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## **Presumed Innocent: The Child Figure in U.S. Southern Literature, 1945 – 2004**

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Presumed Innocent: The Child Figure in U.S. Southern Literature, 1945 – 2004

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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## Abstract

In the nineteenth century in the U.S. the concept of childhood has usually been equated with innocence. Fiction, popular culture, and theatrical productions have not only spread this idea of childhood innocence but also attributed innocence and vulnerability to white children while negating children of color those qualities. This project examines the role of childhood in constructing U.S. southern identity in texts from 1945 to 2004. Drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's conceptualization of the innocent child, the child of color, and the working class child who lacks the "normative" protection of innocence, and the white middle-class child who is psychologically distorted as a result of the burdens of socio-cultural norms, I discuss the queer child figures along racial, class, ethnic and gender lines. Under this category, I examine the southern white child in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner*, the working class white child in Harry Crews's *A Childhood* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the black child in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta*, the immigrant and Native American child in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival*. By focusing on twentieth and twenty-first century texts, this project seeks to identify the child's agency (although limited by youth and dependability) in structuring his or her identity in the South. I expect this project to challenge the assumptions of the historical and cultural construction of a monolithic Anglo-American identity as well as a narrow view of what "southern" means.

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## Introduction

What it means to be “southern” has remained a question without any clear-cut or definite answer. A number of scholars have attempted to provide various meanings of southern identity. In this respect, Richard Gray, in his work *Southern Aberrations* (2000), delves into what “region” means in regards to the American South. Defined as a geographical area having definable characteristics but not necessarily fixed boundaries, “region” often connotes a marginal status and, in the American context, the South, as a region, has historically been perceived as an area on the periphery that is set against the North, which has historically been viewed as the political and economic center and as ideologically dominant. Gray argues that southern writers themselves have often contributed to quarantine the American South to the margins. According to Gray, the concept of the American South is a fictive construction, which in turn represents “a symptom of centralized cultural dominance” (x). Notwithstanding socio-economic changes, two main factors characterize southern self-definition, according to Gray: language, which enables writers to fashion the region; and communal ritual, which depends on social exchanges that are performed through speech. Thus, writers, and in particular literary authors, have created a South with features which set the region apart from the rest of the nation.

Likewise, Jennifer Rae Greeson has theorized about the mythical representation of the U.S. South, particularly as it relates to early American literature. In *Our South* (2010), she asserts that the South is an ideological concept rather than a fixed place, a concept which has been constructed to endorse Western expansionist projects during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Consequently, for Greeson “the South” does not bear a fixed meaning but is rather the result of imagination and national fantasy. Thus, literary imagination has conferred a quality of



uniqueness to the South that has prevailed in cultural consciousness as a result of nostalgia for the plantation past. In *Possessing the Past* (2015), Lisa Hinrichsen best encapsulates the idea of the South as a product of fantasy when she argues that “the set of narratives, images and fantasies [...] create a sense of regional distinctiveness and belonging often rendered as a form of homogeneity” (2). Writers of the Southern Renaissance in the 1930s romanticized the Agrarian antebellum South and set it as “an *internal other* for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole” (Greenson 1). While Greenson and Hinrichsen investigate the fantasy inherent to southerners’ reliance on certain uniqueness, Tara McPherson, in *Reconstructing Dixie* (2003), observes that a pure South in isolation has never existed and that the Old South is a myth whose ideology founded on racial supremacy has been obliterated.

In light of these different definitions of southern identity, most scholars agree that an “authentic” southern culture is mere utopia, the result of ideological constructions. My objective in this project is to use the concept of the child as a critical lens to examine the multiple facets of southern identity, focusing in particular on ethnicity, class, and gender. The figure of the child enables us, I argue, to redefine and question the social norms that are firmly established in southern culture. The memoirs and novels under consideration in this project will be Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* (1949) and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin’s *The Making of a Southerner* (1947), which I will examine to explore the southern middle-class white child; Harry Crews’s *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place* (1978) and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), from which I will investigate representations of the southern poor white child; Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1946) and Endesha Ida Mae Holland’s *From the Mississippi Delta* (1997), which probe into southern black identity; and, finally, Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997)

and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival* (2004), which shed light on the immigrant and Native American child. By focusing on the twentieth-century texts, this project seeks to identify the child's agency (although limited by youth and dependability) in structuring his or/her identity in the South. I rely on Suzanne Jones's argument in *Race Mixing* (2004), specifically her claim that "the child's perspective allows a writer to question a society's shortcomings from a vantage point of someone incompletely trained in a society's assumptions and customs" (19). Notwithstanding the child's status as a dependent of the adult, the child figure in southern fiction illuminates the anxieties and complexities associated with southern identity. This project, then, analyzes a topic about which little has been written by relying on the child figure to challenge the assumptions of the historical and cultural construction of a monolithic Anglo-American identity (predicated on normative assumptions about adulthood and citizenship) as well as a narrow view of what "southern" means. Similarly to the construction of southern identity, the meaning of the child figure has also varied over time.

The concept of the child has played a crucial part in the founding of a U.S. nation that grounds its nationalism on racial separation for, as scholars such as Caroline Levander and Leigh Anne Duck have shown, to be American is to be white. In her work *The Nation's Region* (2006), Leigh Anne Duck affirms that while national belonging seems to be accessible to people of diverse backgrounds, paradoxically, "southern racial practices corresponded rather than conflicted with those of the larger nation" (Duck 7). Although the South is often set in antithesis to the nation, southern racial segregation has provided a model to understand the nation's racial discrimination (5). In this respect, Caroline Levander investigates how the child symbolizes a link between the anxieties of race and the different structures of national identity. In *Cradle of Liberty* (2006), Levander discusses how the U.S. has been configured by placing the child at the

core of racial principles. Arguing that the child that has symbolized race as both “constituting and complicating U.S. national identity,” Levander emphasizes the discrepancies that existed in the foundational principles of national identity as based upon the binary of freedom and/or slavery (31). To make her point, she refers to the colonists’ use of the concept of the child to illustrate the relationship between Britain (the father) and the colonies (the child) who finally turns against the father to protect its love for liberty. While early political rhetoric hinged upon the image of the child to confer Anglo-Americans a “natural” right to liberty, paradoxically, the child symbolized bondage for non-Anglo Americans.

As Levander argues, aside from popular political tracts, domestic fiction in the U.S. South—this project’s geographical area of focus—greatly contributed to reaffirming white supremacy through the figure of the child by supporting the region’s dual projects of separatism and expansionism intended to annex South American slaveholding colonies that would perpetuate an economic system based upon slave trade. In this respect, two main stances predominate in southern fiction. Augusta J. Evans, for example, features the child in her fiction to advocate for the creation of a separate southern nation with its expansionist agenda that reinforces the slaveholding system while Caroline Lee Hentz’s fictional child calls for a unification of the Northern and the Southern colonies based upon the ideals of white supremacy. By supporting the expansionist agenda of the South to South America, Evans’s fictional child highlights the “possibilities” and “dangers” which the racially hybrid population represents to white purity (Levander 67).

A number of scholars have discussed the concept of the child and how its different meanings to some extent inform identity formation. In the introduction to her book *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, (2011), Robin

Bernstein examines the cultural construction of the child since the nineteenth century. In her argument, she asserts that innocence, frequently considered the primary feature of childhood, is often equated with obliviousness, which she defines as “an active state of repelling knowledge” or a quality of ignorance regarded as holy yet historically constructed (6). She states that childhood’s equation with innocence in the mid-nineteenth century contrasts with the previously held Calvinist conception that children were inherently corrupt creatures.

In addition, the concept of childhood not only symbolizes innocence but has, Bernstein argues, also been raced as white. Bernstein contends that since the idea of childhood innocence became ingrained, popular culture, theatrical productions and texts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the Uncle Remus stories, and the Raggedy Ann stories, among other narratives, have attributed innocence and vulnerability to white children while negating children of color those two qualities. According to Bernstein, while an abstract version of childhood has structured political debates over race and rights from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, white childhood innocence has continued to serve as a means for the child as a figure to blur racial, social, and gendered categories. In this regard, writers and actors began associating white children with black adults and children as a way to transfer the quality of innocence to a variety of racial and/or political projects. To substantiate her contention, Bernstein bases her analysis on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which she argues plays a critical part in maintaining childhood innocence for political and racial projects, namely the cause of abolition through Eva and Topsy. In her argument, Stowe emphasizes the psychological distortion that slavery causes in Topsy in order to deconstruct the lack of innocence which has been often attributed to the black child in fiction. In addition, Bernstein notes that while children are aware of the performative nature of childhood behavior, they learn to internalize violent racial practices

through books, dolls, and domestic items such as handkerchiefs, all of which Bernstein terms “scriptive things” (8). In her reading of dolls, Bernstein asserts that *Raggedy Ann* stories subtly teach children to perform violent acts towards the Raggedy Ann doll as a strategy to show the existing power relations between whites and people of color.

Bernstein’s examination of childhood innocence gives insights into how this concept is racially distributed and attached to middle class values. Furthermore, she emphasizes the use of the child figure in fashioning national identity. She utilizes Eva and Topsy to probe into the traditional perception of whites and people of color in the U.S. South during the nineteenth century. Bernstein does not provide a simplistic use of the child as it manifests in the cultural imagination; rather, her work underscores through its analysis of Eva and Topsy the ambiguities ingrained in the construction of race, class, and ethnicity in the U.S. South.

While Bernstein investigates the imagined child as mediating race, Kathryn Bond Stockton, in *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), expands on the different perspectives of the child figure in the twentieth century. In particular, Stockton focuses on how the child mediates issues of sexuality. Stockton views the child as “precisely who we are not and in fact never were [...] a ghostly, unreachable fancy, making us wonder” (5). Given the complexity in defining the child figure, Stockton’s theorization provides a framework that helps explore the child within a southern context. Stockton theorizes childhood as a primary site of queer identity, and argues that “the concept of the child is by definition strange” and that the child represents the new queer (3). In this regard, she depicts the child with four queer identities: the ghostly gay child who displays same sex inclinations, the Freudian child characterized by aggressiveness and a precocious sexual drive, the grown homosexual marked by a stage of arrested development, and the child queered by innocence. Against the backdrop of

Stockton's argument about the ghostly gay child she regards as the icon of children's queerness and defines as a child "knowing [...] of things turning strange on her" (3), I claim that the child in the fiction under analysis in this project is queered by innocence, race, trauma, ethnicity and poverty. Since "queer" in the academy has been conceptualized as a challenge to fixed sexual identities such as heteronormativity, my definition of "queer" in this project relies on Stockton's theorization about the ghostly gay child whose status as a non-normative figure makes him or her terrifying, unfathomable, and strange. As Stockton unfolds, even innocence—which has historically defined the (white) child—makes the child as a figure strange and alien to adults, who can no more have access to an innocent relation to the world but can only look at childhood retrospectively. My contention is that the inaccessibility and strangeness that characterize childhood make the child figure queer. In this project, color, gender, and class affects the southern child and even the white middle-class child, who is viewed as vulnerable, lacking knowledge and experience, and is psychologically distorted as a result of the burdens of socio-cultural norms. The child characters I examine illuminate how southern literary and cultural constructions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity enables both textual and real children to redefine their identity through the experiences of psychological and physical trauma, isolation, displacement, and dispossession. Thus, they have "grown sideways," to borrow Stockton's phrase, as a result of the range of experiences to which they have been exposed (11). As Stockton aptly puts it "one does not 'grow up' from innocence to the adult position that protects it" because growing sideways is ineluctable (11, 12).

While Bernstein, Stockton, and Levander point out the centrality of race, sex, and gender in constructing the figure of the child and acknowledge that the concept of the child has no fixed identity, my intent in this project is to examine the role of childhood in constructing southern

identity and to discuss the queer child figure along racial, class, ethnic, and gender lines. Deep transformations across all sectors (social, economic, cultural, political) have occurred during the twentieth century in the South. Since the texts I will be analyzing have been produced during an era of great changes, they provide an excellent opportunity to revisit the southern cultural and literary imagination and at the same time give an insight into the likely future developments in the region. As a result, the child figures in this study belong to different class, race, gender and ethnic backgrounds that reflect the multicultural picture of the twentieth-century South. While the work of Stockton will provide me with a critical vocabulary with which to interrogate the texts under study, I have taken an eclectic approach to be able to examine the variety of experiences the texts explore.

The first chapter will look at the ways in which the child figure in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* deemphasizes the concept of the white innocent child predominant in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American fiction. Set in the first half of the twentieth century, both texts uncover the experiences of white middle-class girls growing up during the Jim Crow era in the U.S. South. Both Smith and Lumpkin draw from certain traumas of their own childhood to examine the psyches of white children more generally, illustrating in the process how their early indoctrination into a racially divided southern society warps their sense of values and limits any prospect of challenging the social and economic shortcomings of the parents' generation. They show how southern traditions become entangled in the daily lives of the child, whose body serves as the site for the materialization and performance of southern racial supremacy.

The southern home tellingly represents the space par excellence where the process of socialization for the white child starts. In this regard, Smith portrays the home as a haunted space

“that gathers memories like dusts, a place filled with ... ghosts” for the child who is initiated into the lessons of southern mores where the body of the child is controlled by the parents and in particular, the mother who plays an important part in imparting southern values (30). Through her mother, Smith learns the spoken and unspoken rules of segregation. The traumatic experience of Janie, the child that looks white, best encapsulates the idea of the home as a site for the establishment of racial hierarchy. Janie is a white-looking young girl living with a poor black family. After being mistaken for a white child, Janie is adopted by young Smith’s family and enjoys the same privileges as the children in the family. Once her racial identity is discovered (she is black), Janie has to return to a different (black) racial space. Smith poignantly expresses her shock and anxiety in witnessing this incident as a child: *“I was white. She was colored. We must not be together. It was bad to be together. Though you ate with your nurse when you were little, it was bad to eat with any colored person after that. It was just bad as other things were bad that your mother had told you... It was bad ...”* (38). In this instance, the child sees the implications of segregation in the lives of both white and black children and the slippery nature of race. Although “[her] body knew and [her] glands” (38) that the treatment reserved for Janie is unfair, the mother suppresses any dialogue about race relations but the actions of her body speak more to the child who can quickly learn the social values of the South under Jim Crow “far more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow... a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence than from long sentences” (90).

Like Smith, who was immersed at an early age in the structures of southern racial attitudes, Lumpkin’s exposure at home to southern mores occurs in her childhood. Unlike Smith, young Katherine’s body fully participates in the regional rituals under the tutelage of her father. She describes her father as a potent patriarch with high authority over family matters, who



“[impregnates] our lives with his strong sense of mission,” nurturing his children’s memories with books (121). As she puts it, her body is “dipped in the fiery experience of Southern patriotism” (112). In her recollections, Lumpkin gives insight into adults’ control of the child’s body in inscribing the principles of the Lost Cause. Lumpkin remembers that she was baptized and, immersed in regional myths, suggesting the religious significance the Lost Cause ideology connotes. She has been “drinking it in,” indicating an act of consumption (114), her body “joined in, beating...hands...jumping” (119-120).

Similarly to Smith, Lumpkin’s first moment of trauma occurs in her home where she sees her father beat the black cook who was “writhing under the blows of a descending stick wielded by the white master of the house” (132). This unexpected incident awakens young Katherine to the realities of the slaveholding South she has never witnessed and shatters her world-view of her father’s gentlemanliness. To young Katherine, the tradition of the plantation home that her father reenacts brings to light the reality of white supremacy as she begins to understand her privileged position as a white child, privileges that she finds to be countless.

Even though the white child acknowledges a certain anomaly related to his or her cultural conditioning about race, she or he resorts to amnesia to lead a life of normalcy. In this context, the psychological trauma of the white middle-class child as a result of the burdens of socio-cultural norms does not make the child innocent. Smith’s and Lumpkin’s texts demonstrate that the white child’s early exposure to conceptions of racial purity contradicts the concept of the child constructed as innocent, lacking guilt, and experience. I argue that *Killers of the Dream* and *The Making of a Southerner* deconstruct the concept the white middle-class child figure as innocent and sheltered from suffering. By being exposed to the southern construction of race that is emotionally unsettling, the white middle-class child is queered by trauma and thus lacks

“innocence,” that normative attribute to the idea of white childhood. Smith and Lumpkin use the white child to critique and question the socio-cultural values of the Jim Crow South.

The second chapter presents pictures of a rather troubled whiteness which contrasts the concept of a pure whiteness celebrated by the middle-class during early twentieth century. While Smith and Lumpkin explore the white middle-class child figure, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Harry Crews’s *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place* represent a different facet of the white child that challenges the concept of an innocent white child due to socio-economic conditions. As the offspring of working-class southerners, Allison and Crews break from the tropes and themes prevalent in early twentieth century southern literature “as they deconstruct the southern pastoral and dismantle Agrarian fantasies of the southern yeoman” (Guinn xii). Their writing has provided a broader and more realistic representation of southern socio-cultural norms and brought poor whites to visibility. *Bastard Out of Carolina* provides a picture of a poor white girl subject to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, whose vulnerability is compounded by her female relatives’ lack of protection. Set in the second half of the twentieth century, *Bastard out of Carolina* chronicles the life of a young girl—Ruth Anne, christened Bone, who grew up in a working-class family and suffers physical and sexual abuse from her stepfather. Because she was “born on the wrong side of the porch,” she experiences discrimination (54). At her birth, Bone’s birth certificate is issued with the word “ILLEGITIMATE” stamped in red large letters as, a way to deny her any legal recognition and visibility because the father is unknown. Bone’s status as an illegitimate child deepens her position as the “Other” and “trash” under constant observation (Guinn 24). Bone and her family live in a state of want to the extent that the hunger she often feels is “raw and terrible” and causes excruciating pain (98).

The domestic space is no sanctuary for Bone, whose stepfather Daddy Glen abuses her physically and sexually, especially when her mother Anney is not around. Glen goes through a number of unimpressive jobs, forcing the family to frequently relocate to stay away from bill collectors. His self-loathing, fueled by his inability to secure a stable job, drives him to vent his anger at Bone. Bone is four when Glen sexually takes advantage of her for the first time. Because her home lacks protection, Bone is taken to her Aunt Alma's place, where ironically Bone is raped by her stepfather. As Bone confronts Glen, he goes crazy, and in a rage he beats and then brutally rapes her: "He reared up, supporting his weight on my shoulder while his hips drove his sex into me like a sword...I felt like he was tearing me apart, my ass slapping against the floor with every thrust, burning and tearing and bruising" (285). Consequently, Bone develops feelings of inadequacy and anger which deepens her psychological trauma. She is often unsettled and she is ashamed to tell about Glen's behavior and blames herself for what is happening to her.

Like Allison's protagonist that experiences precarity, Harry Crews, in *A Childhood*, provides a realistic approach to life on the farm that is mostly brutal, harsh characterized by constant mobility. Crews's text describes the challenges of a young boy under the sharecropping system, which limits farmers' economic autonomy and makes survival "a day-to-day crisis" (9). The main protagonist grew up during the Great Depression in rural South Georgia, a place of unfertile soil, and grinding poverty that forces people to constantly relocate for better job opportunities. It is a world "in which survival depended on raw courage, a courage born out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives" (40).

Crews's child protagonist has to grapple with domestic violence. Unlike Allison's Bone who endures physical and sexual abuse, Crews' young boy witnesses fighting between his

mother and stepfather as a result of his stepfather's alcoholism. Extreme violence was part of every family's life: "I knew for certain it was not unusual for a man to shoot at his wife. It was only unusual if he hit her" (125). However, the family separates when young Harry's stepfather shoots at his wife, who chooses to leave with her children to seek safety and socio-economic stability. Both Bone's and young Harry's working-class homes lack the protection that a child needs and Bone endures a double jeopardy of being female and poor. Although they are white, their "experience" of violence and hardship rips them of innocence and sets them outside the normative definition of childhood, thus making them queer as a result of poverty.

The third chapter will explore the construction of the African American child as another perspective in establishing southern identity and examine in what respects it parallels and differs from white childhood experience. Richard Wright's and Endesha Ida Mae Holland's child figures in *Black Boy* and *From the Mississippi Delta* symbolize the lower-class child of color deprived of innocence because of his or her exposure to hardship and abuse that become antithetical to "innocence" (Stockton 32). This chapter will also probe the way gender shapes the child's experiences in specific ways. Set in the rural and urban South at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Black Boy* portrays Wright's boyhood in a period of "disenfranchisement" and racial segregation when the black male child figure has to grapple with socio-economic hardships that eventually destroy his family (the father abandons the mother with two children). In *Black Boy*, childhood represents the space of terror and deep anxiety; it exists only as a space of fragility. Home for Wright's child is no sanctuary but a space of cyclical violence that makes the outside world a "safer" place because he often endures corporeal punishment as a form of discipline. Ironically, outside of the home does not provide safety either since the street and school represent spaces of extreme violence for the child, spaces that subject the black boy to

gang attack or bullying and constrain him to assert his masculinity for survival. Given the violent environment, Wright's protagonist constructs his boyhood out of aggressivity. *Black Boy* opens with a vivid scene of violence perpetrated by the child protagonist, a scene which dramatizes the complex nature of the child's struggle with his environment. The four-year-old boy is forbidden to touch the curtains but notwithstanding the warnings, he ends up "pull[ing] several straws from the broom and [holding] them to the fire until they blazed" then rushing to the window as he watches the "flame in touch with the hems of the curtains" (10). Not only is the black boy confronted with violence within the black community but he gradually learns the unwritten codes between blacks and whites whose relations are also fraught with tension. Consequently, racial awareness creates psychological and emotional burdens and deepens the child's anxiety.

