs. Flowers knew it or not, is blocked. Angelou cannot overcome her trauma and fear in this way because it is her personal speech which she believes led to Mr. Freeman's death, a fate she fears for other people close to her. By reading novels and poetry aloud, Angelou uses her voice and is able to recognize the power of this within the safe space of literature that she already occupies through reading.

Angelou's meeting with Mrs. Flowers serves as one of the most impactful literacy events that she retells in the narrative. Literacy events involve the renegotiation of written and spoken language to cater to the situation at hand, which Mrs. Flowers assists Angelou in navigating. These "modes of expression" are used alternately as Angelou reestablishes her confidence in her voice, "supplement[ing] and reinforc[ing] each other in a unique pattern" that is specific to her needs in recovery (Heath 460). Here, Angelou expands the written to the spoken, simply changing modes as Mrs. Flowers requested. This reinforces her love of books while helping her reestablish her voices as a means of safe communication.

For Angelou, Mrs. Flowers serves as what Deborah Brandt calls a "literacy sponsor" (556). Brandt defines literacy sponsors as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy - and gain advantage by it in some way" (556). Mrs. Flowers' literacy sponsorship is not about teaching Angelou to read but to employ her literacy in a meaningful way, instructing her in finding expression in the words she already reads. The reciprocal nature of Mrs. Flowers' literacy sponsorship proposes that Mrs. Flowers must gain something by this as well. Though

Angelou does not suggest Mrs. Flowers' motivation outright, it seems apparent that she had heard of the young girl's good performance in school despite her lack of speech and that she "loved and memorized poetry" (*Conversations* 142). Desiring to see other black women like herself become intelligent, influential members of society, Mrs. Flowers is dispersing what Norma Gonzales and Luis C. Moll term "funds of knowledge" (158). Gonzales and Moll write that teachers "enable and guide activities that involve students as thoughtful (and literate) learners in socially and academically meaningful tasks" with the "strategic use of cultural resources for learning" (157). Funds of knowledge refer to the fact that students and communities already possess the resources "that can form the bases for an education that addresses broader social, academic, and intellectual issues than simply learning basic, rudimentary skills" (158). In this case, literacy helps to accomplish not only intellectual goals, but personal ones as well. Funds of knowledge generally come from the literacy sponsor's education and employment. As Angelou reveals simply that Mrs. Flowers is known as a wealthy, influential woman in town, it is difficult to know exactly what her background is. However, it is clear that she knows communication is necessary for any sort of social success and to gain knowledge and mobility beyond one's immediate community. As Gonzales and Moll write regarding teachers' goals, Mrs. Flowers ultimately wants to teach Angelou "how to exploit these resources in [her] environment, how to become, through literacy, [a] conscious user of the funds of knowledge available for [her] thinking and development" (171). Doing so gives Angelou an advantage socially and, in the future, professionally due to rising literacy standards in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially since World War II (Brandt 562). Suzette Henke further argues that "her filial relationship with Bertha Flowers opens doors and worlds that stretch far beyond the limits of a

small southern town in rural Arkansas,” giving Angelou access to history and the discovery of her personal heritage (“Trauma Narrative” 113-14).

Reflective of Mrs. Flower’s intentions to make Angelou a better student and citizen, Angelou refers to her education at the woman’s house as her “‘lessons in living’” (*Caged Bird* 99). Mrs. Flowers is one of the most respected women in town, and she supports and bolsters Angelou’s existing knowledge by adding to her repertoire of skills. Importantly, Mrs. Flowers shows Angelou respect, “not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but just for being Marguerite Johnson” (101). The feeling of mutual respect brings Angelou a greater reverence for Mrs. Flowers’ lesson, in which she finds that words are powerful and can carry many meanings and inflections. Angelou must read the words aloud, using the voice she has avoided engaging since Mr. Freeman’s death, when she vowed to maintain a “perfect personal silence” that could hurt no one (87). However, since these words are not her own, she is able to speak them without fear. The responsibility for the words is not her own but belongs to the author. The interpretation, however, belongs to Angelou. She is simply providing a voice to the words, allowing her to regain her own voice and ownership of words in a nonthreatening manner and, importantly, an environment of control.

Jenny Horsman suggests that one of the most difficult areas to navigate with trauma victims is that of control, since “trauma entails being controlled by others and being out of your own control” (9). Additionally, Herman writes that it is this loss of control that must be restored as part of the recovery process. Angelou ultimately “must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure” (Herman 133). Further, “asking learners to ‘take control,’ while failing to help them to explore safely what that means or support them in learning about control, sets learners up for failure,”

though it may be unclear what “adequate support” looks like (Horsman 9). For Angelou, the support system Mrs. Flowers provides lies in the books she has already been reading. This provides her with a self-sustaining source of support even after she leaves Stamps. Upon her return trip to California to again live with her mother, Angelou laments missing her family in Stamps, but writes, “I wouldn’t miss Mrs. Flowers, for she had given me her secret word which called forth a djinn who was to serve me all my life: books” (*Caged Bird* 200). Additionally, Mrs. Flowers’ specific interest in Angelou raises her perception of her own personal worth and provides her with a role model who carries herself with confidence and commands respect.

Angelou’s story of recovery deviates from the standard narrative of recovery defined by research on child abuse victims. According to Herman, trauma recovery includes “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (3). Angelou never has the opportunity to confront her attacker later in life, and she does not have access to a professional therapist. She also does not discuss having flashbacks about her abuse in the novel or feeling overly averse to sex into her teenage years, though she has said in interviews that “there has not been a day since the rape 50 years ago during which [she has] not thought of it” (*Conversations* 175). While Herman, Gilmore, and other trauma scholars espouse the value of “reconstructing the trauma story,” Angelou does not reveal this as an aspect of her childhood recovery. However, the novel itself provides this reconstruction as Angelou recalls her life as an adult. Leigh Gilmore writes that “[s]urvivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma,” defining and structuring the story to eliminate traumatic doubt for both the victim and the listener (7). Though *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the only public retelling

of Angelou's rape, the text is undoubtedly one of many repeated reconstructions that Angelou personally undertook over the thirty years that passed.

The novel, published when Angelou was 41 years old, serves as an extension of the literacy lessons she learned as part of her recovery and stands as a linguistic reconstruction of her trauma story in a traditional autobiographical form. Gilmore explains that this autobiographical form can place the trauma narrative back into a space of public scrutiny in which the boundaries between reality and fiction can be questioned (14). In response to these limiting factors of autobiography, Gilmore points out that authors find ways of challenging and circumventing these limits on self-representation. For Angelou, this meant serializing her autobiography, "prolong[ing] what was once considered a one-time-only performance" (20) and "challeng[ing] the limits of the genre by raising the specter of endless autobiography" (96). Having published seven books in her series as of 2013, Angelou's writing is evidence of "the elasticity of autobiography as a form stretching from novel to historiography," intertwining life and history; Maria Lauret suggests that this close relationship between types of writing lends the narrative "credibility" in defense of those who consider Angelou's writing as autobiographical fiction for her use of techniques commonly reserved for fiction writing (119). Mary Jane Lupton explains in a discussion of Angelou's autobiography that "[w]hat frequently goes unsaid in when discussing the history of African American autobiography is that in many instances the truth has been censored or hidden out of the need for self-protection" (35). Writers of slave narratives necessarily withheld details that might put them in danger, such as the desire for rebellion and rape committed by white men. More contemporary writers withhold details that might reflect poorly on their communities. In contrast, Angelou does not shy away from providing the details of her rape in the novel. In an interview with Angelou, she said, "A number of people have asked

me why I wrote about the rape in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. They wanted to know why I had to tell that rape happens in the black community. I wanted people to see that the man was not totally an ogre” (Tate 158). In this way, Angelou views her writing as not only self-representative, but also necessary to consolidate broader competing histories surrounding her life and present a narrative that is unflinchingly grounded in reality.

Both Angelou’s trauma and recovery narratives are distinctive in their reliance on literacy as both a coping mechanism and form of therapy. Her imagination, developed through escaping reality in literature, both allows her to disassociate from her abuse as it happens and serves as a tool for recovery, helping to reestablish her sense of self. Her search for control and power leads her back to the literature she had read for years and the imaginative narratives she creates for herself, longing to be like the male heroes her imagination painted clearly. She only needed to realize that she already possessed these qualities, character traits that would lead her to become a civil rights activist, speaking not only for her own rights but for her entire race.

At the end of Angelou’s eighth grade graduation, as her classmate sings “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson, Angelou feels redeemed. After Mr. Edward Donleavy had essentially discounted the academic work done at the Lafayette County Training School and made the entire audience feel downtrodden, the poem, adapted into song, helped them feel connected and hopeful again: “We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths and been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (Angelou, *Caged Bird* 184). The story nearly serves as an allegory for Angelou’s traumatic experiences. Told endlessly that she will never have full control of her life in a racist world and shown physically that her control over her own body is limited, Angelou

finds redemptive power in words, more specifically in literature. Words become her lifeblood, her way of wrangling experience and putting it in its place; words become her way of controlling what seemingly cannot be controlled.

**Chapter 2: Navigating Culture: Multimodal Literacy and Discourse Communities in Erna  
Brodber's *Louisiana***

Erna Brodber's anthropologist character Ella Townsend describes knowledge as "a silver spear that goes slowly from one side of the head and through to the other, leaving silver dust in its path" (106). The dust left behind is "absorbed into the brain and your whole mind becomes suffused with understanding. Slowly and silently." Ella's idea that knowledge and understanding is something that happens to the body is a major theme throughout *Louisiana*, Brodber's 1994 novel. Understanding comes at a leisurely pace, but pierces the brain, altering it forever. The silver spear and the dust it leaves behind, representing knowledge, can never be eradicated completely and the physical changes left behind are permanent. Ella's analogy suggests that this knowledge, good or bad, changes a person both mentally and physically. Her experiences in Louisiana communities do just that for her, causing her to become a part of the culture herself and assuming the name Louisiana as she becomes a tool of history and communication with the dead. As such, her journey is literacy intensive, and she must learn and master new ways of thinking, writing, and speaking to fit into the new culture and serve as a vessel for others. Ella's experiences can be paralleled with James Paul Gee's theory of Discourse<sup>1</sup> acquisition from the introduction of the "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics" issue of the *Journal of Education*. Gee states that this process requires individuals to adapt to established norms and values in communities they wish to enter (526). Ella's process of becoming a member of the multicultural community she enters is much more complicated than simply mimicking speech patterns or ways of dress and, as Gee suggests, relies on personal experience as the primary form of instruction. As Ella becomes a part of Louisiana, she must acquire new Discourses and master multiple genres including that of communicating with the dead. This process of learning and becoming a

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<sup>1</sup> Gee establishes a difference between "discourse" and "Discourse" in his text (526). He states that "Discourses" are "ways of being in the world" while "discourse" "means connected stretches of language that make sense." As such, "'discourse' is a part of 'Discourse.'"

tool of communication takes place over the course of the novel, transforming Ella mentally and physically.

Ella is a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City in the 1930s. Assigned to “retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana using oral sources,” Ella leaves her teaching assistantship at Columbia in order to participate in a nationwide oral history project (Brodber 3). The school provides Ella with a tape recorder, a new and expensive aid that few were privileged to work with at the time. Her story is told through transcripts of the tapes she records that include her observations and personal struggles throughout the project and beyond, when Ella’s assignment begins to deviate from the university’s intentions for her. June E. Roberts points out the similarities between Ella, Zora Neale Hurston, and Brodber herself, arguing that Ella is the “combined prototype of [Brodber’s] life and Hurston’s” through her role as “a WPA anthropologist, freelance writer, and part-time university professor” (220). The three are also alike in their interdisciplinary approaches to anthropology and writing by “blurr[ing] the boundaries between ethnography, fiction, and creative nonfiction” (223) with the use of “historical events, personal histories, and allegorical signifiers” to produce metanarratives (217). Roberts writes that “Hurston’s life and career never recovered from her inability to combine the life of a scholar with the life of a writer,” citing her unfinished WPA project “The Florida Negro” in parallel to Ella’s unfinished and delayed manuscript (220). Hurston’s work provides an anthropological precursor to Ella’s, focusing similarly on the ethnography of blacks in the Caribbean and American South. Specifically, Ella’s project focuses on the history of Mrs. Sue Ann King, referred to most often as Mammy. Ella is given little information from the school about Mammy other than she is “a most original story-teller” (47). Comparably, she knows even

less about the St. Mary district in south-central Louisiana where she is traveling; she arrives “a total stranger in [her] setting” (47).

Initially, the completely foreign nature of Louisiana is one of Ella’s greatest challenges. Arriving from Harlem, New York, Ella finds few similarities around her. Though her descent is Caribbean, Reginald Khokher points out that she is “firmly situated as American. . . . Her description of her life is marked by a sense of capitalistic individualism that is unmistakably American. She prides herself in her career, her financial independence and her ability to support herself” (39). Admittedly, Ella expends little mental energy on learning about the area at first: “I was only going to be around for about a month, wasn’t I?” (Brodber 48). At the same time, Ella records some details about the communities she visits, writing that Franklin, Louisiana is the “white part of the area” with an “ambiance quite different from the little rural Harlem in which I lived” (48). Eventually, Ella and her partner, Reuben, are invited to people’s homes and immersed in the sociology of Louisiana. “Questions about social structure whirled in my head,” writes Ella (48). Such questions arise because Ella is ignorant to most southern ways, but also because she is unsure if her presence and values are conflicting with those of her host community. She feels that the people she meets are impatient and uncomfortable with her, but is unsure why: “Did it matter that I was sharing my life with a man who hadn’t married me? How would they know about our marital status anyhow? . . . [D]id they think me out of order to be walking with this man when I should be cleaning the house or doing some other female chore?” (49). As a result, Ella begins spending more time in the home preparing meals and cleaning instead of interacting with community members. This behavioral change ultimately serves a dual purpose: “less interaction with the folk and less discomfort for them,” as well as Ella’s first steps in assuming the Discourse of the community (49).

Ella's journey to learn and embody the culture of the Louisiana community she inhabits parallels Gee's concept of acquiring a Discourse. Gee's idea is significant in this context because of the emphasis it places on communication practices as essential to negotiating one's place within a new setting. Skills like reading and writing are transferable but must be modified for use in various cultures. More than just copying mannerisms or donning a certain costume, Gee proposes that someone like Ella must adapt to and acquire the Discourse of the communities she enters through personal experience. Brodber frames this as the focus of the novel by formatting the text as a compilation of Ella's journal and notes about her research. However, it is not just this use of literacy that is significant, but the content that Ella records which traces changing ways in which she must use employ her literacy skills. Gee himself differentiates between discourse as communication with his definition by capitalizing the D; discourse "means connected stretches of language that make sense" while Discourses are "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (526). Discourses involve not only the modes in which people communicate, but the rules surrounding that communication and serve as "a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (526). Discourses may include such broad roles as being American or female and as narrow and specialized as being a cardiologist, a professor at Harvard, or a regular at a certain bar. Everyone begins with his or her primary Discourse, which is made up of an individual's initial interactions with the world (527). Additional Discourses, such as those learned for work, school, church, or other organizations, are called secondary Discourses; Ella's role as a graduate student at Columbia University serves as secondary Discourse, for instance. Gee argues that

people acquire secondary Discourses “fluently to the extent that we are given access to these institutions and are allowed apprenticeships within them” (527). For Ella, gaining adequate access to the Louisiana communities is a challenge in itself, especially after Mammy’s death.

Ella’s directive of recording oral histories requires her to connect personally with members of the community she enters. Her access to this culture, as she writes, is somewhat limited initially both because she is an outsider and because she feels little reason to find connections with people outside her main directive of recording Mammy’s story. When Mammy dies two weeks into the project, leaving Ella with only the tapes she recorded thus far, Ella is unsure of how to proceed. “Now that Mammy was no longer in the flesh, there was a change,” Ella writes, referring to her interactions in the community and her lack of knowledge about the area (48). Further, Ella worries about the data she was able to collect before Mammy’s passing. Expecting to find primarily non-verbal data, her interrogation of the tapes reveals “that the reel was full, not of silences but of words . . . of conversations between two women, one of them Mammy, with interjections from me in words I didn’t know” (44). Barely recognizing her own voice on the tape, Ella is left “in awe and dread and totally confounded” and with the difficult task of determining how the speech got on the tape and why Mammy is using the recorder to communicate with her (44). Ella’s discovery of the mysterious recordings leaves her skeptical at first but soon these recordings become a fascinating and important part of assembling Mammy’s narrative. Discourse acquisition, gaining cultural literacy, and managing her communication with the dead become essential aspects of Ella’s work.

Through the complex interactions of writing, speech, non-verbal, and otherworldly forms of communication, Brodber weaves a complicated narrative in which many types of literacy are present. The definition of literacy is flexible and is able to take on different meanings to apply to

different situations. Most commonly, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. In discussing Ella's literacy and her process of managing the appropriate types of literacy for the community she enters in Louisiana, I will primarily rely on Judith A. Langer's definition of sociocognitive literacy because it is a form of the ideological model. This model situates literacy in the context of culture in which it is being learned, acknowledging literacy practices as "inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (Street 433). The idea of contextualizing communication with culture is especially important to Brodber's novel, as Ella's success within the communities she enters is dictated by and predicated on her literacy practices. Langer's definition establishes literacy as "(a) culturally based, (b) involv[ing] the higher intellectual skills appropriate to the culture, and (c) learned by children as they interact with their families and communities" (2). I will also consider that not only children learn literacy by interacting with people, but newcomers like Ella as well. This definition helps to view literacy as a tool for communication that relies on thought processes and cultural awareness to determine the most effective use of reading, writing, and speaking in a given situation rather than simply the act of reading and writing itself (3). Further, John F. Szwed points out that in studying literacy and ethnography, it is important to "keep literacy within the logic of the everyday lives of people . . . [and] to stay as close as possible to real cases, individual examples, in order to gain the strength of evidence that comes with being able to examine specific cases in great depth and complexity" (427). Therefore, the literacy knowledge and practices I discuss here are focused on the details Brodber presents about her individual characters, their experiences, and how they actively use literacy in their daily lives.