Similarly to Wright, Holland's protagonist's girlhood in *From the Mississippi Delta* exists in a space of trauma and violence. Holland's protagonist is rendered more vulnerable as a black girl subject to rape, and endures a triple jeopardy of being black, female, and a child. While the black male child endures physical abuse, Holland emphasizes her protagonist's sexual abuse to shed light on the vulnerability and commodification of the female black child's body. As a result, the child slips into prostitution not only for survival but also as a way to subvert the existing racial dynamics supported by the segregationist power structures. For instance, she charges white clients higher than black clients. Rape marks the black girl's precocious and painful entry into womanhood. In their fiction, Wright and Holland provide pictures of the black child which reinforce the concept of the black child's lack of innocence. Specifically, they portray, a child that embodies the "pickaninny," or "an imagined dehumanized black juvenile" popular in the nineteenth century southern fiction (Bernstein16). Because the concept of American childhood implies whiteness and middle-class identity, wherein one is protected from

any evil, the black child queered by color is no child. Holland's and Wright's texts underscore the deep racial divide typical of the South during the early twentieth century and illuminate the painful and violent experiences of blacks embedded in southern culture. Holland and Wright call attention to the complexity of black identity in the South, showing that blacks "stand between two great cultural assemblages," that of 'black' and 'American southerners'" (Paul Gilroy 1). Because of this dual identity, the black child is both insider and outsider of the South.

While Smith and Lumpkin deconstruct the idea of the white middle-class vulnerable child sheltered from danger and violence by delving into the psychological trauma s/he endures, Allison, Crews, Wright, and Holland add another layer by giving an insight into the psychological and physical trauma that the white working-class and black child experience. Given the lack of the "normative" protection of innocence due to hardship and abuses, the abuse reinforces the white working-class and black child's vulnerability and need for protection thus deepening their "innocence of consent" (Stockton 33). Although these authors concentrate mostly on black and white child characters, another group of child figures overshadowed by this biracial divide in the South merits consideration.

Immigrants and Native Americans have been relegated to the periphery for so long in the U.S. South that, as a result, critical attention to works by immigrant and Native American writers has been only a recent phenomenon. The binary racial division has for too long obscured the presence of immigrants and Native Americans in the U.S. South. Expanding on the multicultural configuration of the U.S. South, critics Sharon Monteith and Suzanne Jones argue that the idea of a monolithic U.S. South is fictive, since the South has been a space of heterogeneous communities that have coexisted sometimes in tension and also in cohesive ways, making the South "neither insular nor homogenous" but a space rather characterized by multiplicity

(Monteith and Jones 11). While the presence of Native Americans and new immigrants from South America, Asia, and Africa in the U.S. South who brought different cultures have been overlooked, Native American and immigrant writers have complicated the biracial (white/black) literary imagination and challenged the concept of an innocent white child, thus providing a way to revisit our understanding of southern identity. This fourth chapter will focus on the construction of southern identity through the child figure queered by ethnicity because s/he does not neatly fit within southern societal definition of race. In *Black Atlantic* (1999), Paul Gilroy questions the rhetoric of ethnic absolutism that has characterized national belonging, thus alienating ethnic “others” in the West. Gilroy observes that identity is an infinite process of construction. The concept of the immigrant child sheds light on the feeling of ambivalence and sometimes inadequacy he or she develops, and the “racialized double consciousness” that places the new American identity in tension with roots in his or her country of origin (Lavender and Singley 362). This chapter examines how the figure of the immigrant child far from falling into victimization, attempts to negotiate between her home roots and the American culture (her insider/outsider status) in order to find a middle ground that allows her to navigate in the mainstream culture and forge a southern identity.

In *Monkey Bridge* Lan Cao addresses the issues of displacement, exile, and relocation that lead to her characters’ dual identity. *Monkey Bridge* explores the psychological trauma of a family in the aftermaths of the Vietnam War (or, as the Vietnamese call it, the American War). It is a story about immigrants grappling with the overwhelming opportunities and confusions of American life, reinventing themselves as they go along. *Monkey Bridge* gives insight into how the private and public are intertwined, and it reveals the emotional devastation which dislocation entails. In Cao’s text, Mai, the child protagonist, immigrates with her mother to Virginia and has

to go through a change in worldview in order to appropriate the language of the host country, fulfill new responsibilities, and provide guidance to her mother in the daily routines in a foreign land, while also beginning to comprehend the secrets of her mother's past. Mai is caught up in past memories of Vietnam and, at the same time, yearns for a college education and a career. From the onset, she expresses the inner tension of navigating two worlds: "My dilemma, was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither" (12). As a Vietnamese born abroad but now settled in Virginia, Mai's position is complicated by the fact that her identities "remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship" (Gilroy 1). Mai lives at once in the past and the present, haunted by the memories of her Vietnamese youth, and determined at the same time to create a new life for herself in America. The move to the United States complicates and destabilizes the relationship between Thanh and her daughter Mai who has to take on the maternal responsibilities, provide guidance, and teach her mother what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Mai's fragmented experiences deepen when she still has to struggle with the "troubling pasts and disturbing histories" of her family, who are by extension her own history (Stocks 85). Unlike her mother, Mai seems to be adjusting to life in the South. In spite of her trauma, she is able to navigate this new environment because of her capacity to manipulate and control English, the language of power, to enable her mother to fit in their new geographical context. Within the short period she has spent with her father's friend Uncle Michael and Aunt Mary in Connecticut, Mai experiences a linguistic adaptation by quickly appropriating the English language: "My superior English meant that unlike my mother and Mrs. Bay, I knew the difference between "cough" and "enough," "bough" and "through," "trough" and "through," "dough" and "fought" (36). Relocation, rather than crippling the future, "represents unlimited possibilities for rebirth [and] reinvention" (124). Although characters in *Monkey Bridge* seem



alienated in the U.S. South, Vietnam and Virginia share commonalities in terms of war history because both Vietnamese and Virginians are haunted by a warlike past.

Like *Monkey Bridge*, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival* attempts to locate Native Americans' identity in relation to southern identity through a child figure. *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* accounts for the life of a mixed-blood young girl of Huron, Metis, and Cherokee heritages, coming of age off reservation in North Carolina. It is the story of a child confronted with her mother's schizophrenia that results in the domestic abuse she experiences, which obscures her childhood, the torments she endures (rape and violence) and the traumas inflicted on herself (alcohol and drug abuse during her youth). Notwithstanding these odds, the child's strong will enables her to survive and achieve her dreams.

In *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer*, the mother's mental illness tears apart the family cohesion. As a result, little Allison suffers marginalization in her home space (she is considered the black sheep among her siblings), which exacerbates her alienation, a situation which reflects Native Americans' status as outsiders in the U.S. South. In spite of the odds she faces, the child figure heavily relies on her Cherokee traditional beliefs to find strength. The child describes how her mother's schizophrenia nearly destroys the father's efforts to root the children in "our Indian traditions" (25). The illness complicates the mother-daughter relationship by forcing the child to precociously enter adulthood. Among the siblings, she receives the worst punishments, endures the most severe discipline, and does extra chores which result in her tardiness at school and punishment. The family instability leads to constant displacement and relocation, forcing the child to depart from home at age nine. Psychologically affected, little Allison develops a disposition for self-destruction through self-starvation, alcohol, drug addiction in ninth grade, and many attempts at suicide because she feels "responsible for our family problems and shame

believing if I were out of the way things might get better for everyone else” (37). Not only does self-harm characterize her response to family challenges, but she also resorts to fighting other children who refer to her as “dirty half-breed” because she identifies with “a deer thrashing hard hooves from a hind-legged stance” (36). The tendency of Hedge Coke’s protagonist to self-destruct and to act in self-defense sets her out of “normative childhood.” While the mother-daughter bond seems destabilized, the child finds resourcefulness from her father who instills a strong sense of Native values in his children. In her *Reconstructing the Native South*, Melanie Benson Taylor argues that Native Americans endeavor to maintain their culture from its infiltration. In spite of the contact with Western culture, the family still holds on to old beliefs through a father who raised his children “to believe being Indian was what made us who we are – what *shaped* us” (7). In this context, Hedge Coke’s protagonist is sustained by tribal culture that she applies to her realities. Tribal identity is central for her southern self as it is an evolving and mutable process.

The social, economic, and political transformation that occurred in the South in the mid-twentieth century made southern exceptionalism anachronistic. Industrial mobility coupled with advanced production technology have enabled the creation of more job opportunities and superseded the old southern agrarian economy. By the 1970s and especially the 1980s, migrations from rural to urban spaces and immigration from foreign lands have altered the configuration of the population in the U.S. South, indicating the inhabitants are not only black and white but also “indigenous peoples, queer communities, southeast Asians, Latinos and-established and emergent migrants populations” (Cruz 15). New work on the South such as James C. Cobb and William Stueck’s *Globalization and the American South* has extended the borders of the South to other territories including Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the

Caribbean. To Cobb and Stueck, the South's distinctiveness from the rest of the U.S. nation lies in its connection with other regions of the world, thus making the South a more universal space. The permanent contact of southern culture with global cultures deconstructs the idea of an isolated monolithic South that holds sway in the regional and national imagination. Thus, recent immigrant and Native American works provide a revisionist perspective to examine southern literature that has often been read through the lens of black-white paradigms. Notwithstanding their cultural presence in the South, immigrants and Native Americans have been rendered invisible. They have been relegated to the "'zero' of regional forgetting," to borrow Melanie Benson's terms (167). However, Cao and Hedge Coke reconstruct their protagonists' identity by relying on their southern selves. *Monkey Bridge* and *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* upset the racial categorization (white-black binary) that has characterized the South and these texts reconfigure the region as a multicultural space, a space where Vietnamese immigrants and Native Americans "are uneasily positioned in American culture as American but not quite [...] as minority but not one of 'those' minorities" [...] "as like us but not like us" (Bow 26).

In the light of this shift in southern studies, this project seeks to explore the concept of the child from multiple perspectives in forging southern identity. Relying on Stockton's theorization of the innocent child, the child of color, and working-class child who lacks the "normative" protection of innocence, I argue that these various categories of child figures are queered in one way or another to underscore the diversity of southern culture in the US. I expect this dissertation to challenge assumptions of the historical and cultural construction of a monolithic Anglo-American identity as well as a narrow view of what "southern" means. In spite of the different ethnicities of the child figures in this project, all of them are queered in a certain way by

race, ethnicity, trauma, sickness, and poverty, and that queerness contributes to the richness of what constitutes southern identity.

## Chapter One: Shapes of Traumatic Memory and Silences

As one of the core subjects in psychoanalysis, trauma is a psychic state resulting from a stressful experience that shatters one's capacity to integrate the emotions involved with that experience. Trauma is referred to as a psychological wound associated with sexual, emotional and physical abuse, loss, and illness. In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), Leigh Gilmore contends that the meaning of trauma acquires a connotation of psychic wounding when brought into relation with memory "such that trauma's wound no longer [injures] only the body but the soul and through it, memory itself" (25). As memory plays a significant part in post-traumatic experiences, this chapter calls attention to how, in the context of the U.S. South, white childhood memories have been historically connected to traumatic experiences that were repressed to lead a "normal" life as a child.

Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* provide an image of the white middle-class child, in which southern values rooted in racial division and traditional gender expectations have rendered "abnormal" at the turn of the twentieth century. Given the complexity of the concept of the child, it comes to represent, as Katherine Bond Stockton puts it, who we never were, a "ghostly, unreachable fancy, making us wonder" (5). To attribute "innocence" to childhood, she argues, is just a "default designation" (5). This chapter starts with Stockton's premise that innocence already implies a certain estrangement from adulthood because children are considered normative but at the same time different from adults, thus making them "normative strange" figures (31). I build upon Stockton's work to argue that Smith and Lumpkin deconstruct the concept of a normative innocence that has been associated with the white southern child. In their texts, they demonstrate that the white, allegedly-innocent child, supposedly protected from hardship, is instead warped

by trauma as a result of being exposed to the southern construction of race. Thus, the child lacks “innocence,” that normative attribute to the idea of white childhood. Smith and Lumpkin use the white middle class child to critique and question the socio-cultural values prevalent in the U.S. South at the beginning of the twentieth century. In spite of the class privilege that the southern white child enjoys, his or her innocence is, as these authors reveal, a myth.

Written during the first half of the twentieth century, Lumpkin’s and Smith’s works were published during a period when great changes were occurring in the western world (WWII, Fascism). Prior to that, deep transformations such as the post-Civil War period, Reconstruction, industrialization, and the Great Depression swept the South, which saw the emergence of autobiographies by white southerners preoccupied with the region’s social tensions and the question of how to redefine their identity in the midst of these changes. In examining the correspondences of slave-owning white women during the Civil War, historian Drew Gilpin Faust, in her pivotal book *Mothers of Invention* (1996), illuminates the anxieties which produce new constructions of the notion of southern womanhood that challenge the rigid division of gender categories. The Civil War, which at first “seemed to reaffirm and even strengthen traditional divisions between masculine and feminine by defining war as the glorious” domain of men, instead came to engender “uncertainty about gender categories and identities” (Faust 6). In the absence of men, women had to take up men’s responsibilities of running the household. As a result, these women created new gender meanings that maintained their class privileges founded on racial slavery and at the same time strove to preserve the apparent autonomy they gained. Faust cites a Confederate woman named Lucy Buck who observes “we shall never ... be the same as we have been” (qtd in Faust 7). As Faust points out, the war led Confederate women to shift from the private to the public sphere through the formation of women’s organizations,

performances in public for fundraising purposes and even informing government defense policy. This move from the private to the public already “empowered women as women, independent of men” (Faust 24).

This period was also significant for women because it marked a shift in cultural values from Victorianism to Modernism. While white women enjoyed a seeming independence of working outside the home space, they were expected to maintain the Victorian values of self-effacement, and to uphold family and domestic responsibilities. No wonder, then, that southern women’s ambivalent position thus informed the production of their autobiographies. Already transgressing the limitations traditionally imposed upon women in the first half of the twentieth century, Lumpkin and Smith, in writing their autobiographical narratives, are “ever mindful of the risky exposure [they] incur in asserting [their] self in print” (Prenshaw 12).

This chapter probes into the characters’ queer identity, which calls attention to the “troubling and different” position of the white child that rather undermines the foundations of white dominance (Hughes and Smith 1). Similarly, Lumpkin’s and Smith’s queer subjectivity troubles the predominantly hetero-normative South. Given this rationale, they could not reveal their lesbian relationships lest they be ostracized by their community (family, neighbors and church) because lesbian relationship is perceived as a “socially prohibited [form] of desire” (Monnet 29). Lumpkin and Smith lived during a period when same-sex relationships, in Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s terms, have been “medicalized [and] morbidized,” making it impossible to disclose a sexual orientation viewed as non-normative (119). In one of her essays titled “Open Secrets,” Hall observes that although Lumpkin spent almost thirty years with the radical economist Dorothy Douglas in Northampton, Lumpkin erased most traces of their relationship. “Lesbianism,” Hall continues, was an “‘open secret’ prevailing, omnipresent but [an] unspoken”

aspect of Lumpkin's life (121). Thus, to Hall, Lumpkin ended *The Making of a Southerner* in the 1920s lest her sexual orientation undermine the moral authority of her text (120). Gary Richards contends that sexuality was central to Smith's work, drawing on biographical and autobiographical sources that prove Smith was a lesbian. Smith developed a committed relationship with Paula Snelling for nearly forty years; one of her correspondences with Snelling testifies to how deep and strong their bond was: "But I could do with a little loving for a change. Oh darling, if our full spirits and bodies could effect the marriage that our minds have always had – And that our integrity of spirit had had! I'd love to feel your lips on mine ... and I can imagine other feelings too" (qtd in Richards 102). Although Smith acknowledges in her political and professional work how sexuality and race were "inextricably intertwined on the southern social matrix of the first half of the twentieth century," she could only address how sexual desires were inhibited in a child (Richards 103). In her text, Smith highlights how any knowledge even related to the reproductive function of sex is repressed in children, particularly girls. As girls, "aware that there are certain doors" marked by gender, the "question of where babies come from turns into a complicated matter since it concerns both a private entrance and a semi-public exit which each human being has to make but no one wants to remember...it is better just now for you (whether boy or girl) to accept the idea that storks bring babies" (88). Such stories just keep the child's mind away from inquiring or trying to discover more about her private parts. Since southern mores stifled girls' sexuality, Smith and Snelling destroyed most of their letters to each other in an effort to keep the relationship secret.

Although autobiography and memoir are the source materials for this chapter, I do not intend to examine the lived experience of the actual child but to analyze how these life narratives deconstruct the notion of innocence associated with white childhood as developed in the



southern literary and cultural imagination at the turn of the twentieth century. The traumatic experiences Lumpkin and Smith explore delineate the “complex and fraught relationship with childhood innocence” and demonstrate that the white child’s queer identity is related to her exposure to the racial segregationist ideology in the South (Henninger 601).

Before delving into the subject, a quick look at both authors’ backgrounds is important. Both Lumpkin and Smith were born in 1897 and raised in southern upper class planters’ families that respectively relocated to Georgia and South Carolina due to economic hardships. Smith’s and Lumpkin’s lives overlap not only biographically but also in terms of their ideological stances. To Hall, both Smith and Lumpkin were deeply immersed in the southern ideology of white supremacy, and their later departure from their respective families in their early adulthood provides them an eye-opening experience on race and class politics in the South (232). As a result, they became involved in social change that originates in southern Christian beliefs. Their personal lives also parallel with regard to their committed partnerships with other women and silence regarding their sexual orientation. Lumpkin and Smith grew up during a period when coming out as a lesbian was met with socio-cultural stigma. Although lesbian life in the South was characterized by “discretion and privacy,” a lesbian subculture burgeoned in the wake of the twentieth century (Kennedy 61). Intimate female relationships called “romantic friendships” were widespread and it was a period in which middle-class women “had grown up in a society where love between young females was considered the norm” (Faderman 2, 11). As Faderman notes, this social acceptance grew out of the “sexual innocence” which marks such romantic friendships (4). Paradoxically, while society accepted such intimacies among women, heterosexual marriages mostly dissolved these bonds, some of which still continued undercover. However, lesbians could craft enabling spaces for queer desire in southern rural spaces after the

Second World War (Thompson 9). This context of tolerance and hostility in the South did not facilitate Lumpkin's and Smith's visibility as lesbians.

Notwithstanding the commonalities between Lumpkin's and Smith's backgrounds, Lumpkin's text is informed by "social Christianity [and] sociology," whereas Smith's work has a therapeutic orientation (Hall 232). Lumpkin and Smith portray the South as a space that enables "sideways" experience for the child figure (11). To "grow sideways" is a phrase coined by Stockton to mean that while a child matures in age and her body develops in stature, she goes through a "width of ... experiences" which "stains" her alleged purity or innocence (11). For Lumpkin and Smith, the South of the early twentieth century is a "twisted world" (Hall 232) where the white supremacist system has a debilitating effect on the white middle-class child's psyche. Thus, the child is no longer "a set of have-nots" who lacks "knowingness" but a figure exposed to the contradictions in performing southern values of racial separateness (Stockton 12).

The child's exposure to southern socio-cultural contradictions entails her "sideways" experience of psychological trauma which makes her non-normative and demonstrates that her state of "innocence" is a socio-cultural construct (11). In her groundbreaking work *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich calls attention to the centrality of trauma in queer identity formation which is non-hetero-normative (46). Queer identity often leads to rejection from the hetero-normative culture because it challenges such norms. Courtney Grubbs argues that the word "queer" disrupts "normative concepts" (Grubbs 36) and refers to Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer as "*troublant*" and notes that the "immemorial current that queer represents is [...] antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational and strange" (qtd in Grubbs 36). Drawing on Grubbs, I argue that trauma is a queer state because it already implies an experience of psychological destabilization, as seen in the case of Lumpkin's and Smith's protagonists and is thus an

“abnormal” state. According to Cvetkovich, psychological trauma seems invisible, as it is limited to the private sphere and therefore “does not appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn’t produce dead bodies or even, necessarily, damaged ones” (3). The traumatic experiences of Smith’s and Lumpkin’s child protagonists are “embedded in everyday life” and social practices as a way to preserve the racial and class hierarchy that constitutes the foundational southern social structure (Cvetkovich 12).

In Smith’s and Lumpkin’s texts, trauma is a pervasive trope that results from the South’s ideology of racial separation leading to a socio-economic disparity between blacks and whites that places the child at the core of the formation of southern identity. In *Cradle of Liberty*, Caroline Levander sees the child as a link between racial anxiety and the structures of the U.S. national identity and contends that the child has served as a “powerful vehicle for establishing a logic of racial difference that [associates bondage] to black bodies and liberty to white [bodies]” thus reinforcing racial hierarchy in the nation and in the South (33). According to Smith and Lumpkin, a “southerner” is constructed and made through a process of indoctrination from childhood. Although white children in the South could feel the contradictions in the values that they learned from their parents, they could not articulate them lest they be silenced. Nevertheless, these children participate in “the perpetuation of the systemic injustice” which contributes to maintaining their privileged position as “white” (Hinrichsen 100). Lisa Hinrichsen points out the complexity inherent in trying to disclaim the past while still “continuing affective investments, social practices, and conceptions of selfhood shaped by this history” (100). This process of systematic repression and ambivalence creates a sentiment of guilt and psychological trauma that is reflected in the form of a lingering ghost. The trope of ghosting, which mirrors repressed memories, permeates Lumpkin’s and Smith’s texts. These texts show how the memory

of a southern “mythic” past has been constructed, nourished and transmitted to the child who in turn feels the burden and contradictions in living up to the expectations of southern behavior.

Smith uses the gothic as a method of presenting the protagonist’s queer subjectivity and giving an insight into the southern definition of racial identity. The gothic, as Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet observes, is not limited to causing fear or horror but it rather provokes “unease” which is a “curious mental condition both cognitive and emotional at once” (Monnet 3). From the onset, Smith sets the tone by reimagining childhood in the South through the gothic to highlight the burden of southern traditions that white children have to grapple with, traditions she compares to “a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the household sleeps” (Smith 25). In this context, the graveyard embodies the South fragmented, divided and in trouble, unwilling to forsake its ideology of racial and social segregation by holding on to a mythical glorious past. These southern values are so deep-seated that they become inescapable, enmeshed in the lives of southern children like “ghosts wandering restlessly through our everyday lives” (112). The gothic is thus figured as the white hegemonic system.

The child is a *tabula rasa*, the perfect ground to sow the seeds of racial supremacy. Thus, language plays a prominent role in the construction of racial identity that the child internalizes and translates into actions. In the chapter entitled “Lessons,” Smith encapsulates this idea when she reveals that children absorb the lessons they are taught to the extent that they are so embedded in every practice, gesture, habit “day by day, hour by hour, year by year until the movements were reflexes and made for the rest of our life without thinking ...[slipping] from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands” and become difficult to rip off (96). Subsequently, the body of the child becomes the site for the materialization and practice of southern ideology and she naturally performs the rituals of sitting at the front of the streetcar, the

bus, the picture show without being aware of it; the child simply lives the lessons taught. In his discussion of the body as the ideological space for the perpetuation of racial segregation in *Killers of the Dream*, Jay Watson observes that “segregated life is like a dance because it is a material performance...literally and intricately choreographed by ideology” (477). Although in performing these social practices, the white child seems privileged, at the same time, southern ideology confines the body of the white child to physical spaces, thus preventing her from crossing racial and social boundaries. Smith highlights the deleterious effects of these defined and internalized social practices that children carry into adulthood. She stresses the reaction of southern women’s bodies during an integrated meal. As some white and black women participate in a social gathering to break the bread, Smith relates, one of the women reveals that her body “was seized by an acute nausea which disappeared only when the meal was finished,” a reaction that results from the childhood training ingrained in the psyche (148). The body betrays the anxiety of breaking the eating taboo although the woman knows what she did is right. The response of the body demonstrates the intensity of these ideas and the blocking effect on the psyche; the grown women “are individuals haunted by ghosts of psychic fragmentation” (Henke 144). Through the gothic, Smith demonstrates the socialization of the white child into southern codes of racial hierarchy, which twists the child’s “innocence.”

Smith also materializes the “unease” related to the gothic by using ellipses throughout her text to represent the presence of ghosts that haunt the white child’s memory. She describes an image of a scary and gothic southern space: “Green cypress blowing through the memory, held firmly to the past by its dark old knobby trees lost in brown water... rivers that go underground and creep up miles away...” (112). The landscape of horror Smith presents here symbolizes the South’s refusal to see the reality of change and by clinging to the “past” and “dark” shadow of

the plantation culture. She draws from the Ku Klux Klan's cultural use of the gothic tradition that represents the foundation of the organization. Members of the Klan meet in supposedly haunted residences, taking on the roles of ghosts or ghouls that symbolize the spirits of the Confederate dead. Thus, in the organization, the ghost persona stands for the Confederate dead, serving as "a tool of fear and memory" to perpetuate white supremacy (O'Dell 82). In *Killers of the Dream*, Smith emphasizes memory by evoking the gothic, dark, and gloomy spaces like the "earth that shakes as you walk carefully on it, in swamp and edge of old moss-shadowed lakes" (112). Smith relies on the ghost persona to represent memory in the South. Like ghosts, memory is transient, deceptive, and by the same token repressed and forgotten. Memory is fragmented because the South upholds the principles of white supremacy. Smith personifies memory by giving it a body that is buried and forgotten but at the same time haunted by past experiences. Memory is equated with ghosts of the past that are present but are not articulated. For Darlene O'Dell, Smith's use of ghosts represent the "segregated South divided and haunted by a system that harms not only the African American children it seeks to diminish but also the white children caught in its contradictions" (O'Dell 80). Smith brings into focus the "moral or ethical dimension [...] of the specific kind of unease created by the gothic" (Monet 3). Through the use of the gothic, Smith gives insight into the past ghost to which the South is still attached.

The haunting starts at home where parents nurture the child into southern values and functions as a foundation for establishing race division. Smith represents the domestic space as a "home that gathers memories like dusts, a place filled with laughter and play and pain and hurt and ghosts" (30). In her text, the maternal figure plays a prominent role in imparting southern social mores in the child. The southern woman becomes the vessel for the transmission of memory through the enactment by her body of southern "spoken and unspoken rules" (O'Dell

88). The child quickly learns to grab the significance of the signals of her mother's body and speaks back to the mother by reenacting those signals; as Smith puts it: "[the child] learned far more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow, a joke, a shocked voice, a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence than from long sentences" (90). Not only does the child's body replicate the unspoken rules but it is also "deauthorized" in the domestic space (Watson 489). Edward J. Lawler expands on how social exchanges cause emotional responses because our everyday feelings are intertwined with these exchanges (322). The reaction of the child's body derives from the emotional response produced by her social environment, and in this context, the child experiences an emotional "down" because the exchange occurs unsuccessfully (Lawler 322). The child has to comply with the tenets of southern traditions even when her "body knew" that they were wrong and her "glands [were] filled with anxiety" (38). In his analysis of the child's body in *Killers of the Dream*, Watson refers to coercive means the southern home uses to destroy "the subversive wisdom of that body" and substitute that wisdom with the cultural constructs of southern values (Watson 488). Smith emphasizes how the mother exemplifies this way of controlling her child's body when the mother in her attempt to legitimize racial segregation silences her daughter: "You're too young to understand. And don't ask me again, ever again, about this!" (37). As exemplified, the "repressive mechanism of the [mother's] language" successfully subjugates the body of the child (Romine 107). Even though the child acknowledges something is wrong, her body finally participates in the ideology of white supremacy by "shrinking away" from her friend who is racially categorized as black (36). This example sheds light on how the child's ideological perception is formed by her interaction with her family and, as Yolanda Dreyer argues, such ideological beliefs "do not remain on the cognitive level as an ideology [but] infect the emotions and spill over into actions of

discrimination and violence” (607). This act of the child’s physical withdrawal informed by the ideology of southern racial hierarchy seals the severance of the ties between the two children and by extension the two races. Southern ideology transforms the child who unconsciously participates in the “stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion” and sets social barriers between herself and little Janie, the white looking girl who in fact is black (Dreyer 604).

The home space thus complicates the white/black divide through the dual relationship the child develops with her biologically white mother and the black nurse. In Smith’s words, “the ghost relationship” between the child and her beloved black nurse makes the child ambivalent towards her black mammy to which she shows deep attachment but at the same time she is required to view the mammy as an inferior “Other” due to segregation that not only “[divides] the races but... the white child’s heart” (134). The weight of southern values makes this white child/black nurse relationship a “tender and tragic” bond (128). It becomes a source of anxiety and disquiet that shapes the child’s personality until adulthood, splitting the child psychologically because she has originally been “fastened to two umbilical cords which wrap themselves together in a terrifying tangle, and then suddenly, inexplicably, but with awful sureness, begin steadily to move, each in a different direction” (132). Smith emphasizes how growing within the two systems of values (white mother and black mammy) destabilizes the lives of the white male child especially who in the long run internally rejects all women and finds refuge in hard work and “companionship with” other men (134). Although the white child suffers deeply from these dual and unsettling relationships, the black nurse greatly informs the child’s formative years morally, psychically and with regards to her physical health. In the text Smith reinscribes the body of the culturally cheapened figure of the black mammy in rearing the white child. While Smith shows that the nurse’s position in the home is undefinable and made of



“tangled contradictions,” she still holds some “power” over the family (128). Smith describes a situation whereby the child protagonist has refused to consume food as a result of a new birth in the family which turns attention away from her. As the family has become alarmed, they call a doctor whose intervention has proved ineffective. Interestingly, Aunt Chloe the nurse, with her knowledge of child’s psychology, uses her maternal expertise to make the young protagonist regain self-esteem. As the story goes, Aunt Chloe, “studying the pale young face before her for a little . . . took a little food, chewed it first in her mouth, put it in mine and I swallowed it promptly. Soon I was prospering on this fine psychological diet, gaining weight and security as the weeks went by. I was once more the center of somebody’s universe” (130). Through the chewing of the food Smith empowers Aunt Chloe’s body which brings life, health and stability to the white body. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson argues that the presence of the black mammy defines “who counts as a lady” (53) because she participates in the “production of white femininity” through her labor (53). As McPherson asserts, the mammy supports a “system of femininity” that denies her access to “privileged femininity” (55). Like McPherson, Smith also demonstrates that notwithstanding the function of the mammy in nurturing the white child, the latter is paradoxically trained to overlook the mammy’s impact on her life.

While the child’s body functions as a site of the materialization and perpetuation of the southern white supremacist system and its selective memory of the past, a key event has shattered the child’s “innocence” and awakened her to the truth of southern values. Smith describes a situation which not only awakens the protagonist on race relations but also shatters her southern core values. The event occurs when Janie, a white-looking child, is taken from her adopted family and placed in a white middle-class home. Both Smith and Janie were approximately the same age and drawn to each other, rooming and playing together, sitting next

to each other at the breakfast table. Smith mentors her new friend in the recitation of Bible verses. Sharing almost everything together, both girls have developed a strong bond. However, the yoke of southern ideology was going to sever these solid ties when one day, the Smith family receives a telephone message from a black orphanage. Janie has to leave because she is now deemed “black.” As Smith described it, the white child’s mind is too “innocent” to grasp the meaning of why Janie “looks” white but “is” colored; a situation that reflects century long practices (36). To borrow from Perry Carter, Janie is an “undecidable” by her look (228). This racial categorization denotes the slippery nature of race itself, and challenges the notion of fixed racial identity and shows that external appearance alone cannot determine a person’s race. Her young mind senses the wrongness of the decision, which gives her a sudden insight into racial injustice. As Watson terms it, “custom must hijack conscience” (488). Since the protagonist becomes aware of the privileges associated with her race, this incident enlightens the white child on her racial position. Then, the ideas begin to seep through her mind: *“I was white. She was colored. We must not be together. It was bad to be together. Though you ate with your nurse when you were little, it was bad to eat with any colored person after that. It was just bad as other things were bad that your mother had told you. It was bad that she was to sleep in the room with me that night. It was bad ...”* (38). While the child figure sanctions the societal codes in absorbing its principles, her language is suggesting uncertainty and even doubt. The gap Smith leaves at the end of the child’s reflection reflects a crisis in language, which results from the trauma of this racial crisis.

In *The Making of a Southerner*, Lumpkin emphasizes the centrality of memory as the foundation of southern tradition by relying on the conventions of the epic. Lumpkin layers the epic in the early parts of her text through her re-creation of her forefathers’ South as a

“fairyland,” providing a dreamlike depiction that alludes to a certain nostalgia of a remote past (116). Lumpkin also borrows from the rhetoric of writers, historians, and journalists who portray the Confederate soldiers as tragic but courageous heroes. By weaving these epic conventions of a mythic past and halcyon bygone days, fairyland, and heroism in her text, Lumpkin demonstrates that this rhetoric has been imagined, constructed in order to maintain the memory of the Lost Cause. Lumpkin shows that although the past southern master-slave system has gone, southerners have maintained its ideology, carried and instilled it into their progeny that “It was by no means [their] business merely to preserve memories [and] keep inviolate a way of life” (127). For her forefathers, nothing could change the racial social structure that makes whites superior to the people of color; this, as she observes, is “the very cornerstone of the South” (128). The memories are so much infused in the mind of the child that even “Thirty years after reconstruction, I, a child must still feel it” ... “I, too, would feel namelessly oppressed” (Lumpkin 87). While the father’s narratives about the plantation South mostly describe it as an ideologically healthy space for the white child, Lumpkin highlights how the process of indoctrination into the Lost Cause ideology twists the child’s psyche. In learning to preserve southern racial and class hierarchies, the child is exposed to the contradictions that lie in such social practices and becomes psychologically affected, thus, undermining the supposed “ignorance” of the child.

Similarly, the domestic space for Lumpkin is the first site par excellence of socialization where parents condition children into performing the cultural behaviors of white superiority. In Lumpkin’s text, the white child figure is steeped at an early age into the structures of southern racial attitudes through her exposure to the Lost Cause ideology and as Lumpkin puts it, the child is raised in this ideology, “drinking it” (she has been immersed and trained to live up to the

expectations of this ideology) since “babyhood” (114). Here, the father plays a prominent role in shaping his offspring’s southern identity that is already affected by contradictory socio-cultural practices. One realizes that the presence of the father pervades nearly half of the text to the extent that the young narrator’s voice is lost “in the nostalgia of Lost Cause rhetoric”; her identity is tied to the shadow of her father (O’Dell 48). Lumpkin describes the father figure as a potent patriarch with high authority over family matters, “head, and dominant figure, leader, exemplar, final authority” who “[impregnates] our lives with his strong sense of mission,” nurturing his children’s memories with books (121). Reading becomes one of the parents’ methods to teach children to “love the Lost Cause” and in the context of Lumpkin’s text, the mother (albeit overshadowed by the presence of the patriarch), plays a subtle but effective role in selecting books that nurture the nostalgic sentiments of the antebellum South (Lumpkin 121). The most efficient strategy the father employs “to shore up” the child’s “white hegemonic self” is the “Saturday Nights Debating Club” a weekly domestic activity during which the child is trained in the art of arguments and debating (Hinrichsen 99). Although these sessions are performed as a game, they nevertheless provide a solid foundation for the defense of white superiority that enables the child to support and even defeat her opponent in a debate about the question of racial equality. Parental shaping of the child’s southern self has been so potent that it informs the children’s game. Lumpkin refers to the case whereby children have formed a Klan club, meeting in secrecy, wearing costumes and emulating their adults’ Klan rituals and practices. Lumpkin states that they represent more than games, “far beyond pretense” because the club gives the opportunity to cultivate one’s “Southern patriotism” and loyalty and “in a sense we were serious children bent on our ideals” (136). Every day practices, story-telling, readings, oratory and debating in the domestic space foster in the child figure “a view of southern history that bolstered

the Lost Cause sentiment” (Hinrichsen 105). Not only is the mind of the child conditioned but her body is also controlled by the parents who inscribe the principles of the Lost Cause.

Like Smith, the child’s body for Lumpkin, fully participates in the regional rituals under the tutelage of the father. As Lumpkin points out, the child’s body is “dipped in the fiery experience of Southern patriotism” (112) but the child’s body “was verily baptized in its sentiments” (114) during the Confederate reunion of 1903 held in South Carolina, a big event to commemorate the Old South. Lumpkin indicates that the child is baptized, immersed in regional myths, a way to suggest the religious significance the Lost Cause ideology connotes. The child has been “drinking it in,” indicating an act of consumption (114), while her body “joined in, beating...hands...jumping” (119-120). The best illustration of the child’s acquiescence with the Lost Cause ideology is her membership in the “Children of the Confederacy,” a space propitious for the performance of patterns of social mores. As a result, her body functions as a site of commemorative civil and religious memory. In this regard, O’Dell contends that “the Lost Cause memory settled in the mind, body and soul of southern white children” (49). As Lumpkin acknowledges, southern racial beliefs prove difficult to disentangle from the mind and body even in adulthood. In the context of the South, the body is subtly manipulated to implement the segregationist ideology which becomes a naturalized form of social relations (477). During one of the YWCA meetings at which a black woman has to speak to white southern students, Lumpkin lays bare the tension of the body in transgressing the “sacred” laws of racial boundaries: “our pulses had hammered... our hearts [pounding] in our chests” (192). Lumpkin emphasizes the existing paradoxes in southern behavior and how they constrain the body to behave a certain way. By blurring racial barriers at the YWCA meeting, she lives in contradiction with the established standard of southern behavior. Even the body reacts and

manifests angst over that “transgression” of norms through the “hammering” and pounding of heart.

While the white child seems protected by material security, Lumpkin’s protagonist goes through certain experiences that deeply affect her psychologically. Her first moment of trauma occurs in the home space. In her description of the domestic space, Lumpkin emphasizes the kitchen as a space that provides a “warm sense of plantation authenticity” (131). Ironically, the dreamlike kitchen becomes haunted when the child sees her father administer corporeal punishment to the black cook who was “writhing under the blows of a descending stick wielded by the white master of the house... her face distorted with fear and anger and his with stern rage” (132). This unexpected incident shatters the little girl’s world view of her father’s gentlemanliness and by extension the South. The father ceases to be the chivalrous and protecting figure and instead becomes “the white master,” violent and avenging who creates fear and emotional insecurity in the daughter (132). Lumpkin’s protagonist not only distances herself from the father linguistically but also physically by moving away from the scene of horror “creeping away on trembling legs” (132). To the protected child, the slave tradition that her father reenacts, brings to light the reality of white supremacy as she begins to understand her privileged position as a white child: “Thereafter, I was fully aware of myself as a white, and of Negroes as Negroes. Thenceforth, I began to be self-conscious about the many signs and symbols of my race position that had been battering against my consciousness since virtual infancy. I found them countless in number” (133). She could distinguish the symbols of socio-economic separation that go along with color division, symbols such as “For White”... “For Colored” in public transportations, theaters and many other institutions (133). Lumpkin gives insight into how regional identity informs individual identity to the extent that the child comes to

internalize and view abnormality as normal. In her analysis of Lumpkin's text in relation to the Lost Cause, O'Dell contends that "the making of a southerner ... is the making of a child through the language and rituals of the confederacy" (O'Dell 57). While Lumpkin explores trauma in relation to race, she examines how class difference alters the perception of the protagonist about whiteness. In the text, the child figure faces a situation which undermines the meaning of white hegemony on which southern ideology rests. Witnessing white poverty destabilizes her, because it is inconsistent with the privileges and power construed about the southern ideology of white superiority.

Lumpkin provides a different picture of the socio-economic conditions of white southerners which sharply contrasts with the mythic glamour of the constructed Old South. In the Sand Hills, the child for the first time witnesses other whites living in extreme poverty, completely removed from the material security she enjoys. The ideological construct behind whiteness assumes that "those with white skin are more deserving of employment, sound housing, quality education, and equitable social treatment than those without that attribute" (Babb 44). This experience becomes eye opening for the child because white poverty destroys the foundation of white southern class values, leaving a deep impression on her to the extent that "the images of the people...their surroundings and hardships" remained indelible on her mind even years after the incident (182). She further observes, "Something ... was begun out there.... Something apparently had been taken away" as a result of the Sand Hills experience (182). The Sand Hills sojourn awakens the child on the fragility of whiteness and she realizes being white does not guarantee socio-economic stability. The "sideways" experience in the Sand Hills has "taken away" the solid foundation of the Old South heritage that has been bequeathed to the child. The child protagonist could perceive that she is not on a par with the other children from

the Sand Hills and remarks that only childhood unites them. She even points out that everything separates them at almost all levels, noting that “my clothing was different... my lunches were different ... there was the matter of manners... of course my knowledge was different” (158 – 159). The socio-economic gap seems unbridgeable and subsequently isolates the other children from her. This class differential creates a sentiment of unease and disturbance, which makes the protagonist contend: “I had a pre-arranged advantage in a race which made me always win.... I felt unfair and that they would think me so” (160). Seeing white poverty undercuts the power and superiority that has often been associated with whiteness.

Throughout this chapter, the focus has been on the experience of the protagonists’ psychological trauma which results from the socio-cultural attitudes that maintain race and class division. Far from minimizing black suffering during the segregation era in the South, white victimhood has been “a foundational trope of subjectivity and community” in southern literary imagination (Hinrichsen 97). Smith acknowledges that many have “made identification with” the experiences which others have gone through (154). As Hinrichsen aptly fleshes out, there is a dynamic at work in southern culture whereby the white non-traumatized strategically “appropriate and lay claim to trauma thus attaining victim status without being victimized” (97). While Lumpkin and Smith lay much emphasis on white victimhood at the expense of black injury in their narratives, their protagonists’ experiences can be regarded as traumatic. These experiences seem invisible because they are embedded in everyday practices and even disguised by a false safety that the home setting provides.

One of the commonalities Lumpkin’s and Smith’s texts share in terms of silences lies in the child’s incapacity to express overt criticism of the father figures even though her experiences have filled her with an acute sense of the debilitating effects of patriarchy. Peggy Prenshaw



partly attributes such reticence to southern societal constraints that weigh on women and in particular women who hold a public status (18). Smith herself connects this silence over the father's "sins" to the woman's curious loyalty to her own father in spite of the sexism she experiences (Hobson 8). Lumpkin and Smith call attention to the way the presence of the father obscures and even inhibits the child's language to the extent that the child can voice any criticism only covertly. In *The Making of a Southerner*, a silent moment occurs in the scene of the beating of the cook when the child eludes explicit disapproval of her father's act by convincing herself of its legitimacy. The child is fully aware of the values of chivalry of men towards women when she expresses that it is uncommon for white gentlemen to "trash their cooks" (132). But at the same time, her doubts deepen because she becomes disturbed and has mixed feelings about what she witnesses. This way of silencing her criticism is revelatory of the ambivalence she has to grapple with concerning the South her father represents. In the first part of her text, Lumpkin uses ellipses to stress the young protagonist's doubts about white southerners' anxiety about blacks' growing political force during Reconstruction: "Apprehension took possession of the entire public mind. ... Men ... were afraid to go away from their homes and leave their wives and children for fear of outrage" (82). Also, the young narrator seems to question the credibility of news concerning blacks' political organizations causing terror but also divided among themselves with her references to "white men said," "they said," "they believed" (82). Through the use of quotation marks, Lumpkin indicates the protagonist's uncertainty about the accuracy of the Old South's memories of a happy and prosperous plantation culture that her father narrates as is the case with the discipline slaveholders enforce upon a "rebellious" and "lazy" slave (29). Placing "rebellious" and "lazy" into quotation marks suggests a covert criticism of the disciplinary measures enforced in the treatment of slaves. Lumpkin shows that by

the time the father becomes absent, the child's linguistic subjectivity can then take place.