As soon as she arrives in Louisiana, Ella is entering unfamiliar territory and must quickly learn the cultural literacy of the region. She enters Louisiana as an outsider, a woman of

Caribbean descent who comes from the North. The customs, clothing, and ways of speaking are foreign to her. E.D. Hirsch coins the term cultural literacy in his seminal 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Hirsch writes, “To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world” (xiii). Such a simple definition suggests that a college educated woman like Ella would thrive in nearly any environment, presumably armed with both practical knowledge and classroom-based learning. However, Hirsch’s idea of basic information includes a large array of topics, “from sports to science,” covering the range of human activities (xiii). Hirsch’s arguments are based on reforming the American education system, so he refers to cultural literacy in broad terms, suggesting that an all-encompassing American culture exists and that it should become the basis for a well-rounded curriculum. Though Hirsch often discusses cultural literacy in national terms in his book, he also recognizes that the United States is pluralistic culturally, and often people identify with hyphenated terms, like Afro-American, in order to best define their race and culture (Hirsch 95). Therefore cultural literacy on a smaller scale might refer to the culture of regions or particular communities. In Brodber’s work, the multicultural world of black Louisianans, including those with African and Caribbean roots, is significant Ella’s personal heritage, and yet she has virtually no cultural literacy for this region or its cultures. This suggests, unlike Hirsch’s proposal, that cultural literacy is not a concept that can easily be packaged and transmitted via the classroom. “I did not know the psyche of the South, black or white,” Ella thinks (Brodber 66). Referring to the psyche, Ella acknowledges that the region has its own psychology, deeply ingrained in the people. The differences in culture are not just outward, physical characteristics but also involve the inner workings of the mind, details about the culture that nearly cannot be explained but are gained through living as a member of the area. As a means of becoming a

successful member of the community, Ella begins to learn the customs, practices, and appearances that are acceptable in Mammy's culture.

Amy J. Devitt, Anis Barwashi, and Mary Jo Reiff point out that the concept of discourse community has been critiqued and challenged by scholars like John Trimbur, Patricia Bizzell, and Joseph Harris, who contend that the idea is "too utopian, hegemonic, stable, and abstract" (Devitt, Barwashi, and Reiff 541). As a result, the idea of a discourse community "conceals the language and social practices that take place within it and distracts researchers from examining how its internal workings may be recognized and studied" (541). The reduction of a culture to a defined set of literacies potentially undermines the idea that immersion and personal experience is necessary for acquisition of cultural literacy and Discourse ways of being. As Ella's experiences in the novel reflect, belonging and success in a community cannot come through classroom instruction alone. Similarly, Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins write that "[c]ultural literacy creates a discourse that seeks to minimize or eradicate difference," building a "community built around a particular set of values, languages, and conventions" (574). As a result, the idea of cultural literacy is at risk for either excluding many aspects of culture or being so broad that it no longer is easily definable. While it is possible for the concept of cultural literacy to create community and reduce difference in small communities, it can also cause outsiders to feel alienated or unwelcome. With her limited initial knowledge, Ella experiences the frustrations of being an outsider firsthand and must struggle through the process of gaining cultural literacy virtually on her own.

Ella is allowed into Mammy's home for her interview, but Ella feels limited by her lack of cultural literacy. This is not the first time that Ella feels restricted. In recalling experiences at her mother's church, which was dominantly attended by West Indians, Ella remembers that

talking to the parishioners was difficult. Though they spoke sometimes outright about “how-we-did-it-back-home,” Ella writes that learning details about their culture, behavior, and “how ‘they did it back home’ was as difficult for me and as painful for them as pulling teeth. Each was a history book, separate, zippered, and padlocked. Some like my own parents had even thrown away the key!” (58). Ella drops out of the church before high school. Though she is technically a member of this Caribbean community as the daughter of Caribbean transplants, Ella’s primarily American upbringing and young age puts her outside the realm of experience for this culture. Simply asking for the information she seeks from members of the West Indian church leads to few useful details, and she soon finds that some of the understanding and interpretation must be extrapolated on her own. The anecdote is reflective of her experiences in the Louisiana community as well. Each person she meets in Louisiana possesses a history book’s wealth of experience and information, but all seem to keep this information close at first. This results in Ella’s initiation into the Discourse being not so much guided by her peers as influenced by her own intuition to determine her appropriate place and behavior. For Gee, this constitutes acquisition rather than learning, meaning that Ella becomes a member of the Discourse “subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error” rather than through formal teaching (539). Acquisition, Gee says, is best for performance purposes, making Ella’s process of gaining the ability to explain and analyze her community fairly slow, but her ability to mimic appropriate behaviors is gained fairly quickly.

However, Gee also argues that Discourses and literacies are not like languages in that there are not different levels of fluency. A person is either a member of the Discourse or not: “someone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner” (Gee 529). Failing to display the appropriate identity only confirms and announces the person’s lack of membership in

that Discourse. Therefore, Ella must gain access through “mushfaking,” a term from prison culture defined “as making ‘do with something less than when the real thing is not available’” (533). Gee argues that “[m]ushfake Discourse’ means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies” in order to assimilate well enough to pass as a member (533). For Ella, mushfaking helps her to function until she more fully acquires the Discourse and allows for her acceptance by Madam Marie, who becomes an important mentor in Ella’s journey to become a medium.

As Ella manages her mushfaking period and begins to transcribe the tapes she has recorded from Mammy, Ella finds that they answer few questions for her. Mammy talks about the people in her life rather than her own experiences, and those, Ella feels, should be the focus of the project. She feels as though the keys to Mammy’s personal history are there but hidden among the stories she tells about others. Ella struggles with interpreting the words on the tape because “[s]ome words control large spaces. They sit over large holes” (Brodber 43). The difficulty comes primarily in not knowing what is metaphorically in the holes. As Ella considers, “These holes might be dungeons with hairy half humans living in them. Then again they may be underground worlds with railway lines taking trains and neatly dressed people here and there” (43). Ella feels that the experience of exploring the recordings, which seem to be coming from Mammy in the afterlife, is like walking on corrupted words, suspended over holes that could contain any number of things. Knowing what is contained in the holes is significant to the overall story and encompasses the research and interpretation that must be done by the transcriber. Such work is difficult, and Ella does not know how to approach the task without acquiring all of the cultural knowledge that Mammy possesses. It is this cultural literacy and acquisition of

Discourse that allows Ella to manage the holes underneath the words, or interpret their true meaning more easily.

Ella's skepticism about communicating with the dead also affects her ability to engage with Mammy's words; she asks Reuben, "'Do I need to see a psychiatrist?'" (44). Knowing that the journey of gathering and processing these words is completely up to her and seemingly important if Mammy is providing her with the stories, Ella is fearful of falling into the holes under the words, or more accurately, she is afraid that she is losing her sanity in dedicating herself to a vast amount of information that may or may not be real or relevant to the project. Becoming an outlet for Mammy's words is involuntary and scary for Ella, and it feels like a violation: "I had been officially entered. I was going to be, if not already, a vessel, a horse, somebody's talking drum" (46). Instead of wearing and possessing the elements that make up the supernatural Discourse, she feels as though the Discourse is wearing her, becoming an identity she cannot take off and a burden she must bear without truly understanding it. As Roberts notes, "it takes Ella six weeks to set up a scientific method for recording and analyzing the supernatural data" (230), marking her first steps in acquiring the Discourse.

In addition to her acquisition of a new Discourse, Ella must learn to manage multiple modalities in working with the oral history project. As defined by Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt, "mode is used to refer to a regularized organized set of resources for meaning-making, including, image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, and sound-effect. Modes are broadly understood to be the effect of the work of culture in shaping material into resources for representation" (1). *Louisiana*, as Vera Kutzinski writes, deals in "intensely complicated modes of address of the dead in the fictionalized context of ethnographic fieldwork" (69). As Ella works with her main subject, Louise, referred to as Mammy, Ella simply watches and lets the recorder

capture the sound. She observes images, movements, and gestures as Mammy makes them, recording her speech, songs, and even the background noise that characterizes Mammy's house, all representing different modes. "Mammy I'm reading your face," Ella writes in her transcription notes (Brodber 13). As such, Ella serves as an unattached observer of the data, using the modes as a tool or resource for cultural understanding, as Kress and Jewitt suggest. Later, as Ella becomes ingrained in the culture itself, her interactions with modes change and she becomes an embodiment and dispenser of these same modes. In use, modes become a tool for Discourse acquisition and, ultimately, one of the markers of its mastery.

While much of Ella's learning of culture, mode, and Discourse involves mental work and change, her physical appearance and everyday practices are also heavily influenced. Ella "no longer wear[s] slacks," but learns to sew her own clothing, making long, flowing dresses that cover her body but also keep her cool in the southern heat (99). She lets her hair go natural: "I no longer press. I don't know if this represents spiritual or intellectual movement or just plain convenience, but there it is: my hair is natural and untouched" (98-99). Though these changes represent her assimilation into the culture, Ella feels conspicuous at first, sensing that she is "very observable in the streets" (99). However, the changes in her appearance also trigger a connection with her mother and a newfound confidence: "I was never as tall as my mother nor had I before her bearing. With my headdress and my long dress, I know I present a dignity rather like hers and an aura which turns heads" (99). The attention she draws is no longer because she does not fit in with the community, but because she appears as an important member of society, belonging completely and possessing significant cultural capital.

In addition to changes to her physical appearance, Ella begins to engage more with the culture's values and traditions. She learns to make a type of gumbo stew from the vegetables she

finds in the farmers market, a practice she will undertake almost religiously every single day. To be accepted in the community that has traditional values about men and women living together, Ella and Reuben have to marry. Belonging to the culture is essential to her transcription work as it allows her to comfortably assimilate into the homes of the people she interviews; without her understanding of the culture, the transcription work seems to her much more difficult and confusing. Ella's spells of cooking and sewing around the house rather than writing and studying seems to her a failure, that her mind is on vacation when she is not actively writing and transcribing. However, even these aspects of cultural literacy help her to understand Mammy's perspective and extrapolate Mammy's personal history from her accounts of life in Louisiana. In these beginning stages, Ella is acquiring a nondominant Discourse that will later become dominant and very useful to her.