Lumpkin sheds light on the fact that patriarchal rhetoric of the Lost Cause has molded the white child's early formative years and thus the child lets the voices of her fathers speak first.

Silence pervades Smith's discussion of sex as a result of southern cultural strictures. She illuminates the undermining function of religion on the child's sexuality and body. Already, the body symbolizes "a Thing of Shame," which one should not look at. This becomes a way to estrange the white child from his or her own body. Smith explores the role of religion in deepening the anxiety about body when she refers to preachers especially who warn the young southerner against "the Unpardonable Sin," suggestive of sexual desires and fantasies in which children may be tempted to indulge (110). The young girl is prohibited to know more about her body in relation to procreation which is after all considered an "ugly" business in the context of Smith's cultural upbringing (88). Smith also shows that these prohibitions on race and sex are connected with racial prohibition. Ultimately, the child learns to associate the rejection of her own body with the rejection of dark bodies, lessons that preachers and parents reinforce.

In expanding on childhood in the South, Smith and Lumpkin probe into how the effects of southern racial attitudes deprive the child of its "holy ignorance," to draw on the words of Robin Bernstein. These authors also show that the white middle class child is not spared from traumatic experiences which raise her awareness about the reality of southern identity. The child thus turns to a forced amnesia as a means of survival. The process of systematic repression of memories for the southern child exacerbates her psychological trauma which takes the form of a lingering ghost. In the same vein, Patricia Yaeger argues that childhood is crucial in the lives of some white women authors whose sudden exposure to the southern racial caste system inhibits their minds (100). Notwithstanding the child's forced amnesia, she is confronted with "the return of

the oppressed,” the oppressed symbolizing in the case of Smith and Lumpkin Janie and the black cook (Yaeger 95). In her discussion of southern white women’s exploration of childhood ghosts, Yaeger holds the white child complicit with the segregationist system of the South. She argues that while the child feels or senses the system of racial oppression, she wards off that ghost, which makes it possible for her to act out the normalized practices of racial injustice (96). While Yaeger’s argument proves correct, the child in her vulnerable state has no other option than to comply with her parents’ instruction and, furthermore, forced amnesia is the only strategy that enables the child to add some levity to her life. In this regard, Smith admits that believing your parents are right is the only way the white child can lead a life of normalcy. Far from denying childhood responsibility, Smith’s and Lumpkin’s act of recreating white middle-class childhood already serves as a corrective to the forced amnesia which has been adopted.

Despite the fact that Lumpkin and Smith portray a middle class white child affected by trauma, the experiences are not all negative. As a space that leads the child to a “sideways growth” Lumpkin’s and Smith’s representation of the child figure also provide counter-narratives that enable them to reconfigure the meaning of southern identity and undermine the values and practices of the dominant culture of the early twentieth century South. By means of the epic, Lumpkin offers an alternative way to imagine the South. In the first parts of the text, Lumpkin grants the father figure the primary voice to show that the foundation of the white child’s identity is structured by the forebears. Lumpkin’s protagonist constantly questions her forefathers’ memories of a glorious past filled with colored exaggeration, memories she refers to as stories. In an early section, Lumpkin is careful to highlight the contrast between a romanticized South and the real South whose two pictures, she acknowledges, blur and blend until later years (9). She also uses irony to describe the contradictions in the religious and moral

values that the forefathers symbolize when she comments: “slaveholder, Southern Baptist, and Southern gentleman all rolled into one” (12). In this context, the epic that functions as celebratory of past heroes’ deeds becomes instead a “mock epic” because Lumpkin dismantles the rhetoric of the Lost Cause ideology (O’Dell 58). With the death of her father, Lumpkin shifts the focus from her forebears to the child, making the child’s growth the subject of the text. The absence of the father thus signifies the demise of the patriarchal structure of the Lost Cause that gives way to a progressive new South. The child turned a young adolescent can turn away from Lost Cause principles to remake her southern selfhood under the principles of the Social Gospel.

For this transformation to happen, the protagonist joins a community of progressive women christened “the group of Eves” (191). Later, she reveals that once her eyes are open, she can no more live in a state of “comfortable ignorance” (239). As she remarks, she goes through a genuine transformation –an enlightenment- which reaches deep within her body, her blood: “Change was in my blood. I could see it now. I was in truth its offspring” (235). Lumpkin shows how difficult it is for the white southerner to disentangle from the haunting of the “old dogma” of the plantation tradition in spite of the change (235). By the close of the text, Lumpkin presents a different South that is gradually accepting diversity as the Old South recedes into history (235). *The Making of the Southerner* is a narrative of rebirth and reconstruction of the self and provides a new reading of southern heritage. Through this text, Lumpkin imagines a South where there is possibility for change based on race and gender equality, and which provides a catharsis that allows the individual to “[reject] racial inferiority, and [...] the entire peculiar set of ways which it allegedly justified” (229).

Old Screamer Mountain is the space for the experimentation of this vision of a new South that breaks free from the restrictions of segregation and gender oppression and gears towards a

diverse, multicultural new South. Screamer Mountain “functions as a counter-ideological space of almost numinous power” (Watson 492). Like Lumpkin’s group of Eves, Laurel Falls Camp is a gender-segregated space which solely encompasses a community of southern girls. During one of the camp’s sessions, there was an allegorical performance of southern childhood based upon Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince*. The central crisis in the play lies in the Prince’s inability to play with all the children of the earth. The dilemma is exacerbated when the four travelling companions of the Prince—“Southern Tradition,” “Religion,” “Conscience” and “Science”—implicitly or actively contributes to the crisis. Unable to resolve her dilemma, the Prince “twisted and turned, ran quickly, ran slowly; yet always the eight who were Southern Tradition blocked her way. She lost herself in her struggle, stopped acting... She fell on the floor, breathing hard, and lay there, staring up at the ceiling” (49). The Prince’s performance of the struggle and defeat awakens the campers to the way southern ideology weighs on their bodies and mind. One of the campers even expresses her anxiety about their capacity to eradicate the deeply ingrained racial caste system by observing that the counter values they learn at the camp “just [tear] us up inside! [Make] us raw” and unfit for the South (54). She is seeing a discrepancy between the counter-narrative learned at the camp and her ability to implement that narrative outside of the camp. However, the play does not end on a note of defeat; Smith highlights the boldest move of the campers that initiates the possibility of change and healing in the South, by means of a dance in which the campers join “[driving] Southern Tradition – nonviolently of course! – into the wings of the stage” (50). The dance in which all the children could play with the little Prince marks the “triumph” of social change Smith envisions (50). In performing this interracial dance, the campers’ bodies redefine southern childhood’s identity. Then, Smith presents the body of the female child as the site of transformation.

By portraying the traumatized white child, Lumpkin and Smith call attention to the twisted environment the South symbolizes as a result of the Lost Cause ideology in the first half of the twentieth century. Culturally, the South has been clinging to the antebellum memory of the plantation system which creates and enforces racial divide. Avery Gordon best encapsulates the impact of past ghosts when she claims that “haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. ... The whole essence of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention” (Gordon xvi). Despite Lumpkin’s and Smith’s attempt to reimagine a New South that is inclusive (Laurel Fall Camp and Daughters of Eve) Lumpkin acknowledges how difficult it is to disentangle from the grips of the Old South because the old dogma whereby there is only one way to be a southerner was still haunting at a time of deep socio-economic and ideological transformations (Lumpkin 235).

## Chapter Two: The Burden of Poverty

On February 28, 1935, the *New York Post* made a revelation that fueled criticism in the publishing world and brought about controversy. The novelist Erskine Caldwell reported on a group of people whose very presence in the South contradicted the American ideology whereby all American citizens could enjoy “social fluidity and equality of opportunity” (Jones 2). According to Sylvia Jenkins Cook, the presence of the southern poor white in the literary imagination became effective during the nineteenth century. He was depicted as either a comic, villainous character, or as a victim (Bledsoe 10). After the Civil War, interest in the representation of the poor white dwindled because southern writers developed a new concern in creating a mythic past for the South. By the late nineteenth century, the presence of the fictional poor white became nearly nonexistent while his stereotype still prevailed in “historical, sociological, and journalistic writings” (Cook 17). The newspaper industry between the two World Wars denied the presence of poor whites because they were perceived unfit for the American ideal of middle-class citizenship. Writers like Caldwell who brought new attention to the southern poor in fiction such as *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933), were placed in the literary margins because their writing was considered a “denial of literary value and regional centrality” (Gray 162). Thus, to write about poor whites was not “to write as a Southerner” and since Caldwell in his fiction promoted social change, it was met with poor reception both aesthetically and regionally (Gray 161). While Caldwell’s fiction lays bare the economic forces that are impeding poor whites to emerge, it also recommends ways to “root out” poverty (Gray 159).

The South in the cultural and literary imagination has been viewed as a backward space and the socio-economic repercussions of the Depression intensified this view of the South. Because of the economic marginalization that the South has suffered, “this fantasied South,” according to Leigh Anne Duck, was “isolated from idealized national temporality” (87). In the *Nation’s Region*, Duck analyzes the position of the South vis-à-vis the American nation after the Depression era and argues that the image of southern poor whites perceived as an “abject population [...] provoked anxiety concerning both the status of the nation and that of the white race. If such devolving bodies actually constituted a segment of the population, they would challenge the nation’s representation of itself as an economically and politically progressive democracy” (95). Duck contends that poor whites in the early twentieth century America were considered physically and psychologically degenerate because they supposedly descended from convicts and indentured servants, “people said to be of inferior genetic quality” (96). According to Cook, writers, sociologists and the media widely contributed to spreading these negative stereotypes of poor whites as “idiotic, immoral, and - above all inert,” emphasizing how they did not fit into the American socio-economic standards of success (Cook 4). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poor whites did not have access to the “benefits” of the plantation economy. The advent of industrialization in the twentieth century brought in the emergence of the factory system. With the shift from “feudalism to industrial capitalism” the system of exploitation remained unchanged, making poor whites’ social status more precarious (Cook 37). Thus, the presence of poor whites in the American setting at the dawn of the twentieth century challenged and threatened the racial purity and cultural integrity of a nation which viewed itself as a place of socio-economic opportunity and individual self-fulfillment. Although poor whites lived within the nation, “they were not considered to be *of* the nation [...] but to exist only



beyond spatial boundaries that national culture could not penetrate” (103). In fact, whiteness has long held the “privileged place of racial normativity,” and being an impoverished white is antithetical to that norm (Newitz and Wray 3). The very existence of poor whites questions the system of material, economic, educational, and social privileges that has been associated with whiteness and, as Cook puts it, “the very conception of ‘poor white’ is an oxymoron. It insists on the irreconcilable nature of its two parts; -the unnaturalness of their yoking assumes a worldview in which to be white is to be assured of a satisfactory share of personal resources” (185). Whites who do not enjoy these privileges, “take on the status of freaks, to be reviled, cured, pitied, accepted, or mocked” (Cook 185).

This chapter will investigate the representation of the poor white child in the South as a mark of troubled whiteness, which deconstructs the perception of white hegemony in the South. The study will be based on Harry Crews’s *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and I will discuss how these texts problematize the fact that class status marks the child protagonists as outsiders. I argue that Crews and Allison have intertwined poverty, fantasy, and sexuality to emphasize the queer status of the poor white child in the two texts and that gender accentuates the distinctive experiences of the poor male and female child. To belong to the working-class already disrupts the innocence, protection, and privilege often associated with a normative white childhood. The poor white child’s queer status results from experiences with hardships, physical and sexual abuse, rejection, alienation, and physical disability, which deconstruct the notion of privileged white innocence.

Unlike Erskine Caldwell who belongs to the middle-class, Harry Crews and Dorothy Allison come from poor rural backgrounds. Thus, Matthew Guinn challenges Caldwell for unfairly representing poor whites because of his position as an outside observer (7). John Seelye,

in his article, "Georgia Boys: The Redclay Satyrs of Erskine Caldwell and Harry Crews," claims that although Caldwell is sympathetic towards poor white farmers, he writes "condescendingly" about them, while Crews, who comes from "the other end of the long red-dirt road" is able to highlight the impact of poverty on his characters (619). Because of their first-hand experience with the South's harsh rural living conditions, Crews and Allison dismantle southern agrarian myths by providing accurate depictions of southern agricultural life. In his argument, Matthew Guinn contends that works by educated poor whites deconstruct the cultural mythologies of an agrarian utopian past which is created by early to mid-twentieth century authors. For Guinn, authors like Crews and Allison break from the "themes, patterns, and concerns of earlier twentieth-century southern fiction" (xi). Crews and Allison bring visibility to southern poor whites, representing "southern agricultural life from the neglected bottom end" (xiv) an underworld, an opposite ideology, to the "Agrarian Arcady" (Guinn 6). This opposite ideology to the moonlight myths of the plantation life overlook the traditional representation of region, place, past, and community to provide "cultural agency and autonomy" to the underprivileged (xiv). According to Seelye, Crews's fiction revisits the "old agrarian map" (616). Due to their socio-economic stability, the Agrarians could choose "their course of action" whereas Crews's poor sharecroppers' labor is a result of necessity, not of choice (qtd in Guinn 9). To Guinn, Crews provides a realistic approach to life on the farm, which is mostly brutal and harsh, and which is characterized by constant mobility. Since the effects of the sharecropping system limit the peasant's ability for economic autonomy, Crews's *A Childhood* is, he argues, an antipastoral work (13). Rather, he observes that Crews's antipastoral work sheds light on the crude experience of southern farm life, made up of material deprivation, and deep impoverishment the pastoral mode never perceives (13).

Crews's *A Childhood* intertwines the grinding poverty of rural South Georgia and the resilience and courage of rural people amid that precariousness. Referring to the contradictions embedded in American liberal democracy, Gavin Jones underlines "the powerful clash [...] between ideologies of universal equality and the persistence of unequal socio-economic barriers" (152). *A Childhood* portrays Harry, a young boy whose sense of self has been informed by people who live in a world where there is, "so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it. It was a world in which survival depended on raw courage, a courage born out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives" (40). Within the sharecropping system there were few landowners and - "survival was a day-to-day crisis" (9). In the memoir, the child, at the age of five, has already become aware of his self: "It has always seemed to me that I was not so much born into this life as I awakened to it. I remember very distinctly the awakening and the morning it happened. It was my first glimpse of myself" (47). This self-consciousness not only gives him a glimpse of his surrounding and the hardscrabble life of his people but also becomes the starting point for the setbacks he will later suffer. The people he comes from are tenant farmers in Bacon County, who are exposed to food insecurities and have to cope with diseases due to a lack of medical care. Harry's awareness of his surroundings echoes Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin's depiction of the Sand Hills in *The Making of a Southerner* as a "desolate area" whose inhabitants' "scrawny necks, angular ill-nourished frames" reveal the repercussions of extreme poverty in the South (151). As Lumpkin puts it, most of the southern white farmers carried heavy mortgages which kept them dependent and unable to move up socially (151). With the new industrial prosperity at the turn of the twentieth century, tenant farmers were caught up in an insidious peonage in which the landowner provided the equipment and seed that required "the repeated placing of a lien on

[the tenants']" following year's crop (Cook 13). Women in particular endure the effects of the impoverishment through hard work, several maternities, and domestic abuse. This harsh reality generates cyclic violence within families and becomes "an inescapable fact of life" with which Harry has to cope (Foata 6).

The experience of violence informs the child's growing consciousness and understanding of masculinity. Harry himself not only witnesses violence but he is also subject to physical and psychological abuse. He lives in a world characterized by excess: "excessive alcohol, excessive sex, excessive violence" (Bledsoe 9). In *A Childhood*, Crews sheds light on how violence represents a sign of masculinity in Bacon County. The scar on the left cheek of Ray, which occurs as a result of a fighting, is a mark of manhood for Harry, who views his father as "more powerful and stronger and special to [him]" (49). Although Harry is himself not involved in abusive acts, the perpetual presence of violence disrupts and distorts his perception of masculinity. Violence characterizes the inhabitants of Bacon County's daily life and, notwithstanding the presence of a sheriff to maintain order and peace, people themselves enforce order. The socio-economic lack in which there is "so little margin for error" (40) can easily lead people to fight and kill each other over trifles such as bird dogs or fence lines (8). Harry lives in an abusive domestic space where parents take part in disputes, oftentimes screaming, throwing and breaking things. At the early age of five, Harry is already familiar with the tension and struggles of everyday life because "being alive was like being awake in a nightmare" (108). The trauma caused by the unsafe home setting leads little Harry to view life as "Scary as a nightmare. Jest like being awake in a nightmare" (108). Also, paternal violence is not often directed toward children; however, the mother enforces corporal punishment especially, "for telling an obvious lie" (135). Child upbringing is so entangled in physical punishment that parents believe in the

necessity and efficiency of using the whip because it will “loosen a child’s hide and let him grow” (134). In the city where a lot of women’s survival mostly depends upon factory job, they particularly vent their anger towards their children whenever “the stock had been bad” by beating and slapping them (136). Violence is commonplace in most families to the extent that shooting at your wife is ironically considered a trifle. This is not the case within Harry’s family, for Ray’s first drawing and dislodging a gun at his wife splits the family and marks a turning point in the life of Harry: “Then the shotgun, the eye-rattling blast of a twelve-gauge, so unthinkably loud that it blew every other sound out of the house, leaving a silence scarier than all the noise that preceded it. The sound we had all waited for and expected for so long had finally come. It literally shattered our lives in fact and in memory” (125). As a result, the mother, together with her two sons departs for the urban space where Harry will face other challenges.

Constant displacement, as a result of extreme poverty, heightens the child’s vulnerability. Similar to the rural area, life in town has its own share of predicaments. Like other poverty-stricken families, Harry and his family often migrate in search of better opportunities. Crews even indicates that subsistence farmers “tenants out on the fringe of things,” relocate quite often “from one failed crop to a place where they thought there was hope of making a good one” (36). These farmers work so hard that when they have a meager harvest, they prefer moving to the city to find other job opportunities. In *A Childhood*, Harry, his brother Hoyet and their mother, settle in the town of Jackson so their mother can work in a factory. Harry explains this common experience during their journey to Florida: “I knew absolutely, without knowing how I knew it, that something called the Springfield Section of Jacksonville was where all of us from Bacon County went, when we had to go, when our people and our place could no longer sustain us” (128). As the passage illustrates, the child is aware of this propensity to migrate to “the

Springfield Section of Jacksonville” because it symbolizes social and economic hope, but at the same time, it becomes a source of uprooting (128). Likewise, Matthew Guinn in his essay “The Grit Émigré,” expands on the constant displacement of southern rural farmers to secure better living opportunities in the urban setting and how they struggle to adapt to the new place. He argues that these “dislocated agrarian figures” have to grapple with the anxiety of disconnecting from the familiar rural environment and relocating in an alien space and this tension oftentimes creates maladjustment (165). For the child, life in the city is another traumatic experience which brings frustration that parents cope with through alcohol and violence as a result of the inability to cope with the realities of the city. However, the forced mobility, in the form of evictions from apartments, upset the child by deepening his vulnerability in a socio-economically unstable southern environment. Because of his class status, the poor child is already at a disadvantage since he cannot have access to any legal protections from social injustices. The mother’s regular rent payment does not prevent the landlord from dislodging the tenants because he receives a better offer for his apartment. Harry is the first one to get the shocking sight of all their belongings “piled out on the sidewalk. The doors and windows were nailed shut. It was just beginning to mist, but by the time mama got home from work it was raining hard [...] Everything we owned was soaked. It was cold” (143). In a state of temporary homelessness, Harry and his brother are left unprotected. This situation gives insight into the powerless position of the poor even in a nation which proclaims equality for all. Without a father to provide for the family, the mother needs to strive daily for the survival of her offspring, leaving her son to spend most of the day by himself and gradually to become involved in delinquent activities.

Since he is caught up in a circle of social, economic and even legal insecurities, Harry turns to delinquency. The socially unstable environment leads Harry to turn to delinquency for

lack of an appropriate structure to take care of children while the parents are away for work. In *A Childhood*, Junior Lister, a six-year old boy, is presented as more mature and knowledgeable than other children his age in terms of criminality. He is extremely violent and mean and “smoked cigarettes and cursed and ran down little girls, groping them right in the street, and was afraid of nobody, not even his parents” (134). Like Harry, Junior lives in a home space where the parents “savagely” beat him “across the head and everything” and believe in the efficacy of physical punishment for the child’s growth (134, 139). The perpetual use of violence against Junior makes him develop callous manners, an abnormal behavior which serves as a form of protection and survival. Left alone, Harry and Junior give in to theft to make some money. These children live in a social environment which fosters such vices. Harry reveals how the man who often purchases stolen spare parts participates in their larceny because “how else could children our age, a couple of six-year-olds, get so much copper? [...] He just beamed when we came in with his copper. He’d pay us knocking down the price he would have had to pay anybody but children, which we knew – and happily send us on our way” (138). Thus, Crews gives some insight into children’s exploitation by adults who can “knock down” the price of stolen items because the man can get the items cheaper from children (138). While child delinquency in the South results from socio-economic needs, child labor serves as an antidote to that situation. After the police nearly catch both children, Harry finds a cleaning job in a butcher’s store and later at the Jacksonville *Journal*, selling newspapers (143).

Physical disability in a state of poverty not only emphasizes the child’s status as an outsider from cultural ideals of normative whiteness but also limits any prospect for a future or a better future for the child. In her groundbreaking work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) Alison Kafer explains that the question of disability needs to be perceived in terms of socio-cultural

attitudes which associate “normalcy and deviance [with] particular minds and bodies” and since the absence of disability implies a future full of opportunities, the figure of a disabled child represents an “undesired future” (Kafer 2, 6). In this regard, Crews’s portrayal of the physically impaired child highlights the cultural attitudes towards disabled bodies and the anxieties, rejection, and isolation that the disabled child experiences. The fact that the beginning of Harry’s “conscious life” is characterized by a set of accidents foreshadows the dire living conditions he will experience later (Foata 5). One night, Harry is taken by a high fever which provokes infantile paralysis, a condition whereby the “ligaments were slowly drawing [...] heels closer and closer to the cheeks of ... buttocks” (77). Harry’s disability becomes a matter of curiosity for relatives, neighbors, and strangers from neighboring farms who come to “stare at my rigid legs” (78). He “felt how lonely and savage it was to be a freak” (79). Being perceived as a “freak” accentuates the “painful vulnerability [and] inability to hide [once] deformities from the world” and sets him apart as an “abnormality” (Jeffrey 10). As Kafer aptly points out, Harry’s “future is written on [his] body” (1) because disability is often considered “a sign of no future, or at least of no good future,” which is a supposedly bleak, uncertain future, characterized by alienation, resentment and bitterness (3). Disability becomes a source of anguish for Harry who feels deeply estranged when he describes how he felt: “as a child I got the bottom of what it means to be lost, what it means to be rejected by everybody[...] and everything you ever thought would save you” (83). Harry remains for weeks in a situation in which no one could identify the root of the disease or cure it.

Crews presents the child’s sickness as an unfathomable condition since country doctors, passing gypsies with herbal medications, a faith healer using the Scriptures and a tongue-speaking uncle all prove inefficient. Harry is a “crip,” to use Kafer’s term, someone whose



disabled body “differ[s] from the unmarked norm” which is the able body (17). Harry’s body is queer; that is, it challenges the boundaries of “normalcy and deviance,” a physical state which spurs reactions ranging from “relentless staring [to] a turning away to difference, a refusal to see” (Kafer15). Building on queer theory, Kafer identifies crip category as a “contested” category and fluid “terrain” and she sees the possibility of alliances between crip and queer to “trouble such identification” (16-17). She argues that “I’m calling attention to these shifting positions not to fix them in place, but to get them moving on the questions that face those of us committed to and invested in such positions” (17–18). Here, the child’s crip and queer body is connected to the notion of transgressive identity. The crip and queer child reveals the position of the poor white that questions the cultural ideal of the normal body and normal whiteness. A fellow outcast, Auntie, the old black woman living on the farm is a source of comfort who helps Harry transcend his “abnormal” state through her wisdom, and makes him realize that “in this world, there was much more to worry about than merely being crippled” (83). Auntie falls into the stereotype of the black mammy figure that nurses and takes care of her owners’ children. Like Harry (an outsider by class), Auntie holds the status of an outsider because of her race and she can best grasp the anxieties, fear, and alienation of the child. Harry then devises a strategy that allows him to cope with the mishaps he has to endure.

In front of all these setbacks, inventing stories becomes a way for the five-year old boy to alleviate the hardship of his daily life and as he puts it “making up stories” is a way to “understand the way we [live] but also a defense against it” (57). The Sears and Roebuck catalogue enable the child with his playmate Willalee Bookatee, to “spin a web of fantasy” that makes life more bearable for them (54). Harry becomes fascinated with the people in the catalogue that are physically perfect and beautiful with faces showing happiness, something

which sharply contrasted with the physical deformities and psychological scars of the people around him. In fact, “[n]early everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half chewed, and eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn’t have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks” (54). As Crews shows, deformity is the norm here and it undercuts the ideals of normative middle-class whiteness. The grotesque appearances described emphasize the deep impact of poverty on the body. In this regard, Jones contends that poverty returns “ultimately to the body as the site that bears the marks, the damage, of being poor” (3). No wonder, the Sears and Roebuck catalogue allows Harry to dream about and live in a different world. Fantasizing about the catalogue’s characters is a way for Harry to make sense of his world dominated by violence as a result of material and economic want. Out of the “Wish Book,” as the catalogue is referred to in the area, Harry ironically creates stories of “feuds of every kind . . . maimings, and all the other vicious happenings of the world” (57). Harry and his playmate invent relationships replete with family feuds about the catalogue characters. They make up a story around “the man in his middle years, dressed in a hunting jacket and wading boots” who supposedly disapproves of the love affair between a pretty young woman identified as his daughter and a young man on another page (55). Because of the father’s discontent, as their story goes, he will put an end to all that “messaging around” with the guns and knives that were on display in different parts of the catalogue (56). To add more interest to their fantasy, they make the young woman an accomplice in her father’s attempt to kill her lover. Harry’s fantasies conflate with his reality of violence because they are constructed through the lens of his daily experiences. Zack Zipes captures this idea when he explains in his article “Why Fantasy Matters Too Much” that “[o]ur fantasy and the fantasies that we conceive have become desperate, because they are outstripped by real existing

conditions that instrumentalize them at every waking second of our day” (2). Fantasy for the child is not a space which enables him to make better sense of his reality but it is so “outstripped by real existing conditions” that his violent reality and fantasy are intermingled. Notwithstanding the happy and able-bodied people the catalogue displays, Harry realizes that all this is a lie “that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world” (54).

Moreover, sexuality fashions the child’s gender identity in such a way that Harry’s exposure to sexual practices is seen as normal in his environment. In *A Childhood*, Crews represents sexuality as an experimental phenomenon. Jeffrey Weeks notes that “sexuality is as much about words, images, ritual and fantasy as it is about the body: the way we think about sex fashions the way we live it” (Weeks 3). To Weeks, the cultural conception of sexuality (imagined and practical) informs the ways we respond to it. For the child, precocious sexuality is part of his identity formation in a cultural space where he has frequently been exposed to the “images” and “ritual” of animal copulation. As early as age five, he is already well accustomed to all the animal couplings around him because “All of us grew in Bacon County surrounded by sexual couplings of every kind. Nobody ever tried to keep such matters from us” (105). Hoyet, his brother, would provide his sexual education and even force him to have sexual intercourse with the little Lottie Mae. As novices, both children could not implement Hoyet’s instructions, “trembling [and] naked as babies,” and Lottie Mae does not “know any more about [sex] than [the child] did” (106). Later, Harry as a teen could willingly experiment with Hoyet’s sexual education. Ironically, Crews starkly juxtaposes religion with sexuality as “the mystery of little girls stood at dead even with the mystery of God” (167). Just after church service at night, Harry puts into practice his brother’s lessons about sexual interaction with a girl “down on the dark

back porch of the church, delirious, full of God and raging” (169). The delirium refers to the sexual excitement and pleasure the girl might have felt but at the same time the “raging” delineates her frustration over being sexually abused. This brings about the issue of forced sexual interaction since the girl starts “crying because not only had I ripped her little cotton drawers, but I had thrown them in the yard and she didn’t know what she was going to tell her mama” (169). Crews highlights how little Harry’s immediate environment makes his involvement in sexual activities inevitable. *A Childhood* thus illuminates on how socio-economic need exposes the white child to a number of experiences that distort “innocence” and thus makes her queer. While Crews’s text focuses on the experiences of a poor white boy, Allison’s work probes into the figure of a poor white girl that questions the concept of child innocence and socio-economic privileges associated with whiteness. *Bastard out of Carolina* lays bare how being a poor female child heightens the experience of poverty through the commodification of her body. In other words, Allison’s text lends insight into the “feminization of poverty” (Jones xv).

Set in Greenville, South Carolina, *Bastard Out of Carolina* chronicles the predicaments of a white child, specifically Ruth Anne Boatwright, here referred to as Bone. Bone grew up in a working-class family and suffers physical and sexual abuses from her stepfather. Because she was “born on the wrong side of the porch” (she is white “trash”), Bone endures hardships within and outside her family (54). The term “trash” designates white people living in poverty and encompasses “a set of stereotypes and myths related to [their] social behaviors, intelligence, prejudices and gender roles” (Newitz and Wray 7). In *Bastard*, the word “trash” is often used to refer to Bone and her family’s social status and the stigma often attached to the poor white figure since “trash” means “social waste and detritus” (Wray and Newitz 4). As “the most visible and clearly marked form of whiteness,” “white trash” is a term which designates whites who live in

economic and social need because they do not meet the social standards of success typical of American society and are therefore relegated to the margins (Wray and Newitz 4). Despite the derogatory connotation associated with “trash,” Allison reclaims the term in honorific sense, a term she adopts as part of her heritage as a white working-class southerner. As she herself argues, she uses “trash” “to raise the issue of who the term glorifies as well as who it disdains” (xvi).

The book opens with details of Bone's birth that occurred under unusual circumstances. Bone's fifteen-year-old mother, Anney, gives birth to her after being seriously injured in a car accident and remains unconscious at the hospital for three days. Because of Anney's unconscious state after the child's birth and her status as a single mother, Bone's birth certificate is issued with the word “ILLEGITIMATE” stamped across the bottom in large red letters. Bone's status as white trash compounds her legal “illegitimacy” because there is no father to “legitimate” her status. Right from her birth, Bone's position as an illegitimate child is a way to deny her any legal recognition and even visibility. Bone's queerness starts from birth because the absence of a paternal figure makes her legally “illegitimate.” Anney endeavors to clear the mark of bastardy on her daughter's birth certificate by her many trips to the courthouse but they all remain unsuccessful: “Across the bottom in oversized red-inked block letters it read ILLEGITIMATE” (Allison 7). In her analysis of the law's treatment of children with an unknown father, Duck observes that according to the 1952 Legal Code of South Carolina law, a child is legitimate if “born of a legal marriage, a common-law marriage, or a void marriage entered into in good faith. . . . If the parents of an illegitimate child subsequently marry, the child of that union becomes legitimate” (54). For Duck, the legal system disempowers mothers and children, for only the presence of the father can confer legitimacy to a child (55). In her attempt to ward off the

“indelible shame of illegitimacy,” Anney ends up marrying Glen Walden, who can confer legitimacy to her daughter (Duck 54). Ironically, this marriage does not grant Bone the sought-after “legitimacy” because the father’s presence instead causes devastation in the family. The presence of a father figure rips Bone of her “innocence” because he physically and sexually abuses her. While sexuality for Harry is experimental, Allison depicts a protagonist whose body has been objectified, used, and debased. Glen Walden’s incestuous practices unsettle Bone. Through Glen’s attempts to control Bone’s body and inhibit her subjectivity, he becomes the agent of Bone’s sexual and psychological destabilization. At the early age of five, Bone’s childhood “had [already] gone with the child she had been” (307). Glen sexually takes advantage of Bone while they have been waiting in the car for Anney to give birth to the baby at the hospital. In her description of what happens to her, Bone is puzzled, confused, and helpless while she is vaguely aware of what is going on: “I knew what it was under his hand. I’d seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary and hard. . . . He grunted, squeezed my thighs between his arm and legs. His chin pressed down on my head and his hips pushed up at the same time. He was hurting me, hurting me!” (47). Bone is a fragile and scary target caught up by a predator in a maze where she could not find an outlet. Bone’s first and precocious experience of sexuality occurs so violently and painfully that she is “hurting.” The child has seen her cousins shake their “things” which has already been a source of fear and confusion for her. Being a subject of molestation at an early age strips the child of her innocence and emphasizes her vulnerability in front of the stepfather who should provide protection. In fact, Glen is unable to live up to the standards of a family male provider. He goes through a number of unimpressive odd jobs, which brings instability to the family because they have to move from place to place to stay away from bill collectors. His lack of self-esteem is

deepened by his inability to secure a stable employment which drives him to vent his frustration on Bone. As a consequence, Glen constantly strikes Bone out to the extent that there are visible marks of her abuses: “He flipped my skirt up over my head and jammed it into that hand. I heard the sound of the belt swinging up, a song in the air, a high-pitched terrible sound. It hit me and I screamed” (106). Home, a place that is supposedly a haven of safety becomes a space of violence, danger, and psychological trauma. When Bone is removed from her home to find protection at aunt Alma’s place, she is beaten and brutally raped by Glen: “He reared up, supporting his weight on my shoulder while his hips drove his sex into me like a sword...I felt like he was tearing me apart, my ass slapping against the floor with every thrust, burning and tearing and bruising” (285). Allison creates a situation whereby “incest and illegitimacy” are intertwined to elicit Bone’s traumatic experience (Duck 56). Then, Bone learns the language of shame.

Bone is trapped in a cycle of shame which informs her emotional development and behavior and sets her apart as a non-normative child. Shame is entangled with her young self as a result of Glen’s ill-treatment on the one hand and of southern negative construction of the poor white on the other hand. J. Brooks Bouson argues that shame can be experienced individually and culturally and in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, shame is intricately linked to the formation of “white trash identity” in the South (104). Allison highlights the way poor whites in the South have been culturally constructed as “degenerate and socially stigmatized Other ” (Bouson 105). To Bouson, America represents a shame-phobic society in which those who fail to live up to “the social standards of success are made to feel inferior, deficient or both” (101). Living in such a cultural environment predisposes Bone to develop feelings of shame which make her unable to articulate her predicament: “I did not know how to tell anyone how I felt, what scared me and

shamed me and still made me stand, unmoving and desperate, while he rubbed against me and ground his face into my neck. I could not tell Mama. I would not have known how to explain why I stood there and let him touch me.... it was something like sex, something powerful and frightening that he wanted badly and I did not understand at all“ (108- 9). As Bone shows it, she lacks the appropriate language to explain what is going on and resorts to silence as a form of protection. Already, Bone develops feelings of inadequacy and anger, which exacerbates her psychological trauma. As a child with limited agency, the shame-guilt sentiment inhibits her developing subjectivity by crippling her psychologically. She fears showing the bruises on her body as if they are evidence of crimes she has committed (113). Also, Glen’s denial of the truth in front of Anney places Bone in a powerless position as child. The sentiment of shame reinforces Bone’s lack of self-esteem and increases her self-loathing; especially when she sees herself in her stepfather’s eyes, she just wants to disappear, be “already dead, cold and gone” (209). The lack of self-esteem is an aspect of shame that Leon Wurmser refers to as “*the affect of contempt* directed against the self” because Bone thinks she has failed her mother’s expectations (67). She is often troubled, ashamed to tell about Glen’s behavior and even blames herself for the physical and sexual abuses she endures: “It was my fault, all my fault. I had ruined everything” (250). In front of her unspeakable ordeal, Bone finds sustenance in sexual fantasies.

Sexual fantasy in the form of masochism provides Bone the means to sustain herself in the disturbing reality with which she is confronted. Through masochistic fantasies, Bone exerts her agency to surmount her passive suffering and gains a sense of secret satisfaction. By initiating sexual fantasy in her text, Allison provides a complex situation whereby she shows that Bone’s “auto-eroticism” is intricately connected with sexual abuse” (Horeck 48). In her analysis,



Judith Herman acknowledges that abuses inform a child's "states of consciousness" and drive her to develop abilities which can be both creative and harmful. She further asserts that abuses

[foster] the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold. These altered states of consciousness permit the elaboration of a prodigious array of symptoms, both somatic and psychological. And these symptoms simultaneously conceal and reveal their origins (96).

While fantasies might foster "the development of abnormal states of consciousness" (Herman 96), in this context, the child's concern with her body might serve, as Laurie Vickory writes, as her only "means of comfort," which provides her stability and psychological balance and enables her to redefine her identity (Vickroy 41). As Bone herself voices: "It was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen. Only there that I had any pride. I loved those fantasies even though I was sure they were a terrible thing. They had to be; they were self-centered and they made me have shuddering orgasms. There was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery" (113). Since Allison makes Bone find sexual pleasure in reenacting Glen's violation of her body, the fantasies enable her to move from the position of "mastered 'object' to mastering 'narrative subject'" (Lin 12). In her fantasies, not only does Bone feel loved by the invisible onlookers but this desire for love, affection grows into masochistic inclinations: "I hugged myself tightly to the tree and rocked my hips against the indifferent trunk. I imagined I was tied to the branches above and below me. Someone had beaten me with dry sticks and put their hands in my clothes. Someone, someone, I imagined. Someone had tied me high up in the tree, gagged me and left me to starve to death while the blackbirds pecked at my ears" (176). Here, physical suffering such as being "tied," "gagged," and "beaten" highlights the complexity of the child's sexual consciousness. This image of Bone being "tied high up in the tree" refers to southern lynching

ritual conducted against African American victims. Allison uses the image of lynching (racial crossing) as a strategy to bring out the child's powerless position as a poor in a cultural environment which maintains social inequality. Bone experiences sexual development as the conflation of "pain [and] pleasure, anxiety [and] affirmation, identity crisis [and] stability of self" (Weeks 3). Sexual fantasy is freeing for Bone who can create a space her victimizer can neither control nor manipulate. Although Bone seems to have been empowered by her masochistic fantasies and regained self-esteem, she still cannot ward off sentiments of shame: "I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place" (113).

Masturbation stresses the importance of the child's personal autonomy and ability to control her body. Through masturbation, the child is gradually able to construct her subjectivity, thus freeing herself from bodily violation. Reese, Bone's sister constantly masturbates herself not out of frustration and rejection but as a form of self-pleasure. Bone one day finds out that Reese "was masturbating almost as often as I was [...] her legs and arms thrown wide [...] her body taut and curved away from me," deeply enjoying what she was doing (174). Masturbation becomes part of Bone's strategy to fight back in the absence of any familial, social, or legal structure to protect her. Through masturbation, Bone reverses the power dynamics because she can defy and "stare back" at Glen who beats her, but also, auto-eroticism serves as a means whereby Bone exerts some agency (112). One day at Aunt Raylene's house, Bone uses a hook and a chain as a masturbating tool. She holds the chain between her legs, "rubbed it against [her] skin...I used the lock I had found on the riverbank to fasten the chain around my hips.... It was safe...What I really was could not be touched" (193). The child's body becomes inaccessible to

Glen because the chain provides her safety and protection. More importantly, not only her body is inviolable but “what [she] really” is, her personhood, her internal self is incorruptible, and cannot “be touched.” Fantasy for Bone is the capacity to alter the disturbing material reality into a more livable reality and to resist the socio-economic oppression to which she is subject. By presenting Bone’s sexual development through masochism and masturbation, sexuality is represented in its troubling, disruptive aspects, transgressing what is considered “normal” sexuality. On this point, Weeks observes that sexuality “exists to disrupt order, and [...] disruption and transgression are keys to pleasure” (Weeks 216). While Allison empowers the child through transgressive sexuality, she creates another form of troubled whiteness through the character of Shannon Pearl.

Shannon symbolizes the “uncanny figure of absolute whiteness” which dismantles the southern construction of the white innocent child (Duval 133). Like Bone, Shannon’s status as an outsider brings them close to each other. Allison depicts Shannon in repulsive ways; her “white skin, white hair, and pale pink eyes of an albino” is the very source of mockery on the part of other children that often resort to intimidations (155). Ironically, Shannon’s whiteness emphasizes “an almost transcendent ugliness” (Duval 133) that drives Bone to regard her with “awe to disgust” (155). The “transcendent ugliness” of Shannon instead represents the frustration, internal outrage and resentment of Bone in a system which devalues and cheapens her due to her class status. Shannon’s ugliness becomes an important corrective to the fantasy of the values associated with southern definition of whiteness. Commenting on the role of Shannon, Ying-Chiao Lin observes that, “Shannon is Bone’s double, a part of her self that got split off from her, an incarnation of the dynamics of her inner rage and humiliation, her ‘dark side’” (12). Admittedly, both Shannon and Bone experience rejection, humiliation and even a deep rage that

Shannon externalizes in the form of “burning pink and hot” in her eyes (161). Shannon embodies the antithesis of the “innocent” and angel-like gentle child that is resentful, spiteful, entertaining hatred towards “everyone who had ever hurt her, and spent most of her time brooding on punishments either she or God would visit on them” (157- 158). Also, both delight in the horror stories which Shannon tells about mutilated children and dismembered children. As Horeck explains, such an interest in destruction reflects the “pain of damaged children” (54). Bone and Shannon are psychologically “damaged” by the rejection inflicted upon them. The horror stories translate the depth of the “pain” these children endure and symbolize the appalling realities – sexual violence, physical abuse, class bias, mockery - they have to face constantly.