Gee distinguishes between dominant and nondominant Discourses, both of which Ella encounters (527). Gee writes that “[n]ondominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which often brings solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large” (528). Ella begins acquiring the Discourse of her Louisiana community in a nondominant manner, searching primarily for acceptance, at least to the point that she is able to comfortably interact with her subjects. It serves as a form of social leverage in order for her to achieve academic goals. On the other hand, “[d]ominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which, at a particular place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social ‘goods’ (money, prestige, status, etc.)” (527). Once Ella moves to New Orleans and becomes a working medium and prophet with Madam Marie, the Louisiana Discourse couples with the supernatural Discourse to create a means of attaining status within

the community as “another Madam Marie” (99). Eventually, Madam Marie dies and Ella takes over the business, gaining capital through her use of the specialized Discourse.

Ella’s success may be attributed to her enhanced skills in multiple literacies. The African American community represented combines both southern and Caribbean cultures through the global South connection of two Saint Mary parishes in Louisiana and Jamaica, both which value oral tradition as a means of conveying history and culture. Jeremie Dagnini emphasizes Ella’s position in the community as a student of anthropology “bridges the gap between the oral and literate worlds” (29). It is her fluency in both the academic and African Discourses that allows her to “materialize the dead’s voices through printing” (29). However, Gee writes that people can lose their fluency in a Discourse when it is underutilized. There also may be tension and conflict between a person’s Discourses, which Gee says will always be present to some degree (528). Interestingly, Ella’s Louisiana Discourse displaces and rejects her academic Discourse, as seen toward the end of the novel when she returns to New York City to see her parents’ lawyer. “The lawyer’s first glance at me told me a tale. I was something the cat had deposited on the mat,” Ella writes (133). The Discourses of Columbia and Harlem that would have once allowed her to fit into the lawyer’s office without notice have been underutilized for so long that she is no longer able to slip into them without thinking. Ella realizes that her identity is now tied up with the South in such a way that removing the “identity kit” (Gee 526) of the Louisiana Discourse feels wrong. It is now the one she identifies with most. Ella remarks that her physical appearance, with her long dresses and untamed hair, is one she has possessed for years, and it seems surprising to her how out of place she now seems in a New York culture she once was a member of: “It had never struck me, nor did it Reuben, that to enter this part of America I would have to discard garments I had been wearing for years and find myself more passable costume”

(133). However, at his point in Ella's life, the cultural capital she desires is within the multicultural communities she inhabits in Louisiana, so that is the Discourse she utilizes most, and the one she becomes most comfortable embodying.

Acquiring the Discourse and engaging with Louisiana's culture brings Ella raised social capital in the community while she is living in New Orleans and working with Madam Marie. "Another Madam Marie' I hear them say, though I have done absolutely nothing, have none of Madam's credits to my name," Ella writes (99). Significantly, Ella remarks that people in the community begin to associate her with Madam Marie and give her credit for the same sort of credentials and achievements as the woman, though Ella is new to being a medium and feels as though she has done nothing to deserve such a comparison. She has, however, become one of them, a member of the culture: her appearance and association with Madam Marie alone seem to indicate that she probably has such cultural capital, and this is very influential of the community's perception of her.

In the same way that Discourses are valued in certain cultures, Kress and Jewitt argue that certain modes are similarly valued, and groups of people use and refine them until the modes are fully developed and articulated for use in that culture (2). Speech, writing, and sign-language are modes that are heavily used by certain cultures, and images, hieroglyphics, and character-based writing like that of the Chinese and Japanese have been valued writing modes throughout history. In Mammy's culture, the thriving business of Madam Marie indicates that communication with the supernatural is a valued mode of communication. The initial communication of the dead that must be transmitted through a vessel, whether tape recorder or medium, can also be considered a genre. Defining genre as "language forms that have identifiable and changing roles in interpersonal relations and in larger collective contexts"

(Barwashi 550), it can also be assumed that genres are related to the ways people employ language and are dependent upon changes in community usage. Anis Barwashi argues that “[a]nalyzing genres within their lived contexts reveals to students, teachers, and researchers the material strength of those communities and their power over members and nonmembers alike” (549). Such discussions allow for the consideration of communication with the dead as a legitimate genre within Ella’s community in New Orleans. Madam Marie’s prophesying becomes a genre in their limited community, and Ella becomes her apprentice, now possessing a mentor in Madam Marie who can assist in initiating her into the Discourse. When she moves to Congo Square to become a student of Madam Marie’s, Ella finds that the medium has a vast stock of clients in the West Indian sailors who come into port at New Orleans: “[s]he took from them their tales and quickly passed them on” (78). The tales then become a larger part of a growing oral record that Madam Marie commands. In this way, communication with the dead as a form of spoken history serves as a mode, genre, and Discourse in *Louisiana*.

Mammy explains to Ella the experiences in which she, her husband Silas, and Lowly had with supernatural communication. Silas worked hard to study the process, becoming his own mentor by seeking out instruction. He “took books by mail. He was interested in the mind, telepathy, and that whole area of mind control, of outer body experiences” (Brodber 154). As Silas shares his knowledge with Sue Ann and Louise, the group learns to access memories and enhance their communication: “As we talked about [Silas’] reading, Mammy became aware of like experiences she had had. She talked about these [with the group]. She had never talked about them before” (154). The group begins to communicate telepathically; questions mentally pondered by the women are answered aloud by Silas. The women communicate silently from different rooms in the house. Silas, Mammy, and Lowly become fluent in telepathy and

supernatural communication very quickly, and Lowly describes this as a period of growing together, with and through one another (155).

Ella's acquisition of the supernatural discourse occurs over many years, and Ella's initial experiences with accessing the thoughts of others occurs in a much different fashion; she takes on her interactions with the supernatural and telepathy alone, without a support system. This helps to explain her fear and difficulty processing the audio she receives on the recorder. The experience is new and overwhelming; it is a literacy and Discourse she has not yet gained and therefore is uncomfortable navigating. As Gee writes, Discourses "are not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (527). Discourses are learned by doing; one can only gain another Discourse by experiencing and embodying that Discourse. This process is most effective with the help of a mentor, as Gee also suggests that Discourses can only be acquired when one has the ability to interact and socialize with others in that Discourse community. This complicates Ella's experience; her socialization into the community occurs first through the tape recorder, serving as a vessel for Mammy's communication. It is not until later, when Ella and Reuben move to New Orleans, that Ella works with Madam Marie, a working medium, to fully enter the Discourse and master the genre.

Madam Marie becomes a teacher that Ella can observe and work with. She writes that Madam Marie teaches her about the language, giving her mastery of the local dialect and its idioms (117). As she works with the people who come into the shop, Ella feels as though she herself becomes more complete through her learning and recording of their histories: "I am knowing more about my men and where they are from and in the process, I am becoming.

Language is the key” (117). Ella eventually recognizes herself as “a soothsayer, yes, but one who looks behind, sees and will see the past” (106).

Other markers of Ella’s definitive mastery of the Louisiana and supernatural Discourses come in her possession of ethnic songs that she now shares with her clients at Madam Marie’s. “The songs are equally ours now. We just sing. I made no statement on this. It is the shape of things,” Ella writes (129). Additionally, she no longer needs the tape recorder in order to hear from Mammy or Lowly. The pendant necklace Reuben buys for their anniversary serves as a vessel that is connected directly to Ella and is exclusively hers; the ownership of the communication is no longer mediated through the university’s tape recorder. “Much better,” writes Ella. “I have never been happy holding something that was not mine, and satisfied that all involved had made the switch from machine to pendant, from just talking, to talking and seeing” (132). Ella professes to seeing Heaven through the pendant, giving her the ability to engage more fully with multiple modes and showing her intensifying close connection with the otherworldly and the dead. Ella’s discussion of the pendant as a new, stronger form of supernatural communication for her also marks a steady decline in her health. Her growing connection to death and the dead causes Ella’s health to deteriorate over many years as she discovers and hones her abilities as a medium.

Ella records over the next year of falling three separate times. She breaks her leg, hits her head, and dislocates her hip. The broken leg slows Ella down, causing the couple to hire a maid and caretaker. After her hip is dislocated, Reuben takes over the writing duties, describing his wife’s inability to hold a pencil. He writes in March 1950 that her connection to Mammy and Lowly has progressed; as Ella speaks, it is not her own voice that Reuben hears: “[t]he voices I hear, are as with the recording machine, those of other people. I, of course recognize Mammy’s

voice” (143). In April 1952, Reuben records that he fears for Ella’s death when she makes a breakthrough in Mammy’s history, learning during a session that Mammy was “a Garvey organizer and a psychic. . . . A black nationalist” (148). Reuben writes, “I half expect that my wife now that she knows what she wants to know, will now close her eyes and join your heavenly throng” (149). However, Ella recovers, beginning to walk again and write, recording that she does not recall pain or a brush with death but only the physical presence of Mammy and Lowly. “What I recall is being with them and hearing them tell their story/stories. It is down on paper and in Reuben’s hand so I must have been a conduit,” she writes. “I am here now in the world that Reuben occupies,” suggesting that she was spiritually outside the realm of the living during her illness, implying her inability to exist and function fully in both states. One of her existences must suffer at the benefit of the other.