Notwithstanding their shared fate that brings them together, Shannon’s and Bone’s internal outrage becomes more evident during one of their disputes when Shannon overtly refers to Bone and her family as “trash” and “dirty” (171). Shannon’s boiling rage gets physically and symbolically burnt when she is accidentally caught up in fire while adding fuel to the charcoal grill during a family picnic: “Shannon didn’t even scream [. . .] her mouth was wide open, and she just breathed the flames in. Her glasses went opaque, her eyes vanished, and all around her skull her fine hair stood up in a crown of burning glory. Her dress whooshed and billowed into orange-yellow smoky flames [. . .] I saw Shannon Pearl disappear from this world” (201). Although it is an accident, Shannon seems to be a willing participant in her own death, for she neither fights the fire nor screams but she just welcomes, “breathed the flames” as if she has to surrender in a “crown of burning glory” (201). Like the angel-like Eva (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s character) who must die because she does not belong to earth, the uncanny Shannon must die to free Bone from being consumed by shame, rage, and frustration. Shannon’s tragedy symbolizes the social exclusion or social “death” of the child who is socially stigmatized because of her class category.

Allison clearly delineates the heightened impact of class in the South by exposing how Bone's experience as a poor white child is marked by class difference. Since whiteness is often associated with privilege, the fact of being categorized as a poor white is perceived as a social and economic anomaly. In discussing class as vital to queer representation, Lisa Henderson argues that "The practice of class recognition [...] matters in the formation of selves and solidarity in ways that an analytic emphasis on redistribution alone cannot capture" (72). Bone describes the constant need for food that makes Bone's hunger "raw [...] terrible" and causes her excruciating pain (98). This hunger here implies Bone and her family's yearning for social respectability which they do not obtain. Right from the onset of *Bastard*, Bone's mother Anne attempts to protect her daughters from being disgraced and she "hated to be called trash, hated the memory" of being looked at as if "she was a rock on the ground," something which constantly reminds her of their subaltern position (3). No wonder Bone emulates that fear of social stigma and endures condescension when she overhears the Waddells refer to her family as "nigger trash," a term which delineates the poor white's position at the intersection between race and class. The poor white is raced black because being poor is a feature often attributed to blacks in the South (102). Glen's brothers Daryl and James identify Glen with "trash" because he has married into a working-class family. Socially otherized, Bone describes herself as a "bowl of hatred, boiling back and thick behind my eyes" (252). Bone defies this class distinction when she robs and destroys the Woolworth's candy store, a symbol of the culture that views her as Other, and as trash. Bone retaliates after she and her mother have been humiliated and banned from the candy store for shoplifting. She asks her cousin Grey to help her carry out her plan. Bone climbs to the rooftop, enters the store and with a hook she demolishes the glass cases that contain merchandises. Bone steals nothing in the store but she encourages a group of poor men to go and

take every item from the Woolworth's store. Through her action, Bone attempts to destroy the "emblems of [the middle class] superiority with the tools of the subterranean" and then protest against the social hierarchy which keeps the poor poorer and makes the rich richer (Guinn 25). Bone's act contributes to demonstrate that "class subjectivity" is key to establishing a "working-class status into a discrete, identitarian category in possession of its own idioms, its own traumas, its own heroes, and its own conditions of membership" (99).

While Glen represents a source of danger for Bone, Anney does not provide the full support and protection her daughter needs. Allison complicates the mother-daughter relationship that is not as simply presented as Anney's lack of responsibility and empathy towards her daughter. However, Anney's presence/absence exposes Bone to Glen. Right from the start, Anney remains unconscious even at her daughter's birth. Her unconscious state shows the emotional aloofness towards her daughter which amplifies when Glen often abuses Bone. Anney's disregard for her daughter seems like a kind of "tacit acquiescence and even complicity" in Bone's situation (Lin 14). Anney is not depicted as a totally insensitive and uncaring mother rather; she at times expresses affection and concern to her daughters: "You are my pride... You and your sister are all I really have, all I ever will have" (94). Anney is an ambivalent woman, torn between the fears of losing her husband while she strives to protect her daughters. To Lin, the fact that Anney still clings to Glen mirrors the pursuit of "her own legitimacy," and middle class status in order to rid herself of the stigma of trash (16). In this regard, Lin contends that Anney's maternal love is a "narcissistic self-love" which she equates with a "complicit form of abuse" (16). While Lin views Anney's maternal love as self-serving, I argue that her quest for social acceptability is intended to protect her daughters from being socially otherized and give them access to normative middle class whiteness.

The mother's crisis of class identity results in her passivity in front of Bone's abuse. When aunt Raylene finds out the wounds on Bone's body, Anney cannot explain what is going on : "Oh God, Raylene. I'm so ashamed, I couldn't stop him, and then [. . .] I don't know' [. . .] Oh God. Raylene, I love him. I know you'll hate me. Sometimes I hate myself, but I love him. I love him" (246). The mother strikes a final blow to her daughter during the penultimate rape scene when Anney forsakes Bone for Glen. Since Anney fails to "see" Glen's violation of Bone, Allison makes Anney witness her daughter being raped and assaulted by Glen. At first, Anney saves her daughter from the aggressor but when Glen asks for forgiveness, Anney rather chooses him. Feeling betrayed and rejected by her mother, Bone becomes devastated, destabilized, hollowed: "I looked up into white sky going gray. The first stars would come out as the sky darkened. I wanted to see that, the darkness and the stars. I heard a roar far off, a wave of night and despair waiting for me, and followed it out into the darkness" (291). Anney's act of abandonment gives insight into "the acute crisis of individual worth plaguing the contemporary southerner" (Benson 153). Even Anney's final attempt to regain Bone's love by providing her with an "unmarked, unstamped" birth certificate proves unsuccessful (309). During Anney's visit, Bone remains insensitive, emotionless, cold, and barely aware of her mother's presence because she has "lost [her] mama. She was a stranger, and I was so old my insides had turned to dust and stone" (306). On the surface, Anney prefers her husband to the welfare of her daughter; nevertheless, she comes back with a blank birth certificate for Bone, to give her daughter a "blank," new identity which clears the trashiness associated with illegitimacy. I hold that Bone experiences a rebirth with a new birth certificate, which opens up a prospective for remaking a new identity patterned on her lesbian aunt's (Raylene) lifestyle.

Bone finds in Aunt Raylene a surrogate mother after she has “lost” Anney. Bone’s stay with her aunt enables her to gradually regain self-esteem. Raylene has been encouraging Bone and sees in her the capacity to “get out there and do things” when Bone was still with her parents (182). Aunt Raylene lives by the riverside where refuse collects, and which she sells. In joining her aunt who lives by the edge of the town and makes a living by selling waste, Bone inscribes her class and queer identity. Bone’s sexual fantasies are geared towards violence sexually which puzzles and shames her, but she also finds pleasure in masturbation. The masochistic and masturbation fantasies mark her as sexually deviant and othered. Contrary to her relationship with her mother, Bone’s relationship with Aunt Raylene is based upon affection and trust which helps her accept Anney’s choice because, like Raylene said, maybe it is the way “the world goes, the way hearts get broken all the time” (307). Not only does Bone come to understand her mother but she can also channel her anger and grief towards the perspective of a new life before her. Bone’s relationship with her aunt becomes crucial in her process of growth, for Bone is able to construct her future without denying her background of “illegitimacy,” incest, and trashiness; she knows who she was going to be “someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (309). Bone is going to reconstruct a new Boatwright woman free of the social stigma which has plagued her.

In *A Childhood* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Crews and Allison use child figures to question the class and sexual normativity of the South and “explore identities that fall outside the normative, white, heterosexual matrix” (Sandell 218). Although both Ray and Bone are white, their lower-class status deprives them of innocence because of “experience”: violence, physical and sexual abuse, theft, child labor, and physical impairment (Stockton 32). Ray’s sexuality grows out of education and then as an expression of masculinity whereas Bone is forced into



sexual interaction and turns to sexual fantasy (masochism) and masturbation for empowerment. Bone's connection with aunt Raylene provides her the means to survive the rejection, abuses, and shame she has experienced and redefine a new queer identity. The experiences of Ray and Bone echo the untold stories of the southern working-class whose behaviors, in particular sexual behavior subverts the white middle-class innocent normativity.

### Chapter Three: The Pickaninny

This chapter explores the complexities of black identity in the Jim Crow South through the lens of the child of color in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta*. In these texts, Wright and Holland establish a connection between race and childhood and give insight into how southern conception of race affects black boyhood and girlhood in specific ways. As Levander best encapsulates, the idea of the child "operates as a powerful vehicle for establishing logic of racial difference that links slavery to black bodies and liberty to white ones in order to found the nation and then reinforce its organizing racial ideals" (33). Since racial hierarchy serves as a foundational principle of the American nation through the image of the child, I argue that race figures as the root of "conflict [...] destiny, and difference" that shapes the growing consciousness of the child of color in Wright's and Holland's works (Tolentino 28). In exploring the existing black-white binary in American childhood during the nineteenth century, Robin Bernstein makes the case that fiction such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* already polarizes childhood through the figures of Eva, who epitomizes the angelic white child, and Topsy, the black child that embodies the "pickaninny," which is "an imagined dehumanized black juvenile" (16). While this contrasting presentation robs the child of color of innocence and consequently of childhood, Bernstein remarks that the horrors of slavery have distorted Topsy's innocence and rendered her wicked, therefore deconstructing the black child's lack of innocence. In her book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe illuminates how the experiences after slavery still reverberate in black lives, making a case for "the past that is not yet past" but a past which is still present through different forms (62). According to Sharpe, the perpetual criminalization of the black child erases black childhood in the American setting because, the black child "inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother" (15).

Drawing from Bernstein's "pickaninny," Stockton's child queered by color, and Sharpe's theorization of the black child's "non/being," I argue that because hardship and abuse has characterized and deprived the child of color of the "normative" protection of innocence, the abuse reinforces the black child's vulnerability and need for protection, hence deepening its "innocence of consent" in the Jim Crow South (Stockton 33). Although Wright's and Holland's texts are set in the twentieth century, black lives in "the wake" are shaped by "the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding," which is translated through Jim Crow system (white terror, lynching) and still has an impact on black childhood and cut adulthood short (Sharpe 13 – 14). Since the concept of American childhood implies whiteness and middle-class privileges, color and class sets the black child as an outsider, thus making her a non-normative child. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta* underscore the deep racial divide typical of the U.S. South during the early twentieth century and probe into the painful and violent experiences of blacks embedded in southern culture at that period. In these texts, Wright and Holland investigate how black skin has been perceived as a marker for racial debasement and the black body as a non-normative body upon which wounding is enacted. Also, drawing a connection between skin and cloth, Stockton, in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, examines the ways in which the "stigma attached to certain clothes [is] akin to the stigma of colored skin" in relation to the categories of debasement and shame (6). While I concur with Stockton's analysis, I argue that the gender dimension plays an important part in the way the stigma of colored skin is experienced in both texts. The idea of the child is constructed in such a way that boyhood and girlhood intersects with race and exacerbates experiences of poverty, violence and racism. In this respect, Suzanne Jones argues

that “[r]acism causes black children to lose their innocence much earlier than most white children” because children of color lack the protection associated with normative childhood (19).

The racialization of the colored skin stems from a structure that seeks to deprive certain groups of the right to certain social and economic privileges. In *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale examines how white supremacy took hold in the United States between 1890 and 1940 and how sets of practices and images have been forged in the South to reestablish racial hierarchy after Reconstruction. Hale affirms that the South has been a place of contradictions, “both founding family and military foe, both too black and more white, both less fragmented and more segregated, both a place apart, outside the flow of time and an essential part of the national whole” (3- 4). The Civil War necessitated the reconfiguration of the nation on new grounds. Thus, racial categorization served as the new foundational principle upon which the nation is reconstructed, granting whites citizenship and denying people of color privileges attached to citizenship. In Wright’s and Holland’s texts, the representation of black childhood accordingly sheds light on people of color’s disenfranchisement in the Jim Crow South. In *Race in the American South* by David Brown and Clive Webb, Jim Crow is described as “a politically strategic construction that reinforced the power of white patriarchy” and then regulated race and class relations in the South (180). Although the discourse of racial division has been a nationwide constructed ideology, the South successfully used race as a “structure of [class] exploitation” (Young 696).

Wright’s *Black Boy* depicts a black male child figure whose experience of racial poverty deepened by racial segregation in the South deprived him of innocence, thus queering him against the “normative” experience of a child culturally associated with a “holy ignorance” of hard realities, lack of hardship, and middle class protection. This “normative” child experience is

a myth constructed into a “racialized innocence designed specifically to register the ever-present anxiety of whiteness” (Henninger 603). Thus, the child-embodied racial innocence sheds light on the contradictions inherent in the principles of freedom dear to America while at the same time people of color have limited opportunities at the dawn of the twentieth century. Set in the rural and urban South, *Black Boy* portrays the first decades of the twentieth century in which disenfranchisement and racial segregation became part of the social norms. Richard has to grapple with socio-economic hardships which eventually disrupts his family (the father deserts the family). Childhood for Richard is a space of terror and deep anxiety. Richard is caught up in a pattern of alienation, loneliness, rejection and perpetual violence which forge his awakening self-consciousness. Thus, Richard falls victim and by the same token uses violence as one of the tactics through which he can cope with the “precarious [and] unstable nature of the ‘normal’” world (Scruggs 130).

*Black Boy* opens with a vivid scene of violence perpetrated by Richard, a scene which gives insight into the complex nature of the child’s struggle with his family and the southern society. At the age of four, Richard has already developed violent tendencies which mark him as a non-normative child. One morning, Richard thought of throwing something into the fire and watching it burn as a kind of game but notwithstanding the warnings and prohibition to touch the curtains, he ends up “pull[ing] several straws from the broom and held them to the fire until they blazed; I rushed to the window and brought the flame in touch with the hems of the curtains” (4). Richard’s actions resonate with a version of Stockton’s child queered by aggressiveness. The curtain burning scene highlights Richard’s aggressive impulse that he is able to translate into action. Sidonie Ann Smith in her essay “‘Black Boy’: The Creative Impulse as Rebellion” sees this act as an expression of rebellion against his environment which demands servility of him

because he is black (124). Through Richard's violent behavior, Wright demonstrates the restrictiveness that "white" as an icon and color symbolizes for the black subject and, in this case, on the child's developing self. The child's aggressive inclination is also illustrated when he kills a kitten whose noise has been disturbing his father's sleep. Richard's act is another strategy for him to defy not only parental authority but also to find a way to resist the Jim Crow system which keeps in check his aspirations, desires, and dreams as a black youth. Richard takes his father's command literally; he "found a piece of rope, made a noose, slipped it about the kitten's neck, pulled it over a nail, then jerked the animal clear of the ground. It gasped, slobbered, spun, doubled, clawed the air frantically; finally its mouth gaped and its pink-white tongue shot out stiffly" (11). Richard's killing of the cat denotes that innocence is not part of his reality. Killing the cat represents a way for him to exert his power, a form of agency that, as a child and as a person of color, he is denied in the South.

The domestic space is no safe haven for Richard; he is exposed to constant physical and verbal abuse. The family represents the primary site of socialization and as such attempts to instill in their children racial codes of conducts considered "appropriate" in the South. These racial practices require blacks to accept their low socio-economic status and not seek any opportunities equal to that of whites. In Wright's text, corporeal punishment is a form of discipline parents often apply on a child. After Richard has burned the curtains that set the house on fire, Ella, his mother, beats him so hard that he "lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still ... But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me" (7). Richard's "near-death experience" as Hinds puts it, represents the starting point of a series of physical and verbal

abuses he would endure (Hinds 696). Although Ella intends to discipline her son, her violent punishment echoes, the deep anxiety, tension and limitations she experiences in the South but it is also a way to protect Richard from the segregationist world. Ralph Ellison explains the double-edged impact of black parents in their quest to protect their progeny.

It is to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undifferentiated mass of his people into the unknown, symbolized in its most abstract form by insanity, and most concretely by lynching; and to protect him from those unknown forces within himself which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have. Rather than throw himself against the charged wires of his prison, he annihilates the impulses within him. (qtd in Smith 127)

Wright's text emphasizes how the black family in their urge to protect the child from both internal ("that social and human equality" denied him in the Jim Crow South) and external forces (the segregationist system expressed in the form of lynching), comes to annihilate the child's will to assert himself. In using repressive means to subordinate the child, the black family unconsciously works as agents of the racist apparatus that "perpetuate the southern legacy of inculcating fear and docility among African Americans" (Makombe 295). In this context however, Richard's relatives have failed to "break" him into the docile black child who rather uses open resistance to assert himself. As a result, Richard defies his uncles and aunts, who often resort to physical punishment in an attempt to subdue his "rebellious" personality. One morning, Richard openly confronts Uncle Tom when the latter thinks Richard gives him the wrong time. Uncle Tom decides to "correct" and teach him good manners for what he considers impudence and disrespect from Richard. When Richard sees his uncle tear "a long, young, green switch from the elm tree" (158), he determines to fight and threaten Uncle Tom with a razor: "'I've got a razor in each hand!' I warned in a low, charged voice. 'If you touch me, I'll cut you! Maybe I'll get cut too, but I'll cut you, so help me God!' [... ] I held a sharp blue edge of steel tightly

between the thumb and forefinger of each fist” (159). By squarely confronting Uncle Tom, Richard to some extent imposes his own norms on his relatives and is thus able to free himself from their oppressive manners: “I knew I conquered him, had rid myself of him mentally and emotionally” (160). The fact that the child as a person of color opposes any limitations to his self-fulfillment in a repressive environment alienates him from his family.

Richard suffers systemic violence that is cyclical. While his home is no sanctuary, life in Memphis does not provide safety either. Wright presents the streets as a space of extreme violence for Richard, a space that nevertheless enables the black boy in particular to learn survival in the South. One evening, on his way to shop for food, an incident occurs when Richard is assaulted by a gang of boys who “grabbed... knocked... snatched the basket” and robbed him of the money (16). The attack of the gang symbolizes the violent context of the South and at the same time foreshadows the hostile world Richard would have to face later. Rather than giving up on the gang’s attack, Ella teaches her son to fight back for survival by forcing him to go back and confront the gang in the street. Although he learns survival the hard way, Richard defeats his aggressors “knocking them cold” “hitting again and again” and “won the right to the streets of Memphis” (18). The potential roots of this violence stem from the years of systemic abuse and disenfranchisement which they have endured. Aside from the streets, the school setting is another space where violence prevails. Although bullying at school serves to intimidate and test a new member’s ability to be accepted and integrate a group, it has also been part of Richard’s learning to survive. Given the constant displacement and relocation of the family, Richard attends different educational institutions. Each school “meant a new area of life to be conquered” (90). In this context, school symbolizes a battlefield, and full acceptance depends on his capacity to “conquer” the territory. During his first day of school in Greenwood, a small town in



Mississippi, a group of school boys forces Richard to fight. In his determination to gain respect and acceptance, Richard fights “tigerishly, trying to leave a scar, seeking to draw blood as proof that [...] I could take care of myself” (92). Physical violence permeates almost all aspects of Richard’s life.

Black childhood is embedded in a pattern of violence that seems inescapable. Richard not only learns and experiences violence in the black community but he also grows up in an environment where race relations are fraught with tension. The segregationist system in the Jim Crow South has favored tensions and conflicts among whites and blacks. At the turn of the twentieth century, the growing towns and cities, which resulted from the industrialization of the South, symbolize spaces where the white middle-class has fostered socio-economic segregation. According to Hale, since the culture of segregation is modeled after the ideals of the plantation, white middle-class citizens could maintain hierarchical power relations and control new spaces of consumption through the industrialization of southern cities. Thus, public spaces were racially delineated with signs “For White” and “For Colored,” such as public transportation (streetcars and railroads), businesses and restaurants. Richard gains awareness of this spacial division along racial lines at the railroad when waiting to board the train for Arkansas: “I noticed there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a ‘white’ line and a ‘black’ line. During my visit at Granny’s a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died” (46). Though a child, Richard is able to perceive the deep racial divide in the South that can sometimes lead to violence, but is unable to understand the racial categorization black/white. The grandmother’s white-looking appearance troubles and confuses Richard, who does not know whether she is black or white. When he asks Ella about his grandmother’s racial category, Ella attempts to suppress his curiosity through neutral answers

(47). Richard knows such responses are a way for his mother to conceal her true feelings and convictions about race relations and segregation. As a child, Richard rejects racial roles as a given and dares to ask troubling questions.

Although racial division at the railroad gives Richard a glimpse into race relations, not until their trip to Elaine, Arkansas does he, at the age of nine, really experience the reality of white terror. While he and his family move in with Aunt Maggie and her husband, Richard learns the hard way that resisting the oppressive apparatus of Jim Crow leads to death. A group of white men murders Uncle Hoskins for refusing to leave his flourishing liquor business. The family has to flee overnight to protect their lives. Uncle Hoskins's murder gives insight into the reality of his death and how socio-economic upward mobility is difficult to achieve in the Jim Crow South. After the collapse of the slavery system on which southern economy rested, a fear that freed blacks would demand equal social and economic rights arose and engendered lynching as form of terror to control and keep people of color as second-class citizens. In this regard, Mikko Tuhkanen observes that: "A radical refiguring is needed by those whose subjugation/subjectation has been (and remains) an integral part of the economy" (Tuhkanen 105). The lynching of uncle Hoskins causes Richard's psychological and emotional turmoil and deepens his anxiety. From a very young age, Richard experiences "a dread of white people" that lives "permanently in [his] feelings and imagination" (73). White brutality towards black men becomes so pervasive that Richard is "conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings" (74). This unsettling socio-political environment is at the root of the black boy's identity. In an oppressive society for a black person, the black child can clearly see the hopelessness which lies in a future bereft of possibilities.

Not only have the Jim Crow laws restricted and blighted black youth's aspirations to self-fulfillment in the first decades of the twentieth century, but they have also altered black boyhood, threatening and castrating it. Richard learns the shocking truth about Bob, who has been killed by whites for "fooling with a white prostitute there in the hotel" (171). Wright's text highlights the way that black male bodies are subject to violence for stepping out of "their place." In the preface to *Exorcising Blackness*, Trudier Harris claims that, "Lynchings became, then, the final part of an emasculation that was carried out every day in word and deed. Black men were things, not men, and if they dared to claim any privileges of manhood whether sexual, economic, or political, they risked execution" (x). Although Richard does not experience lynching first hand, the distant violence lingers as a "sword of Damocles" and proves more effective because it can arise at any moment. The invisible but persisting violence plunges Richard into a "temporary paralysis of will and impulse" (172). The black child comes to the realization that the penalty of death awaits him if he made any false move, even wondering "if it was worth-while to make any move at all" (172). As the black boy is gradually learning that to survive, he has to internalize the unwritten and tacit rules which require blacks to put on the social mask of inferiority. Because of his brutal treatment in the South, Richard can never be fully himself in an environment which does not acknowledge his masculinity and humanity.

Wright emphasizes the relationship between boyhood and the construction of masculine identity. Peer group relationships are key contexts within which Richard develops strong connections but at the same time these groups provide a space of competitiveness that encourages the young male to develop a sense of self-worth. Despite the fact that the Jim Crow South as Wright expresses it tends to emasculate the black boy, gang life is an enabling space for boys of color to express and develop their masculinity. In West Helena, Arkansas, the young boy

is part of a group of teenage boys who often interact, discuss, reflect upon race and class issues and even challenge the system which denies them socio-economic opportunities. The gang gives the colored boy a platform where he could express his aspirations, develop his creativity, find support, a space where “the culture of one black household was thus transmitted to another black household, and folk tradition was handed from group to group” (81). In the gang, one way to manifest boyhood is through sexism (disregard towards girls), the use of obscene language callousness in attitude: “We spoke boastfully in bass voices; we used the word “nigger” to prove the tough fiber of our feelings; we spouted excessive profanity as a sign of our coming manhood” (78). The boy of color learns the traditional role associated with his gender, that of the strong man who can withstand adverse conditions. This context seems to support Patricia Hill Collins’s observation that “being tough and having street smart is an important component” in the formation of black masculinity (151). As Wright depicts it, the enforcement of social control which thwarts black boys’ self-expression compels the forging of a certain “toughness” related to their masculine identity. However, the gang is a space for violent acts of racism which turn into bloody battles between black and white boys. The gang fosters solidarity among its members and Richard prefers keeping to its codes after being chastised for fighting white boys. To Richard, the gang substitutes for the absent father: “the gang’s life was my life” (83).

In addition to the significance of peer group in shaping Richard’s identity, the absence of the father figure has an impact on the child’s developing subjectivity. The child emotionally suffers from the distant father who fails to connect and serve as a role model for his son. Wright portrays him as a faceless father who does not develop any relationship of affection with his son. This emotional distance between father and son grows into a “patricidal rage,” as Jay-Paul Hinds termed it (697). Wright depicts the father figure, as an authoritarian “lawgiver” in the family who

barely has any connection with his son, “a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote” (10). At the start of the text, Richard and his family have moved to Memphis for better economic opportunities but the father’s job as a night porter seems insufficient to cover the family expenses and it reflects in the small living space of the four people that share only a kitchen and a bedroom. The father’s disillusionment with the promises of the city creates a sentiment of failure which might account for the lack of father –son bond. Eventually, the father abandons his wife and children for another woman. Ironically, the legal apparatus contributes to maintaining a dysfunctional family rather than making the father take responsibility for the family. The father has not been required to support the family. The unfairness of the legal system coupled with the father’s irresponsibility marks a final blow to the father-son relationship. The father’s abandonment leaves an emotional and psychological scar in the child that finally “relegates his abandoning father to an endopsychic tomb, categorizing [him] as "a zero," a nonentity” (Hinds 689). From then, both father and son become alienated from each other forever, and when Richard later meets his father again, he realizes “though the ties of blood made us kin” they are strangers who speak a different language and have totally different perceptions of what is normal (34). In the absence of a responsible and caring father, Richard becomes a delinquent, roaming with morally corrupted adults who have turned him into an alcoholic child at the age of six even before he had started school.

While Richard lacks the influence of a father, the presence of the mother compensates for this absence and shapes the child’s awareness as a person of color in the segregationist South. Richard learns from his mother how to survive, sustain himself and navigate an environment which confers a different status to people of color. According to Horace A. Porter, Ella plays a dual role; that of the “oppressive social order” and by the same token that of the “tender and

loving ... parent, nurturing and protecting her young” (320). Porter is right in arguing that Ella nurtures her son but I read the seemingly “oppressive” attitude as a means for her to prepare Richard to confront the daunting reality awaiting him rather than sheltering him from it. Sadly, the burden of poverty gets the better of Ella’s will to fight against all odds; she becomes bedridden with sickness and, later, paralysis. At the early age of twelve, Richard is bewildered by witnessing and experiencing so much suffering and hardship; he cannot understand the challenging circumstances and ills which have undermined his mother’s health. His perception of life profoundly alters: “My mother’s suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering” (100). Richard is powerless and confused in the face of these circumstances which have taken away his childhood and forced him into a precocious adulthood: “Though I was a child, I could no longer feel as a child, could no longer react as a child. The desire for play was gone” (86). In the midst of economic insecurities, Richard supports himself through petty jobs as a strategy to break out from the situation and attempts to struggle against the rigidity of the racist environment that works at suppressing his individuality.

As a child of color, Richard’s ability to stand for himself and not bend to stifling social practices makes him distinctive as a black boy in particular by defying authority (family, academic), reading and writing, mental and emotional alienation. Richard challenges social conventions by refusing to comply with the values, ideas, attitudes of his family and a region depicted as a “fanatic [society] imposing on [its] dwellers a peculiar way of living, giving much emphasis on conformity and obedience of communal conventional norms” (Sasa and BenLahcene 28). He acts in ways perceived as contrary to what is expected from a child of color

thus creating conflict/friction between his self and his surroundings. When Richard innocently informs Uncle Tom about Grandpa's demise, he is reprimanded for announcing the news the wrong way. Richard could barely comprehend why he seems to be often at odds with his family: "I never seemed to do things as people expected them to be done. Every word or gesture I made seemed to provoke hostility.... Finding no answer, I told myself... that no matter what I did I would be wrong somehow as far as my family is concerned" (143). The child's status as an outsider within his own family echoes African Americans' position as "Others" in the South at the turn of the twentieth century. Richard's family is "othered" due to their race but unlike Richard, they do not seem to resist their position as outsiders of the social elite. Because Richard strives to forge his own individuality, aunts, uncles, and cousins emotionally distance themselves from him to the extent that the child barely remembers any "innocent intimacy ... games, ...playing" with other children, "none of the association that usually exists between young people living in the same house" (173). Richard is literally put in quarantine wherein no one except for his mother will speak to him. The "forced" isolation enables Richard to create an "artificial position within [the southern] society" and make him aware that he will always be an outlander in the black community and the South (Sasa and BenLahcene 32).

The child not only challenges the authority within his family but he also overtly stands against authority outside the family. At the end of the academic year, Richard is selected as valedictorian of his class to deliver a speech during graduation. The school principal proposes to provide Richard a text he himself has written because as he puts it, Richard "can't afford to just say *anything* before those white people" (175). The principal will make him pass and place him in the school system if he accepts to read the principal's speech. Richard turns down the principal's proposal even though he knows his future will be guaranteed. Richard, as a child, sees

through the principal, envisioning him as a “bought” man who has tried to “buy” him and thus stifle the realization of his full potentialities (176). The principal intends to make Richard aware of “the world [he’s] living in” and show him that self-actualization for a person of color is unattainable in the South without compromise (176). As Rodwell Makombe explicates: “The African American community colludes with the larger White society to break the African American and keep him in his place” (Makombe 300). Though a child, Richard refuses to yield to the southern racial practices, which erase his childhood, disrupt his family and subjugate him as a revitalized boy. One day, out of a gnawing hunger, Richard decides to sell his dog Betsy in a white neighborhood. Although it is his first time in a white neighborhood, Richard would not comply with the white residents’ request to go to the back door because “pride would not let [him] do that” (69). When a young white woman proposes to purchase Betsy for 97 cents, Richard declines her offer. By refusing to take 97 cents in place of one dollar, Wright demonstrates his attempt to affirm his individuality and defy any categorization of the desperate black boy who can accept anything just to survive. Because the child finds himself in a “no-man’s-land” which is also a “no-childhood – land” he crafts a personal world through reading and writing (Hakutani 128).

The child’s penchant for literacy kindles literary creation in him, and makes him an unusual black boy within the black and white community during the early twentieth century in the South. Richard develops great interest in the written word which allows him to envision possibilities outside his limited space. Richard shows an interest in writing, a skill associated with an individual’s capacity for creativity, self-fulfillment, and thus considered beyond the person of color’s intellectual ability in the Jim Crow South. Richard is able to, as Suzanne Jones writes, “extract *literary* values from the material lack, social exclusion and alleged cultural



disorder that would seem to destroy literacy altogether” (Jones 138). For Jones, poverty fuels the child’s intellectual sensibility rather than hampering it. I concur with Jones and argue that through artistic creation, the black child is able to transcend limitations and fulfill himself. Becoming literate for a black person was, during the period of Jim Crow, tantamount to infringing upon the racial codes of conduct but Richard rather displays a passion for reading and writing. The negative reaction of a white employer when Richard naively shares his desire to become a writer is a case in point. When the white lady asks him the reasons for furthering his education, Richard tells her of his aspiration to be a writer:

“For what?”

“To write stories,” [Richard] mumbled defensively.

“You will never be a writer,” she said. “Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?”

“Nobody,” I said.

“I didn’t think anybody ever would,” she declared indignantly. (147)

For the white woman, Richard fails to remain within the limits of what is allowed or appropriate for a person of color. Richard’s story “*The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre*” published by a local newspaper rather elicits lack of appreciation, criticism and misunderstanding from the black community (family, classmates) because they regard his aspirations as out of the “socially acceptable possibilities” for a black boy (Smith 134). Instead of gaining recognition for his genius, Richard’s writing talent “[cuts him] off . . . completely” from his peers who show disinterest for his inquisitive mind (167). Howard Ramsby II, in his essay “The Vengeance of Black Boys,” observes that Richard’s inclination for literacy is a trait rarely acknowledged in discussions regarding African American boys. Richard is perceived as “socially awkward, and,

unlike many of his peers, deeply concerned with ideas” (Ramsby II 645). Even though Richard’s writing talent is unacknowledged in his community, a young woman next door is sensitive to Richard’s writing talent. After reading to her his story about an Indian maiden who drowns herself, Richard feels gratified and encouraged for having someone pay attention to him. In addition to writing, Richard has already been fascinated by reading which opens for him “the gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land” although he lacks the appropriate vocabulary to make meaning of the stories he reads (40). Richard’s avidity for reading awakens him to the reality of a new horizon, a world that offers opportunities for self-actualization and gives him hope, a world he “loved...hungered for... something new” (129). Reading enables Richard to discover the impact of the word over one’s mind which gradually shapes his personality and reading “made things happen within me” even though he has no power to change things in the objective world (72 – 73). The act of reading creates a new hunger in him, a craving for freedom of the mind that leads Richard to subvert a system which denies people of color access to literacy by forging notes to the white librarian asking for books which reads: “*Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy... have some books by H. L. Mencken?*” (246). Wright’s text provides insight into how Richard’s craving for literacy makes him feel personally “empowered” (he does not actually have power in the white-dominated system he inhabits) and how he uses words to make meaning of an existence that “appeared absurd, deformed by irrational and incomprehensible violence against the weak, innocent, and black” (Wilmot 19). Richard’s uncommon attitude demonstrates that he is queered at two levels, for he is “a man estranged from his own race by sensitivity and intellect, yet alienated from the white race by the color of his skin” (Hakutani 128). Here, the queer status of Richard implies that he is deviant as a child of

color that develops a keen interest in literacy and this status makes him a misfit in the segregationist South where being black equates with being illiterate.

While Wright's text emphasizes the plights of a black boy in a Jim Crow context, Holland's autobiographical *From the Mississippi Delta* explores how race and class inform the challenges, struggles of a black girl in a southern environment. In her text, Holland portrays herself as a child growing during the mid-twentieth century in Greenwood, Mississippi where racial segregation is still normative. As the youngest child of her family, Cat (the name Holland grows up under) spends most of her time with her mother, whose example of resilience she will follow later. One day, Cat is hit by a car while practicing majorette steps in Gibb Street. The white lady (Miss Lussie Bee's white lady) who has caused the accident often brings Cat and her family food and clothes to compensate for the mishap. Living in an impoverished environment, Cat's car accident at age nine, which is a form of reparation from Miss Lussie Bee's white lady, forms an event that ironically secures food and extra money for the family. In spite of the odds she suffers (poverty, racism, unfulfilled dreams), Cat still works her way with willpower.

Childhood for Cat is a space of poverty, enforced social separation, and violence. Like Richard, Cat lives in a family headed by a single mother with three occasional fathers "depending on the time of year; a Christmas daddy, Mr. Ethan, who lived in Ohio; an Easter daddy, Mr. Warren, who lived in Chicago; and a birthday daddy, Mr. Goosch, who came every August" (23). As the sole bread winner for the family, the mother rents out the back of the house to prostitutes in addition to her regular ironing job to make both ends meet. The racial awakening of Cat becomes evident when she starts noticing neighborhood division along racial lines: "Although I didn't know it then, the houses in Greenwood gave me the first lesson in race. I

learned that color and money went together” (22). But the violent death of adolescent Emmett Till opens her eyes to the brutal reality of race relations in the South. The death of Emmett is reminiscent of how Richard Wright depicts Bob’s murder, for he dares to flirt with a young white woman. Bob is a young black man who has been taken and killed on a country road because he allegedly “fooled with a white prostitute” in a hotel where he worked (Wright 171). What happens to Emmett Till and Bob illuminates how black boyhood is curtailed because, as Christina Sharpe argues, early and violent “black deaths are produced as normative” in a racially divided South (Sharpe 7). The tragic death of Emmett Till occurs at a time when the black child has been at center stage of racial integration through the public educational system. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruled against racial segregation in public schools by declaring that separate educational facilities for white and black students were unequal and contrary to the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Paradoxically, Emmett Till’s battered, deformed, and swollen body is the evidence of the true race relations post- *Brown v. Board of Education* (Stockton 162). “After Emmett Till’s death,” Holland reflects, “I began to see, even if I did not understand it all, that we black folks had to be careful around whites, and mind never to get out of our ‘place’” (36-37). Unlike Richard, who has only heard of white terror, Cat is an eyewitness to the effects of racism on the black boy’s body, a situation that sheds light on the intensity of tensions embedded in the existing relationships among races in the South.

In a context of impoverishment and violence, the black girl sees truancy and juvenile delinquency as psychological outlets. Cat then incarnates Bernstein’s “pickanniny,” or “an imagined dehumanized black juvenile,” because as a black youth and female, she lacks any social authority and is excluded from enjoying socio-economic opportunities (16). Taking on the

role of the pickanniny for a black girl is a means to rebel against the visceral cultural, social, and material reality with which she is confronted. Cat and her girlfriends form a girl's gang that spends their time smoking "three-for-a-nickel cigarettes ... talk[ing] grown-up and tell[ing] stories," something which ties them together as sisters that nurture, sustain one another (58). Belonging to a gang provides her a space for self-worth and self-fulfillment, a space where she can freely be her true self, because "it just seemed... that trying to walk the straight and narrow, ... only made you older and poorer and respected by all wrong folks: those who had nothing and weren't likely to have any more" (101). However, Cat's seemingly bad behavior leads to her being expelled from the academic community. Ironically, gang life (being with Fitzpatrick's gang) has a double-edged effect since it later proves restrictive to Cat's freedom of speech. As a result, Cat turns to shoplifting which costs her liberty; she is sentenced to thirty days in the Laflore County Penal Farm, known as "the workhouse," and is fined a hundred dollars (163).

While the black boy endures physical abuse, Holland explores the sexual violence and commodification of the black girl's body: "No longer any one man's property, now we belonged to everyone" (90). On her eleventh birthday, Cat is sexually violated by Mr. Lawrence a white employer for whom she works as his granddaughter's babysitter. Ms. Lawrence's enabling behavior (she facilitates Cat's rape) not only reinforces the power structures of the former plantation system but also adds to Cat's trauma, "Next thing I knew I was lifted into the air, Miss Lawrence's strong hands under my arms, and then I was on top of Mr. Lawrence. His hands pulled down my shorts and snapped down my panties and something began rubbing where I went to toilet...MAMA, HE HURT ME! MAMA, HE HURTIN' ME SO BAD! MAMA, HE BURNIN' ME UP!" (83). This traumatic experience enables Cat to become aware of what being "called upstairs" truly means for a black girl and by the same token exposes the black female

child's vulnerability to sexual harassment on the part of white men (81). The sexual abuse of Cat evokes the condition of the slave woman, whose body was "frequently colonized by the white master, both to satiate the male's lust and to increase the labor force (Beaulieu 11). When Cat recounts her story of going upstairs (skipping the part regarding her rape) to her friends, she and Percy Mae's "eyes met in the mirror and [they] both knew" the sexual abuse and psychological trauma which black girls have been going through (90). Cat and Percy Mae have adopted what Darlene Clark Hine christens the "culture of dissemblance" which implies "creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings while actually remaining an enigma" (Hine 915). To Hine, the culture of dissemblance is a strategy for black women to "protect the sanctity" of their inner life and keep it from being violated (915). Cat's rape symbolizes her precocious and painful initiation into womanhood. As Holland highlights in her text, sexual violation is a rite of passage for most Greenwood coming-of-age black girls whose dreams are subordinated to white male whims (Berg 98). Black teenage girls also fall prey to black men's sexual desires. During Cat's prison stay with her sister Jean, a trusty referred to as L.C. often molests Jean, finding an opportunity to "search" all over her for some alleged contraband. However, L.C.'s harassment remains unpunished, a situation that suggests both black and white men's control over the young black woman's body.

In addition to the painful experience of rape, Cat slides into prostitution by streetwalking, an activity whereby a young woman uses her charms to attract a man's attention by "strolling, trolling, and strutting your stuff" and having or not sex with them (95). At first, streetwalking seems to give Cat control over her body but it in reality turns her into a teenage prostitute, a situation on which she depends to survive. Cat not only engages in prostitution for "food and money" but does so also as a way to subvert the existing racial dynamics supported by the

segregationist power structures. Referring to the ineffectiveness in perpetuating racial hierarchy in the South, Hale argues that while public facilities were visibly racially marked, prostitution was one domain with no legally defined limits. Through prostitution, Cat still falls victim to the lust of men (white and black) but can at the same time repossess her body and impose her conditions. In retaliation for being raped, she charges white “clients” double what she would charge black men, “Mr. Lawrence still owed me for what he’d done—a debt other white men would pay” (101). Aside from streetwalking, performing exotic dances in show business is another way for Cat to exert a certain agency over her body. After experiencing the socio-economic limitation imposed by the southern segregationist system, Cat determined to move up north, joins a carnival group as an escaping route from the South. Although Cat could not go North, performing exotic dance provides her the opportunity to make her body both accessible and inaccessible to her male audience. Cat plays on her sensuality to give the audience “something they needed,” but at the same time she keeps her body from being violated (138). Her exotic dances are alluring and captivating; it is a moment when she deploys her seductive capacities not only for financial gains but as a way to valorize her body. The following scene appropriately describes Cat’s dance:

I moved to the center of the stage and shimmied down to my knees. I lay back on my haunches, real sexy-like, waving my arms like branches in a storm, then leaned forward and took a drag on the Camel.... I opened my thighs and pulled back the little patch of fabric that covered my privates. The cheers gave way to stunned silence. Carefully, I pushed that cigarette half its length into my vagina. As Candy taught me, I tightened my stomach until the red ash glowed. Then I relaxed, and a blue cloud billowed” (139).

Holland’s performance seems to confirm the stereotype of the black woman’s unbridled sexuality. However, Cat finds in performing in the show business a source of empowerment; to

some extent she can make choices and act freely even though she is viewed as a non-normative child.

Like Richard's uniqueness as an unbending black boy, a trait which alienates him from his community, Cat's agency, though limited, sets her as "an outsider on the inside, a bit like the freedom workers. Perhaps this was what growing up really meant, I thought: to take that small space hidden within you and to pull it out, then stretch it until you could fit within it" (219). As Holland portrays, "growing up" for a black girl really means acquiring "premature knowingness," because she endures hardships, and sexual abuse which forces her to mature quickly (Wright 14). To this end, Nazera Wright maintains that "the constant vigilance black girls must maintain, often to protect themselves against mistreatment and violence, denies them privileged periods of ease or innocence" which sets them as subjects who are still young but at the same time forced to take on adult women's roles (18). Thus, in *From the Mississippi Delta* the mother-daughter bond is key to Cat's child-adult transitional space.