Kutzinski argues that the possession that Ella experiences is an equal-opportunity experience for anyone willing and spiritually open enough to allow it. This “textual ventriloquism,” she argues, is an act of public performance rather than a private experience (76). Anyone is able to become a vessel, or as Ella describes it, a horse that is seemingly involuntarily ridden by the spirit (Brodber 46). “What Ella describes as ‘hegemony of the spirit’ is a function of her being initially unaware that what she, in her role as anthropologist, observes is a performance of community in which she, as audience, is already involved as a potential spirit vessel and performer,” Kutzinski writes (77). The mind and body duality that Kutzinski applies to the “hegemony of the spirit” that Ella describes is mirrored in its duality of public performance and the private discourse of her journal and notes that make up the novel. Kutzinski continues, “Ella’s journal, then, chronicles her increasing awareness of the precise degree of her involvement” (77). Effectively, Ella subconsciously records her experience in acquiring the

supernatural discourse as it occurs, from her early mushfaking with the tape recorder to her stronger and more personal connection to the spirit world through the necklace, to her final entries that mark her full embodiment of Louisiana and the supernatural. Both the spirit possession and Ella's journal entries about her experiences are forms of private discourse that cross boundaries into the realm of public performance. The private journal becomes public when published and is bookended by letters written by a fictional editor and Reuben, respectively. As Kutzinski writes, *Louisiana* presents "voices [that] tend to stray from their assigned bodies, physical and written, stripping those bodies, in the straying, of the constants of assigned identities" (77). These unclear boundaries make understanding and dealing with becoming a vessel, what I would define as acquiring the supernatural discourse, difficult to process, as evidenced in Ella's writing.

Eventually, Reuben is correct, and Ella seems to recognize that she has nothing more to transmit from Mammy and Lowly. "There was nothing more. I knew there was nothing more. Nothing more but for myself to understand why this was my experience," Ella writes (Brodber 160). Rae Ann Meriwether argues that Ella's death signifies the completion of her transformation into a "communal self" that includes Mammy, Lowly, and the histories of all the people she has served as a medium (110). Further, Kutzinski argues that Ella's new name represents not only a geographical place, but "the imagined merging of two characters' names," (79) as evidenced by the Spanish combining of Mammy and Lowly's names as "Louise y Anna" (Brodber 124). The name represents the marriage of the women in narrative as well as Ella's birth: "The venerable sisters had married themselves to me - given birth to me" (32). I would also argue that the transformative marriage and birth that Ella describes signals her full acquisition of the supernatural Discourse. These events represent Ella's full embodiment of the supernatural

Discourse and manifest in her crossing over into Mammy and Lowly's realm: when the narrative is completed and Ella has received all the messages from Mammy and Lowly, she passes away.

Jenny Sharpe suggests that “[a]rguably, Brodber is instructing us to listen carefully to the past for an agency that exists in the silent spaces of history” and that “the novel’s depiction of spirit possession [is] a critical engagement with the materiality of sociological data and official archives” (91). Indeed, Brodber seems to be presenting oral history as important and potentially the most accurate emotional history. Through Ella’s narrative, Brodber is making a judgment about the modes we rely on for historical fact. Sharpe writes that “*Louisiana* points to gaps even within the oral histories, a narrative form whose morsels are difficult for the reader to fit together like so many pieces in a jigsaw puzzle” (25). Roberts adds that the novel itself “represents Brodber’s effort to iterate allegorically the recovery of missing histories from the silences of historical gaps, omissions, and commissions of cultural repression,” agreeing that the result is a “metanarrative jigsaw” that must be worked out by both Ella and the reader (217). Certainly Ella’s experience has been troubled, frustrating, and tedious. She sometimes spends hours poring over the oral records without feeling like she has put together a narrative that will be useful to anyone. At one point she doubts anyone will ever understand the transcripts: “If these transcripts make sense to any third person, bless her. It is her work” (116). It is easy to regard oral histories as merely one person’s story, a tiny sliver of the larger history that possesses the real significance. “At the same time,” writes Sharpe, “the value of Mammy’s stories lies not only in new factual evidence but also in something written archives simply cannot convey - namely, a lived experience passed on from one generation of women to the next” (25). As she writes about Mammy’s mother’s history as a member of the Teche strike in the Louisiana cane fields, Ella realizes that Mammy’s own accounts of the events are valuable in themselves. “I could ask the

old people who were around at that time to give me some leads to the names but you are right,” she writes to Mammy, “what your granny felt, what your mother felt, what you felt cannot be told any better than you have told it” (Brodber 139). Personal histories are valuable in their details and in their humanity. The telling, recording, and survival of these narratives are important, not only as parts of the historical narrative, but pieces of humanity. In the end, Reuben wants to publish Ella’s transcript to serve as both her story, as the conduit, and the story of Louise, Sue Ann, and Silas. He believes that this can be a corrective measure, a means of explaining to Ella’s parents what kept her in Louisiana for the remainder of her life. Though Ella does not explicitly state it, her goal was always to complete the initial assignment of recording Mammy’s oral history. The emotional significance of the narrative is important not only to the people involved in the telling of the stories, but to those who transcribed and compiled the information as well. “I want to publish the manuscript,” Reuben writes in the epilogue. “It is my wife’s story too. It is the story of the conduit, the scribe as much as that of the actors” (165). Not just the manuscript, but the entire process serves as recovery of “her erased cultural identity and lost cultural connection as a member of the diasporic folk community” (Roberts 234). For all parties involved, the narrative reflects experiences and transformations: for Mammy, through the telling of her life story, and for Ella through her acquisition of new Discourses and process of becoming Louisiana the person.

Through Ella’s experience, Brodber argues that understanding history from a human perspective must involve the use of multiple modalities and genres, utilizing written history, oral accounts, and in this case, communication with the dead. Ella ultimately represents the convergence of the three genres through her mastery of each and her production of a completed narrative. Though the university requested an oral account transcribed to text, Ella’s experiences

in Louisiana cause her to take the project to another level, devoting the rest of her life to becoming a part of Mammy's culture in order to fully do justice to the complex story of Sue Ann King's life. Ella's oral history project essentially embodies the same genre and possesses the same goals as her position as a medium. In both instances, personal histories are being unearthed and recorded in order to produce a more full picture of the community's rich history. Like the silver spear she describes depositing knowledge, Ella's experiences in Louisiana changed her mentally and physically. Her acquisition of multiple Discourses as part of the black community alters her ways of thinking and being. As Roberts writes, both Ella and her husband "come to their study with little or no cultural connection but end up finding themselves and forming a strong spiritual connection, reaching beyond death as we read the record of their experience in *Louisiana*, to the folk and to their own pasts" (256). Ella's use of Louisiana as her name reflects her acquisition of the state's spirit, embodying its history, while also reflecting a renewed identification with Caribbean and southern culture.

**Chapter 3: Experiencing Words: Managing Synesthesia and Racial Difference Through  
Letter Writing in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth***

Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven write that every letter, “no matter how private and personal it may seem, is a letter marked by and sent to the world” (1). In Monique Truong’s novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, reading and writing are essential to the life of the protagonist, Linda Hammerick. Letters in particular are significant, serving as both public and private discourse and helping to define, record, and manage Linda’s life. An adopted Vietnamese-American girl living in the largely white town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, Linda contends with racial difference and reveals feeling judged and excluded because of her race, experiencing a problematic seeing of physical difference and not-seeing of her as an individual. As she grows up among cruel classmates who taunt her with racial epithets in adolescence and exclude her entirely as they progress into high school, Linda is left without a defined social group of her peers. Adults similarly practiced “selective blindness” (Truong 171), “look[ing] at [Linda] with eyes that always made [her] uncomfortable” but largely keeping their comments to themselves (170). Though she identifies with the South as home, people in her community automatically view her as an outsider because of her race. Linda also has synesthesia, a neurological disorder in which senses involuntarily mix in unexpected ways. Speaking and hearing speech correlates with various tastes for Linda; each word has a distinctive and consistent flavor, and all of the flavors materialize in her mouth as she hears the words. As a synesthete, Linda “cannot stop the influence of the outside world on her body and experience,” and thus wages a constant battle to manage speech and the internal, involuntary response it elicits from her (Dykema 124). As Patricia Lynne Duffy points out, Linda’s race and synesthesia present the challenge of “contend[ing] with both the inner and outer anomalies of her identity” (666). In order to cope with both her inner and outer difference, Linda often retreats to the realm of reading and writing, particularly through letters. In an age of phone communication, the fact that characters rely on

written communication so often is significant because of each message's personalization, not just through intimate content, but through handwriting and physical presence. Linda writes letters to her best friend, and the medium serves as the main mode of their communication from childhood forward. Later in life, Linda begins to write to her traveling uncle and as she learns about her early childhood, Linda finds that her adoption was negotiated through letters written between her biological mother and adoptive father. The many letters that manifest in the text combine to represent different parts of Linda's self, creating a complex and intimate portrait of her life, both historically and emotionally. Though they are deeply personal, the letters provide Linda with a most effective means of managing both her inner and outer difference and traversing space and time to create and maintain relationships with others.

Considering Linda's synesthesia as a communication barrier is essential to understanding what leads her to rely so heavily on her literacy skills. Synesthesia, meaning "joined sensation" (Cytowic 1), is often thought of as a literary device, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's description of "a yellow smell" in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Gilman 11). Duffy writes that such descriptions "let readers both hear and 'see'" imagery and are used for effect (647). Used as a literary device, synesthesia may fire multiple senses for readers, simulating its effects. Though the senses are distinctly separate sensations, people with neurological synesthesia often experience "dual or multisensory response[s] to stimuli that would produce only a unisensory response for most people" (647). For example, music may also evoke smell or color, and the response is intense, inseparable, and involuntary. Developmental synesthesia, like Linda's, "does not arise voluntarily, nor is it learned through training, acquired through drug use, or induced (solely) by any neurological pathology" (Johnson, Allison, & Baron-Cohen 4). Linda's synesthesia is of the lexical-gustatory variety (i.e., words trigger tastes for her). Though

Linda's synesthesia is limited to an auditory-gustatory relationship, the response is triggered only by spoken language, both her own and that she hears: "Many of the words that I heard or had to say aloud brought with them a taste," Linda explains, "unique, consistent, and most often unrelated to the meaning of the word that had sent the taste rolling into my mouth" (*Bitter* 21). Singing, writing, and reading do not affect her, and therefore become outlets when the synesthesia becomes overwhelming.

Though Linda has no idea that her condition has a name or explanation for much of her life, synesthesia cases have been documented since the early nineteenth century, with "the first known convincing account" being a first person "self-description" in an 1812 medical dissertation (Jewanski 370). Later, large-scale studies were conducted and documented "[d]uring the last two decades of the nineteenth century" (375). Portrayals in literary works appeared in French poetry at the end of the nineteenth century (Duffy 649), becoming a link for Symbolist poets to the sublime (651). Psychological literature on the subject declined in the 1930s due to its subjective nature; it was difficult to verify or prove results of individual reports of internal phenomena (Johnson, Allison, & Baron-Cohen 4). Therefore, the study of synesthesia did not become prevalent again until "the latter half of the twentieth century" when "new methods were introduced to assess the genuineness of synesthesia" (5). In addition to the fact that Linda is unaware synesthesia is diagnosable and that others share similar experiences, her family and friends are not always accepting or understanding of the condition, leading Linda to guard this information carefully. Linda's attempts to explain the connection between words and flavors only instructed her that this was a private phenomenon, almost shameful, and should be kept to herself. At 11 years old, Linda attempts to share her word-taste associations with her mother:

I blurted out as quickly as I could, 'Mom *chocolatemilk*, you *cannedgreenbeans* know *grapejelly* what *grahamcracker* tastes like a *walnuthamsteaksugar-cured*?

*Godwalnut* tastes like a walnuthamsteaksugar-cured. The word*licorice* *Godwalnut*, I mean*raisin*, and the word*licorice* tastes-  
 ‘Linda*mint*, please*lemonjuice* don’t talk*cornchips* like a crazy*heavycream*  
 person*garlicpowder*,’ my mom said, cutting me off. (Truong, *Bitter* 107)  
 Linda persists, but her mother insists that her talk is “crazy” and admonishes, “I won’t have it in  
 my family” (107). Linda then clearly understands that DeAnne’s message is, “*If you want to be*  
*one of us, Linda, you hush your mouth*” (108). The interaction colors her relationship with her  
 synesthesia for the rest of her life, identifying it as a negative anomaly that makes her an  
 outsider. Not even her father, with whom Linda feels much more connected to than her mother,  
 is allowed to know of the sometimes-overwhelming experience of hearing speech. When her  
 father read her bedtime stories, often fairy tales, Linda was nearly unable to cope with the sharp,  
 intense flavors triggered by the words commonly found in them. “I tried my best to hide my  
 face,” she remembers. “The only story I could tolerate was ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears.’  
 The rest contained too many sour words that made me agitated and kept me up long into the  
 night. . . . I don’t know what Thomas must have thought, sitting there next to a child with her  
 face underneath the covers but who was clearly wide awake” (162). The scene reflects Linda’s  
 difficulty in dealing with her synesthesia and the lengths she will go to hide it from others, even  
 as a small child. As if her mother did not invoke Linda’s difference enough, Richard E. Cytowic  
 writes, “It is rare for smell or taste to be either the trigger or the synesthetic response,” making  
 Linda an outsider even among other synesthetes (1). Ultimately, synesthesia is problematic to  
 Linda’s communication in that it neurologically interrupts thoughts, but also in that it prevents  
 her from sharing her whole self from people like DeAnne.

In the novel, Truong represents Linda’s synesthesia in dialogue by including the tasted  
 word in italics with the word that triggers it. For instance, “Linda*mint*” indicates that the name  
 Linda tastes like mint to the protagonist. At times, Truong uses this technique throughout entire

conversations, complicating the reading experience. Amanda Dykema points out that the writing technique shows “the very cumbersome negotiation necessary to write Linda’s experience of a conversation” and gives the reader an idea of what holding a conversation might be like for Linda by “disrupt[ing] a sentence’s visual flow” with the intrusion of italicized flavors (122). The technique slows down the reader, forcing her to process both the meaning of the spoken words along with the taste that accompanies each word. Though non-synesthetes cannot experience a conversation the way Linda would, Truong’s writing technique gives the reader an insight on the overwhelming nature of processing multiple senses firing at once. The words that do not trigger her synesthesia bring relief in comparison to the others as their flavors invade her mouth: “For me, the few words that *didn’t* bring with them a taste were sanctuaries, a cloister in which I could hear their meanings as clear as my own heart beating,” Linda recalls. She compares the rest of her vocabulary as being “populated by an order of monks who had broken their vows of silence and in this act had revealed themselves to me” (*Bitter* 15-16). The flavors that populate her mouth when speaking or hearing speech cloud the meanings behind the words, not allowing her to process messages fully or truly connect with the person speaking.

Linda’s synesthesia leads to difficulties for her in both listening and speaking, especially in school. Her “reading comprehension skills were well above average,” but the overwhelming tide of flavors interrupting lectures and class discussions are distracting. This is reflected in Linda’s grades, where she is a C student prior to high school: “On my report cards, my teachers conveyed this . . . to my parents as ‘your daughter’s unwillingness to pay attention in class’” (Truong, *Bitter* 21). In everyday life, words that Linda found “literally distasteful” would make her wince, and their cumulative effect could sometimes leave her “subdued and in search of a dark, quiet room” (77). Thankfully, Linda’s synesthesia was not all distraction and unpleasant

experiences. At eleven years old, Linda “had just learned the trick of stringing words together to produce the tastes that [she] wanted” (Truong, *Bitter* 73). For instance, while eating her adoptive mother DeAnne’s terrible cooking, Linda discovers while saying “not again” that “again” tastes like a plain pancake (75). Whether positive or negative, the effects of Linda’s synesthesia were overall distracting and confusing for her to process as a child, especially without the support of her family.

In addition to her synesthesia, Linda contends with the judgments of her community about her race. As a child, Linda feels out of place in her body, recognizing it definitively as what makes her different. According to Nahem Yousaf, “[t]he trope of nonseeing or selective blindness characterizes fiction set in” the South, and he points out that Truong’s epigraph for the novel focuses on this (215). Taken from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the epigraph quotes Atticus as he explains to Scout that the poor, white trash Ewells are nice people ““when you finally see them”” beyond their appearance (Truong, *Bitter* 1). In a similar manner, Linda recalls that the judgments made against her were the result of seeing and judging her body coupled with willful ignorance. Linda recalls that the adults in the town “vowed to make themselves color-blind on my behalf. That didn’t happen. What did happen was that I became a blind spot in their otherwise 20-20 field of vision” (170). The “selective blindness” Linda observes only ensures that the adults around her do not remark about her appearance, but it does not stop their thoughts or silent judgments: “Instead of invisibility, Boiling Springs made an open secret of me,” Linda states. In the notes for *Bitter in the Mouth*, Truong writes she considered *To Kill a Mockingbird* heavily while writing the novel because of the “evocative creation” of Boo Radley (292). She argues that the South often creates unseen “ghosts” like Boo who are outsiders, “the embodiments of the anxieties, fears, and violations of the norms of the

family.” Truong thus has Linda connect with this literature, identifying with Boo in her racial difference: “I was the town’s pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so. In Boiling Springs, I was never Scout. I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in plain sight” (171). Like Boo, Linda feels like a shameful centerpiece of Boiling Springs lore, a figure rarely discussed but widely known.

Linda refers to herself as the answer to the “diversity drought,” providing someone to serve as a target for pent-up racism in a southern town overwhelmingly populated by whites (173). Though she is mostly left alone by adults, school presents a host of other challenges, namely children without the filters that their parents attempt to maintain. Linda recalls that her new, Americanized name only served as a “mask” to her classmates, in place until she revealed herself by answering the roll call: “[t]hen they would turn around and silently mouth ‘Chink’ or ‘Jap’ or ‘Gook’ at me, so that our teacher wouldn’t hear” (Truong, *Bitter* 171). The discrimination Linda experiences, then, is solely based on her appearance and ignores her family, accent, values, and other features that make her more like her classmates than different. Lisa Lowe writes that “the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before” (5-6). Linda experiences this directly, as her outward appearance is seemingly all that is needed to classify her as foreign or different. The racism she experiences is bodily, and even though Linda grew up in North Carolina and sounds southern, Linda still looks like the Other and becomes a target for judgment. “Since leaving Boiling Springs, I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South,” Linda recalls (Truong, *Bitter* 169). Her standard response asserts that the real question is about *looking* Asian in the South: “[f]or me, pointing out to them the difference between ‘being’ and ‘looking’ was the beginning, middle, and end of my

answer” (169). The question is problematic because Linda does not identify as Asian: “How could I explain to them that from the age of seven to eighteen, there was nothing Asian about me except my body, which I had willed away and few in Boiling Springs seemed to see anyway” (169-70). As Lowe points out, the other “cannot be imagined as sharing in America,” and Asian appearance like Linda’s causes others to view her to be “located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation” (6). But, because the American South constitutes her experience more than Asia does, Linda feels as though she cannot effectively answer questions about being Asian; she “identif[ies] with the South almost completely as home” (Yousaf 216).

The discrimination Linda experiences as an Asian female in the South is not always based on racial epithets so much as the lack of identity she feels among her peers, especially in high school. Rather than being hyper-aware of her external difference, Linda feels the “heightened interest in my physical presence rapidly dissipate into a kind of non-seeing” as she grows older (Truong, *Bitter* 173). Instead of an especially specific role based on her race, Linda feels as though she is completely disregarded by both her classmates and adult members of the community, nearly invisible:

I had no role to play within the romances, the dramas, and the tragedies that my classmates’ hormones were writing for them. I was never considered a heroine, love interest, vixen, or villainess. Even Kelly assigned me the role of secret confidante and then audience member. To be the Smartest Girl in my high school was to be disembodied, which was what I thought I had wanted all along. I was the Brain. Everyone else around me became their bodies. (173).

More than feeling judged for her race, Linda feels disregarded for being Asian, and this causes her to retreat even further from social interactions at school and into a select few relationships and reading and writing as a main method of communication.

In dealing with feeling like an outsider among her peers and in her community, Linda is resorts to reading and writing as a means of finding belonging. Linda’s connection to the South,

cultivated primarily through place and her upbringing in a white, middle-class home, can also be linked to her literacy practices. Linda identifies deeply with some of the stories she reads in the book her father gave her, *North Carolina Parade: Stories of History and People*. “There was something reassuring about having the history and people of your world reduced to 209 pages and a handful of drawings,” Linda remembers. Her father “wanted [her] to have a book that would foster a sense of security and belonging,” and the book provides vivid portraits of historically well-known North Carolinians, including those who were outsiders in their communities (Truong 52). Instead of identifying with the “children, well loved and well remembered” or towering historical figures like Andrew Johnson or Daniel Boone, Linda connects most with George Moses Horton, a slave who wrote poetry, and Virginia Dare, a child who became a state legend for being kidnapped and raised by Indians. Yousaf writes that “[t]he emotional attachment Linda has to the story of each echoes her coming to consciousness that her own story is also that of an orphan” who has no knowledge of her birth parents (216). In this realization, Linda must deal with a sort of seeing and not-seeing from her own family who seemingly do not address the issue of race at all. On the one hand, this ignorance of race is positive: her adoptive family, Linda’s father and Baby Harper at least, try to view Linda as a natural member of their kin. On the other hand, their determination to not discuss Linda’s heritage with her leaves her with no knowledge of her backstory prior to her adoption. Linda’s disconnection from her adoptive mother is seemingly unexplained throughout much of the novel, making it clear that Linda herself is not sure why DeAnne seems to tolerate her presence at best rather than treat Linda like her own child. This disconnection from her adoptive mother especially creates a home environment where Linda does not feel completely comfortable. On a broader level, Linda’s identification with the people described in *North Carolina Parade* comes

through their status as outsiders who were able to find lasting and respected belonging as southerners. Though she feels like an outsider both internally and externally, Linda “has no doubts about her homeplace and learns to survive her sense of alterity in a family that refuses to tell her who she once was” (Yousaf 216). Without anything else to cling to, Linda ultimately identifies as southern because it is all she knows. Though the region’s people have labeled her an outsider, Linda is able to find community as one of the South’s many individuals who have been “shrouded, hidden, [or] secreted away,” like Boo Radley, Horton, or Dare (Truong, *Bitter* 292).

While Linda finds a community of outsiders through reading, she maintains her real-life relationships through writing. Letter writing is a form that Truong has focused on previously in her writing, noting it as an interesting device for framing relationships and allowing for strong personal voice. Though she does not use the epistolary form to present the narrative in *Bitter in the Mouth*, the emphasis on letters as an important aspect of Linda’s communication is central to the novel and allows for the discussion of their effect on her life and relationships. In the notes for “Kelly,” a short story Truong published in 1991, she writes that “[a] letter allows for anonymity and a safe distance that a phone call cannot” (48). The story, written in epistolary form, is a letter from a Vietnamese woman named Thuy Mai to her friend Kelly. The letter recalls the childhood the two shared in the fictionalized Boiling Springs, much like the letters that Linda and Kelly apparently shared during their time apart in college and Truong’s own upbringing in North Carolina. Thuy Mai’s letter is apparently the first in four years, and Truong explains that this makes letter writing the ideal format for such a message: “I no longer keep in touch with my friend but the thought of ever communicating with her again seems so remote that I am sure it would take the form of some enigmatic, time-standing-still language like the one I attempted to imagine and to create in the piece” (48). In other words, the letter is a form that that

allows time to be fluid, accommodating the reminiscing and jumping between time that Thuy Mai does between her childhood self and current self, showcasing “the contrast between the two” as “vibrantly clear in some instances and subtle and deceptive in others” (48). In the letter, text is able to transcend the time gap in the friends’ communication while still being keenly aware of it. The letter’s flexibility allows it to work within nearly any context, between strangers, acquaintances, or the best of friends in formal or informal language. At the same time, the nature of letters require them to be tailored to a specific audience, whether it is intended for an individual or a group, and the “writer constructs an intended reader in the text” (Barton and Hall 6). David Barton and Nigel Hall write that “[t]he letter as an object of literary practice is peculiarly versatile and diverse” for its ability to “mediate a huge range of human interactions; through letters one can narrate experiences, dispute points, describe situations, offer explanations, give instructions and so on” (1). For Linda and Kelly, letters provide their main method of communication.

Linda’s relationship with Kelly is especially influenced by her synesthesia. Their friendship lasts because it is primarily text-based, even from a young age. “From the earliest days of our friendship, we had relied on carefully written letters to keep ourselves informed of our inner lives,” Linda recalls (Truong, *Bitter* 16). The two rarely relied on phone communication, and when they did, Linda describes their conversations as “verbal telegrams, short, clipped, efficient, and to the point” (134). The reliance on letters allows Linda to better engage with Kelly, without the excess of her synesthesia clouding or complicating the conversations. When she reveals her synesthesia to Kelly in a letter and informs her “that her name tasted of canned peaches,” Kelly does not question the validity of Linda’s claims or her sanity (21). She simply asks in the next letter, “Packed in heavy syrup or their own juice?” (21).

Her unhesitating acceptance is a comfort to Linda, and Kelly becomes an integral part of determining how to best manage the synesthesia in high school, among the myriad of other academic and social pressures.

Before entering high school, Kelly insists that she and Linda determine the place they will assume in the social hierarchy and prepare for it. Determining that Linda's obvious social group will be with the smart kids, the friends endeavor to find a way to "stop, or at least minimize, the 'incomings,'" or the tastes associated with verbal speech (21). The desire to reach her full potential in school comes not so much in a desire for great grades, but for a definable persona to take on in high school and a social group to belong to. The two girls experiment with various strong flavors, including mints and Big Red gum, which prove ineffective at overpowering her synesthesia. Cigarettes seem to do the trick for her: "We decided that I would smoke in between my classes and that the lingering taste of the smoke would easily get me through the hour-and-fifteen-minute-long class periods" (23). After the afternoon of smoking together, Linda and Kelly are able to have a long conversation, enjoying the "rare sound of our voices commingling" and listening to Dolly Parton, their secret idol (23). The conversation is an uncommon occurrence between them in a friendship defined mostly through writing. Linda's difficulty in concentrating in school and having conversations with people indicates the level of disconnect her synesthesia forces her to have to verbal speech. Being able to speak to someone without the incomings gives Linda the opportunity to connect closer with them; instead of the flavors associated with the words, Linda can process the tones and inflections in Kelly's voice, making her feel close to her friend in both a physical and emotional sense simultaneously for the first time. Writing letters becomes the best means of replicating the closeness Linda feels to Kelly during that night's conversation by assuming a "dialogical position" in which the two

“answer questions, paraphrase, [or] use verbatim or modified quotations and allusions, thus always guaranteeing the continuity of the epistolary dialogue” (Seara 370). In high school, the friendship “was strictly that of two pen pals,” but the letters were maintained into adulthood through issues like Kelly’s pregnancy and Linda moving away for college (Truong, *Bitter* 236).

While Linda and Kelly’s letters were essential in the development of their early friendship, their writing progresses into their primary form of communication, maintaining their friendship through becoming a means of preserving the social status quo. While “Kelly soared into the stratosphere of tow-headed popularity,” Linda assumed a dual role as one of the school’s smart kids and as a smoker: “My appearance in the school’s designated ‘Smoking Area’ muddled my school classification. Heretofore I wasn’t just a smart girl, but the Smartest Girl, which meant I wasn’t a girl at all” (Truong, *Bitter* 24). Though these are the groups with which she has chosen to align, Linda feels practically anonymous within them both, further marginalized and ignored by her classmates. She does not seem find a sense of community with fellow serious academics, busy with their studies, and the three smokers outside ignore Linda, though she seems to appreciate this: “I liked them immediately because they made no effort to talk to me” (25). Still, watching Kelly’s quick rise to popularity annoys Linda and makes her “feel lonely,” details she shares in their letters. Their friendship itself becomes a secret between the two of them, a means of covertly communicating across the strict social boundaries of high school. The epistolary form has a history of uniting people covertly, from slaves in the Antebellum South as studied by Ben Schiller to a network of gay men that “spanned the country” in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as studied by Nicholas L. Syrett (140). The letter has the ability as a private discourse to surmount social and cultural boundaries in order to diminish difference or unite those who share it. For Linda and Kelly, the letters serve as “the cover of night” for their communication, transcending the rigid

social boundaries of high school and making their friendship almost exclusively text-based for many years: “We understood, without really fully understanding, that the words that we wrote to each other couldn’t have existed in speech” (26). This form of communication also allows for Linda to relay her criticisms to Kelly without interruption or protest. Truong writes in the notes for “Kelly” that letters “can not be interrupted and ended abruptly by a receiver who no longer wants to participate in the sharing process. A letter arrives and can be thrown away but at least one communicant has already had her say and the process of release is complete” (48). Linda addresses Kelly, critical of her position in the popular crowd and disappointed in her adherence to the ditzy personality favored by the group. Linda writes to Kelly, “I know you think you’re happy. But as your best friend I must tell you that you’re not” (Truong, *Bitter* 25). The letter provides a mediated outlet for such discourse that probably, as Linda mentions, could not take place in a face-to-face situation. “A letter arrives and can be thrown away but at least one communicant has already had her say and that process of release is complete,” Truong writes (“Kelly” 48).

Overall, Linda and Kelly’s reliance on letters for communication allows their friendship to survive their tumultuous high school years, Kelly’s pregnancy and subsequent move away from Boiling Springs, and further physical separation from college into adulthood. They are able to maintain a candid, if more infrequent, rapport even as Linda tries her hardest to escape Boiling Springs and Kelly remains firmly rooted there. Linda’s other relationships are sometimes negotiated through letters as well, like when Baby Harper begins traveling: “Baby Harper never sent me an e-mail, which gave me the great privilege of opening up a physical mailbox and finding his handwriting floating on the other side of a sandy beach or behind the façade of a church,” Linda remembers (179). Linda links the physicality of the letter to a physical closeness

with Baby Harper himself remarking that “I could hear my great-uncle hiccupping” as she held the envelope in her hands (184). Baby Harper also sends her photos and some of the albums he had compiled over the years, revealing his secret life of cross-dressing to her through the mail. He invites a face-to-face discussion, writing that he and Linda “should go through [the photographs] together,” but he wants “[Linda] to live with them first, though” (186). As such, Baby Harper recognizes the ways in which letters both create and eliminate space between people. As Isabel Roboredo Seara writes, “the letter is a space of invocation: it calls upon a temporally or spatially absent or distant other” (364). While Linda’s letters to Kelly link them through a spacial absence of separated peer groups in high school and later a larger physical gap when Linda moves to New Haven for college, the letters exchanged with Baby Harper serve a more complicated purpose. Baby Harper’s letters both traverse physical space and connect Linda to a temporally absent Baby Harper, her uncle as a young adult who is discovering and exploring expressions of his sexuality. Letters then allow for a physical connection that eliminates spacial absence but also create space that excludes and prevents the judgment and anxiety that can come with the gaze and physical interaction. For Baby Harper, this means a space where he can comfortably introduce and discuss his lifestyle with Linda. In a similar manner, Linda is able to write letters freely without the judgment of her race she experiences in everyday life.

Perhaps the most significant letters to Linda’s life are those she did not write or receive. The end of the novel’s reveal of Linda’s birth parents and adoption shows that her life has been negotiated through letters since her childhood. The significance of the letters between Thomas and Linda’s birth mother, Mai-Dao lies in their status as a private discourse that becomes public. Though they are not directly relayed in the text, the letters become public when they are accessible to readers outside the intended audience, namely DeAnne and Linda. Seara writes that

“[t]he letter writer demands the addressee’s attention” and builds “subtle networks of sociability” through the writer and addressee relationship (364). However, letters can also open a dialogue with parties outside this intimate relationship if opened to a public discourse. As Gilroy and Verhoeven write, all letters straddle this line as they provide correspondence between two people, but also a historical context that is significant beyond the sender and recipient (1). When Thomas presents the letters between himself and Mai-Dao to Baby Harper, his intention is to preserve a piece of their relationship, but a secondary effect of his action is that the letters become a means for Linda to connect with her own history. Thomas met and fell in love with Mai-Dao in college, though she was admittedly engaged to a man in her home of South Vietnam. Thomas wrote letters to Mai-Dao consistently, even during his courtship with DeAnne. “Mai-Dao, like a teenage boy, didn’t reply,” Linda remarks (Truong, *Bitter* 268). Her letters did not come until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and relayed the worry Mai-Dao and her husband had for their families back in South Vietnam. Mai-Dao’s letters were not frequent as Thomas received only eight in total, and they were especially clipped when Thomas attempted to help them directly, stepping into their lives to use his connections to find out about the safety of their families overseas (275). Mai-Dao’s last letter revealed that her husband found the letters from Thomas, and he “accused her of adultery,” further emphasizing the intimate nature of writing letters, especially between people involved in separate marriages (278). The details that Mai-Dao shares with Thomas reflect a woman conflicted by location, tradition, and her relationship. Maureen Ryan writes that for people like Mai-Dao, these feelings of “[c]hange, loss, [and] dislocation” are common realities for the Vietnamese seeking refuge from war in America (235). Their value differences, however, are not terribly different from those in the American South: “[t]he centrality of place, family, and the past in the lives of the traditional Vietnamese almost

eerily parallels similar obsessions of southerners in countless imaginative and critical texts about the South and southern culture,” Ryan writes (237). Though little is revealed about Mai-Dao, her letters and the details Thomas shared with DeAnne show her dedication to family and the struggle to cling to tradition in an American setting.

Linda’s adoption is negotiated through letters, for the very first letter Thomas wrote included a telephone number that would provide her rescue after the fire that killed her parents. Found sound asleep in the driveway of a neighboring trailer, Linda survived and unknowingly already possessed the key to her new future: “Tucked inside the pocket of my nightgown were my passport and the first letter that Thomas had sent to Mai-Dao in Chapel Hill, the one with the phone number of the blue and gray ranch house, which she had never dialed,” Linda relays. “A Chapel Hill police officer phoned Thomas instead,” putting in motion Linda’s adoption and introducing her to the only life she remembers (Truong, *Bitter* 280).

The letters between Mai-Dao and Thomas are Linda’s only connection to a temporally separate part of herself. As such, the letters are recontextualized from their initial purpose of connection between writer and addressee to artifact of history. Barton and Hall write that the recontextualization of letters can “take place when letters are moved into other arenas and used for different purposes” (9). Mai-Dao’s letters are recontextualized at the end of the novel when they are presented to Linda as a means of learning about her birth parents, describing the type of person her mother was, and sharing the details that led to her adoption. She is able to finally identify the source of her hazy first memories of a bitter taste and disjointed images of a trailer: “When I was seven, I heard a word that made me taste an unidentifiable bitter, and I never forgot flames cutting through the seams of the trailer home, the sound of footsteps on gravel, then darkness,” Linda remembers (116). But, she considers, “the trailer on fire might not have

existed” as there is no evidence other than her memory until Linda receives the letters and discusses the situation with DeAnne (117). While the letters initially serve as a connection between two people, recontextualization transforms them into a piece of a historical narrative that is able to reconnect Linda with her past. With her adoptive parents agreeing to never discuss her birth parents, Linda’s discovery of her own early childhood is negotiated primarily through these texts, grounding the conversation in reality, with DeAnne’s commentary to fill in the blanks. These letters are not revealed directly to the reader because of their intimate and personal nature. Barton and Hall write that the sharing of a letter outside the intended audience established by the sender is traditionally then mediated through the recipient (3-4). Linda discusses the letters and discloses portions of their content as shared by DeAnne, but will read and process on her own terms as a participant in writing and receiving. Mai-Dao’s letters are not revealed in detail through direct quotation, as they sit untouched on the table near Linda as she concludes the novel. Their writer and recipient both deceased, these letters are negotiated through DeAnne’s memories of Thomas reading them to her and her own involvement with them. They become Linda’s as part of the recontextualization process, serving as one of the only accounts of Linda’s childhood pre-adoption. According to DeAnne, Mai-Dao shares details about her daughter in the letters, like trips “to the supermarket [to] indulge in the American snack foods and sodas that she had missed so dearly when she was in Saigon” (271). As Linda admits to having no clear recollections prior to her life with her adoptive parents, the documents communicate invaluable details of Linda’s early life, connecting her with a temporally absent part of herself that she will be allowed to rediscover.

Ultimately, reading and writing are Linda’s primary means of finding belonging in the South and managing her relationships. The letter form serves as an essential tool to Linda’s life

because of its flexible form, allowing it to “shape identity” and serve “as a way of capturing the self” while creating social networks between individuals and providing a form of the historical record (Seara 364). The letter’s ability to traverse spacial and temporal distance allows it to serve a purpose in the present, as Linda’s letter writing does in her relationships, and the future, as Mai-Dao and Thomas’ letters do for Linda’s memory. In addition to not triggering her synesthesia, the letter eliminates visual prejudices, manifesting the body in non-traditional ways through handwriting, content, and the physical presence of the letter. Linda’s strongest and most enduring relationships are negotiated through letters due to their ability to create physical connections that are not interfered with by synesthesia or racial judgment. From Kelly to Baby Harper to her very connection to her adoptive family, Linda escapes her synesthesia through writing, and in turn, establishes and strengthens bonds through this practice. In effect, epistolary form renders Linda’s inner and outer differences insignificant and manageable, allowing her to create a space for herself in which she no longer feels like an outsider. The letters allow her the anonymity that Truong refers to (“Kelly” 48), the ability to escape difference, and the means to traverse spacial and temporal separation.

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