Holland's text closely looks at the depth and impact of mother- daughter relationship and how determinant it is regarding the daughter's growing consciousness. Similarly to Richard's mother, Ida Mae (Cat's mother) "is the predominant influence on [her daughter's] developing consciousness," the bedrock of the family (Berg 97). In spite of her misdemeanor, Cat learns from her mother to have dreams of improving one's condition. As her mother states: "you gots ta have a dream, 'f'n you gwine be somebody" (49). The mother sets the example when she endeavors against all odds (she is illiterate and poor) to obtain the permit of midwifery. Knowing about the value and rewards of education, Ida Mae often fosters her daughter's literacy, with the hope that Cat could go to college. Most importantly, Ida Mae: "[provides] a model of embodied storytelling" referred to as "play-like" which sustains Cat throughout her difficult journey of



emotional and psychological maturity (Berg 97). It is by watching her mother act out the painful memories of her youth and escape from an oppressive stepfather that Cat learns the power of storytelling. Cat successfully uses her “play-like” ability to play over the emotions of Miss Lussie Bee’s white lady and later on obtain “material” reparations for the accident. As Holland observes, Cat’s “play-like” reflects black people’s tendency to put on a mask and perform in front of white people (45). Interestingly, this methodology enables Cat to develop an oratory ease, which she later uses to save the reputation of her elementary school. Since Sue Willie Oliphant fails the public reading, Cat puzzles the visiting white superintendent when she dramatically declaims the poem “Casey at the Bat,” with her voice that “took on a commanding roar. Halfway through the poem, I had the entire assembly hanging on my every word. By the time Casey came to bat, teachers and students alike were rooting aloud for him [...] the final pitch came [...] into a strong, sad voice [...] I lowered my hands, hung my head, and let the weight of [...] the whole South sink into my shoulders” (73). Cat’s brilliant performance has brought her social acceptance since even the “good girls” would talk to her.

Unlike Richard, whose boyhood is constructed around misogyny, toughness, and group solidarity, sexual violation and early motherhood shapes black girlhood for Cat. Unexpected menstruation at school characterizes an aspect of Cat’s entry into womanhood. She suffers mockery and humiliation from her male classmates who “make fun of [her]...pinned red paper streamers on their pants” (89). In spite of the traumatic and degrading bodily experiences it brings, maternity comes as a restorative and redeeming moment for Cat. The fact that Cat gives life revamps the demeaning image of the black female body formed as a result of rape, prostitution, and menstruation and also enables her to envision her son’s birth as the mark of a

new life; As she herself affirms: “I had a little boy now and I chose to regard him as a symbol of my new life – not a chain to the old one” (194).

Wright’s and Holland’s texts, which together analyze the relationship between childhood and race, point to the fact that racial category, deprivation, violence, combined with a hostile southern environment does not allow the black child to enjoy the privilege of innocence. These authors demonstrate how black childhood is shaped by the ongoing material impacts of slavery, which takes different forms in a socio-cultural context where the black body is constructed as abject and non-normative, a body which has been subject to suffering, wounding and even death. Notwithstanding the experience of trauma from their lived conditions, both Richard and Cat reappropriate their suffering and reject victimization by deploying inner resources which help them survive the extreme socio-cultural and economic restrictions and work for a better future even though it is an uncertain future.

## Chapter Four: Counternarratives of Culturally Othered Subjects in the South

The idea of a white monolithic South is fictive, since the U.S. South has been a space of heterogeneous communities which have long coexisted. This chapter examines the immigrant and Native American child figures that are reconfiguring the construction of southern identity in multifaceted ways. My contention is that because these child figures do not neatly fit within a southern definition of an “innocent” white child, their status as ethnic minority marginalizes them since they are perceived as children who do not “belong” to the southern space. Immigrants and Native Americans have held a liminal position in the U.S. because being American has for long meant being “white.” In her essay “My Childhood is Ruined,” Katherine Henninger contends that, historically, childhood has been used to construct racial innocence which inscribes and, at the same time, “[sooths] the (white) anxieties” of the American nation and the South in particular (607). She asserts that the myth around this racial innocence founded upon white childhood with its state of “holy ignorance” has been dismissed, thus bringing in new implications for the South (607). Drawing from Henninger’s analysis, I argue that Lan Cao and Allison Hedge Coke explore the erasure of “an innocent” childhood in a white perspective by showing how a racialized protagonist revises the concept of childhood and grapples with adolescence and its implications. This chapter examines the way the immigrant and Native American child redefines southern identity as they “stand between...two great cultural assemblages,” namely that of “immigrant/Native American” and “American southerners” (Gilroy 1). Because of this dual identity, the immigrant/Native American child is both an insider and outsider of the South. Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* (2004) revisit and question the “biracial yet monocultural” southern identity (Yousaf 214).

Long obscured in southern literature due to the binary racial division (white and black), the presence of Native American and immigrant writers in the U.S. South prompts a redefinition of “traditional understandings of race, class and gender in southern literature” (Cha 128). New immigrants from South America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean in the U.S. South who have brought different cultures and foreign economies make the South a transnational space. In this regard, Sharon Monteith and Suzanne Jones in *South to a New Place* (2002) argue that “the South is neither insular nor homogenous” but is rather characterized by multiplicity (11). Cao’s and Hedge Coke’s texts complicate the biracial (white/black) literary imagination and, through the lens of the child protagonists challenge the concept of an “innocent” white childhood. I contend that the “non-black [child] of color,” to borrow from Frank H. Wu, because she does not fit in the definition of a normative child disrupts the solid black/white binary in the South and troubles the myth created around whiteness (Wu xiii). Neither white nor black, the child figure is racially othered.

In Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, the figure of the immigrant child, far from falling into victimization, attempts to negotiate between her home roots and the American culture (her insider/outsider status) in order to find a middle ground that allows her to navigate the mainstream culture and forge a southern identity. *Monkey Bridge* is the story of a thirteen-year old girl who grapples with the past memories of Vietnam but at the same time yearns to achieve the American Dream of obtaining a college education that will open up a career opportunity for her. Mai the child protagonist departs from Saigon six months before Thanh her mother joins her in the US. Then they relocate in “Little Saigon” a Vietnamese community in Virginia. Central to the story is Mai’s attempt to find out the reason behind Baba Quan’s (Thanh’s father) absence the day Thanh has left Vietnam. Not knowing the truth about her grandfather’s disappearance is

partly a source of Mai's distress. From the onset, Mai expresses the inner tension of navigating a world which does not belong to the past but a present world to which she does not totally belong: "My dilemma," says Mai, "was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither" (88). *Monkey Bridge* sheds light on the immigrants who attempt to reinvent themselves in America while wrestling with the new opportunities that life in the new land offers.

Displacement, exile, relocation, and the ensuing psychological war trauma mark the life and define the experiences of this generation of Vietnamese immigrants' identity. Mai and her family are involuntary immigrants forced to flee the war in Vietnam. Coming from a middle-class background with the relatively attendant comfortable life, Mai has to leave her mother behind to join her American mentor, Colonel Michael McMahon, in Farmington, Connecticut. Mai experiences this sudden separation from her loved ones, and her land as "downfall and rupture" (Pelaud 87). At first, she does not associate immigration with possibilities and protection; she is instead overwhelmed with angst, a feeling she equates with "the fear of death. Once felt, it stays forever trapped, like a child's muffled cry, inside one's chest" (97). Mai compares her fear of immigration with "a child's muffled cry," because for Mai, immigration entails a total severance of any connections with her childhood. As an exiled teenager, she looks back to her childhood from an American southern perspective and grieves its loss under the sign of trauma. Cao demonstrates that it is impossible for the ethnic subject to have a childhood characterized by "a holy ignorance" (Bernstein 6); rather, the memory of the past marks the ethnically raced child in the South. Mai experiences "deterritorialization" which implies she leaves her homeland and concurrently the culture that has nurtured and shaped her (Suarez-Orozco et al. 7). Deterritorialization entails the loss of "meaningful sources of identity" that is home country, family members, belief systems, language (qtd in Liu 78).

Although Mai is geographically displaced, she nevertheless transports her Vietnamese culture to Virginian soil. The status of Mai and other Vietnam exiles is uncertain and precarious; they have to face the hostility of southerners who do not feel reassured. The presence of refugees in the South produces fear and distraught in people who see them as “a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget” (15). The rhetoric of American nationalism that denigrates and perceives the immigrant as an Other is at play here, creating a situation which compounds Mai’s psychological fragmentation. In her analysis of *Monkey Bridge*, Melanie R. Benson compares the Vietnam homeland the immigrants have left behind to a “phantom limb” which represents their status as outsiders in the South (188). To Benson, their status as Other reinforces their invisibility and by the same token their southern identity. By bringing her characters to the South, Cao highlights the way Virginia and Vietnam are connected by war history. The Vietnamese community’s fixation on the loss of their homeland during the war echoes “the consciousness of loss and defeat that has characterized” the South and its cultural and literary tradition (Ryan 250-51). Despite the connection between Vietnam and Virginia through loss, Mai is queered culturally because of her status as a cultural other in the South. Thus, for a child who attempts to assimilate into a southern and at times hostile environment, cultural negotiations are accomplished at a certain cost.

Culturally and chronologically, Mai holds an in-between position. As an adolescent who moves to the United States, Mai lacks a solid ground in her culture of origin. She belongs to the 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans, a generation of what Cao and Novas calls “[i]mmigrants and refugees born abroad but educated and socialized in the United States . . . ; a generation straddling two countries and two cultures” (qtd in Shan 24). Neither a child nor an adult, Mai describes her cultural assimilation as a painful process wherein she learns in many ways a

“lesson in what was required to sustain a new identity: it all had to do with being able to adopt a different posture” (39). To “adopt a different posture” for Mai implies to comply with a new set of behaviors that will help her function according to the norms of her new world, in particular, the South. Mai is then confronted with a “dilemma of double identity,” wherein she should be able to equally navigate the Vietnamese culture and the American culture as well (Vu136). As a teenager who has not fully matured yet, Mai experiences psychic dissociation which affects her sense of reality and her identity. From the start, Cao explores how past memories deeply inform Mai’s construction of the present reality and how both past and present become simultaneous realities for her. During a visit to her mother, who is hospitalized in Arlington, Mai’s consciousness is overwhelmed with past memories:

The smell of blood, warm and wet, rose from the floor and settled into the solemn stillness of the hospital air... a scattering of gunshots tore through the plaster walls. Everything was unfurling, everything, and I knew I was back there again, as if the tears were pooled in readiness beneath my eyes. It was all coming back, a fury of whiteness rushing against my head with violent percussive rage. The automatic glass doors closed behind me with a sharp sucking sound (1).

Mai’s experiences as a volunteer at a Saigon hospital ten years previously seep into her mind creating a sense of “doubled consciousness” (Satterlee 78). Because Mai straddles two worlds, two generations, her sense of self derives from past and present realities that are fragmented and fragile, causing in Mai a psychic dissociation. In the essay “‘An Outsider with Inside Information:’ The 1.5 Generation in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*,” Bunkong Tuon explains that the 1.5 generation “constructs a fragile reality —part invention, part fragmented memory—that is designed to hold the various forces of the past and present together in a delicate balance that could implode at any moment”(6). For a young girl who has experienced the disastrous

consequences of war, the fragile reality she creates is a coping strategy which allows her to live a “normal” life.

In addition to the process of cultural adaptation, fear and anxiety permeates the lives of Mai and Thanh. The loss of a homeland coupled with a loss of the middle class status leads to a sense of permanent insecurity and vulnerability. Cao highlights the pervasiveness of internal agitation that even informs and dictates the actions of the teenage girl, who has lost her childhood world with which she is familiar in Vietnam. Mai, paralyzed by the fear of deportation is unable to cross the Canadian border to contact her grandfather, Baba Quan. As she describes it: “I could offer a confession of some sort myself – my fear of the wide-open space, or even the constant concern I carried in me about being deported” (192). She realizes that at the roots of her deep fears lies her mother’s “paranoia” which “circulates inside my skin” (17). Isabelle Pelaud, in her seminal work *This Is All I Choose To Tell* (2011), notes that “fear can be passed down from one generation to the next, or is intertwined with memory, history, and invisibility” (65). While Cao shows the negative impact of fear on Mai, she also represents fear as a stimulating force for her protagonist. To control the fear during an interview for college admission, Mai strategically revisits the Vietnamese legend of the Truong sisters. Mai sees herself as Truong Trac, the Vietnamese woman warrior who has defeated Chinese invaders. To her, Ms. Layton (the interviewer) is the tiger or “enemy” who acts as the gatekeeper to higher academic institutions and might deny her admission to college. In front of the interviewer’s questions, which are filled with already preconceived notions about Vietnam (a war-like Vietnam shown on American media), Mai like the Trung sisters “[guards]... weak points and [keeps] them hidden from sight” (126). Ms. Layton holds a position of power and Mai, rather than confronting Ms. Layton’s ignorance about Vietnam, plays the role of the stereotypical and vulnerable refugee.



When asked where she lived in Vietnam, she provides a vague answer: “In Saigon, right in the downtown section” (127). She uses the “drunken-monkey style”—another of the Trung sisters’ tactics—to divert the conversation with Ms. Layton from war toward a different topic (129). Mai’s answers to Ms. Layton’s questions challenge the Americans’ perception of the Vietnamese exile as a “powerless Other.” In response to the question “What was it like over there?” she replied, “It was ... different,” and notes: “It’s very hot there. And humid” (129). In this moment, she relies on the Trung sisters’ strategy of “fluidity and softness... the art of evasion and distraction” to manage her fear and anger and turn the situation to her own advantage (129). In this context, Cao deliberately plays with the “model minority” stereotype by emphasizing Mai’s Asian Americanness to successfully gain acceptance into an American high educational institution. This suggests that not only whiteness guarantees access to certain privileges, but playing the expected stereotypical role can offer possibilities. Nevertheless, Mai’s state of fear is made more complex since it is entangled with karma, a sum of a person’s actions which will determine their fate in future lives.

In Cao’s text, karma plays an important part in Mai’s perceptions. Michelle Satterlee defines karma as “the spiritual force that creates balance in the world between good and evil” (154). To Thanh, karma is an intergenerational and inescapable fact that connects parent to offspring because Baba Quan’s murder of Uncle Khan will spiritually alter the course of both Mai’s and her lives. In her diary, Thanh explains the importance of karma to the Vietnamese consciousness: *“Karma my child is nothing more than an ethical, spiritual chromosome, an amalgamation of parent and child, which is as much a part of our history as the DNA strands. One is already the face of the other. Even as I write this, the shared facts of our lives continue to thread their way through our flesh. There is no escaping it, the fact of mother and child, as*

*synchronous and inseparable as left and right, up and down, back and forth, sun and moon*" (170). Even the Vietnamese language structurally functions in a karmic pattern because, as Thanh wrote, "*our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible and knows no end*" thus making past, present, and future a single entity (252). Like the fear which affects Mai's body, Cao outlines karma's potential to contaminate both the body and destiny. To Thanh, the defilement of her mother's body through forced adultery is transferrable to her daughter (descendants) according to the karmic law. Thanh's body suffers karmic consequences too with the scar burn on her face after the failed burial of Tuyet. Although Thanh provides a domestic interpretation to cover up the truth about her scar, it is the reminder of a painful past which has obsessed and traumatized Thanh. Cao thus inscribes karma in the woman's body. Admittedly, Mai senses karma's potential for trans-generational transfer when she notes that "My mother was my karma, her eye my inheritance. Through that eye, I could see nothing but danger in the phantom landscape ahead" (20). While the "phantom" refers to the wrongs which have occurred in the family (Uncle Khan's sexual abuse of Tuyet and Baba Quan's murdering Khan in retaliation), it also suggests that Mai cannot avoid the burdens of that past, and might suffer the consequences of Baba Quan's murder. Mai is concerned with history and even recognizes that "there was something about my mother's Vietnam past that I would like to understand" (168). As an important aspect for Vietnam and the South, the past shapes the subjectivity for both the white child figure (Lumpkin and Smith) and the immigrant child (Mai). The burden of the past psychologically warps the white child but it enables Mai to find out about her roots.

For Mai, knowing about the past truth is critical in the process of constructing her future self as she straddles Vietnamese and American southern cultures. Out of protective impulse for her daughter, Thanh emotionally distances herself from Mai; to break the karmic cycle, she is

convinced that “the faith that the distance slowly edging its way between us might help separate you from the fate of our family” (229). She even believes the course of karma can be channeled toward positive outcome and, for that reason, Thanh frequently performs rituals. She purchases dozens of hummingbirds and canaries -- “one hundred at a time” from the market --and sets them free in the garden one by one, considering this “a good deed designed to generate positive karma for the family” (34). Despite all her attempts to shield Mai from the negative forces behind karma, Thanh’s suicide serves as the ultimate sacrifice which, she thinks, will enable Mai to reconstruct a different past and grant her “the seductive powers of an American future” (254).

The first step in achieving cultural adaption is the authority shift between mother and daughter. This mother-child’s role reversal undermines the family structure which is organized under the direction of parents. Mai’s new position as the one holding the responsibilities of an adult is not consistent with the normal expectations of the parent and the child in the South. Once in Virginia, the mother-daughter role reverses with Mai taking parental responsibilities, telling her mother what the acceptable and unacceptable norms are. This experience of role reversal disrupts the adolescent’s “normal growth before developing into an adult frame of mind” (Tuon 6). In *Monkey Bridge*, filial reversal complicates the mother-daughter relationship, with Mai who has become a circumstantial “adult,” making her realize that “all children of immigrant parents have experienced these moments. When it first occurs, when the parent first reveals the behavior of a child, is a defining moment. Of course, all children eventually watch their parents’ astonishing return to the vulnerability of childhood, but for us the process begins much earlier than expected” (35). This parent-child role reversal is a classic pattern whereby it is believed immigrant offspring immerse more easily into the receiving community because they are “younger, more malleable, and more exposed to the new culture” through the academic system

(Suarez-Orozco et al. 105). Thus, children adapt more easily to the new culture than their parents who rely on their children to guide them in the new environs. To illustrate, Mai functions as a “cultural bridge” for her mother to whom she teaches the American way of shopping at the grocery store (paying at once after completing all the purchases), which is different from “the improvisation of haggling” to which Thanh is used (34). Pondering over her new responsibilities in the family, Mai acknowledges: “I was becoming, in the most obvious and unmistakable way, the chess champion directing my mother’s pawns with my magic parasol, telling her which piece to move into which square across the board” (136). Mai’s early departure to the U.S. also contributes to Thanh’s growing dependency on her daughter, which results in the rapid role reversal. According to Jennifer Ann Ho, Mai has lost her mother as both a “nurturer and caregiver” by becoming herself a non-normative mother (85).

Aside for the role of a cultural bridge, Mai nurses her mother when a stroke, which paralyzed her left side, sends Thanh to the hospital for four months. Mai becomes her mother’s caregiver, overseeing her convalescence by keeping an eye on her fragile emotional health after Thanh has returned home. Thanh’s deficient health reinforces her dependency on Mai and, like a vulnerable and helpless child, Thanh “did not rebel. I could see resignation, compliance in her bleary eyes as she swallowed the rice gruel I fed her every morning and every night her first month back from the rehabilitation center” (136). Noting this dependency, Michèle Bacholle-Bošković reads Thanh’s childlike position as the “Vietnameseness” or is the Vietnamese values, customs, behaviors and beliefs Mai has to carry (270).

Mai plays the role of the cultural translator because she has access to a world with which Thanh is not so familiar. Cao clearly delineates Mai’s cross-cultural status in the passage where Thanh is dissatisfied with the apartment into which they have just moved. She believes the

apartment is “cursed” because the shadow of an antenna on the building across from their apartment has been reflected in their living room with “its long wiry spike [becoming] a deathly sword that threatened to slash our fortune and health in two” (21). Thanh orders her daughter to tell the apartment manager to provide them a different apartment where they can “deflect the curse” using mirrors (21). Mai makes use of her “New World tricks” to obtain what her mother requires (21). Knowing that Thanh’s demand will sound superstitious and even absurd for the American consciousness, Mai fabricates the following story: “‘My mother saw a green snake coming out of the drain yesterday and again this morning. There’s no way she can set foot in that bathroom again. She has a phobia about snakes,’ I added, making sure to emphasize the word ‘phobia.’ Psychology is the new American religion, Uncle Michael had once said” (22). Mai, aware of the importance of psychology in the Western way of thinking, translates her mother’s superstition and aggressiveness into “phobia.” Mai successfully reconciles Thanh’s “Confucian mysticism and the American Pragmatism” to get what she wanted (Ho 86). Despite the success Mai achieves in convincing the manager, Thanh expresses distrust toward her daughter as “somebody volatile and unreliable...someone whose tongue had to be perpetually checked and contained” (41).

Even though Thanh’s feelings seem justified, Te-Hsing Shan observes that Mai’s role as a “translator/traitor” is critical not only to satisfy her mother’s request but also to take full advantage of their situation in the South (28). Mai is pragmatic in her ability to cross both cultural and linguistic barriers to meet the needs of her mother. As a cultural translator, which results from her go-between position, Mai is able “to form a transcultural identity by learning to navigate and to accept diverse cultures” (qtd in Shan 29). Mai’s role as a cultural translator is made possible owing to the linguistic switch from her mother tongue to English she successfully

achieves. Drawing from Mary Yu Danico, Chi Vu claims that being bicultural, and “at least conversationally bilingual,” characterizes the 1.5 generation (Vu 130). In the process of constructing her subjectivity, Mai is attempting to absorb the receiving culture through her acquisition of English. She even acknowledges that “English revealed itself to me with the easy of thread unspooled” (37). By the time Thanh joins her daughter in Virginia, Mai becomes a different person with an astonishing power “inside [her] new tongue” (37). Within the short period she has spent with Uncle Michael and Aunt Mary in Farmington, Mai already demonstrates a capacity to grasp the subtleties of the language, the shifting meanings related to words like “cough” and “enough,” “bough” and “through,” “trough” and “through,” “dough” and “fought” (36). In this text, language functions as the site of transnational and transcultural bridge which connects Vietnam to Virginia, the Vietnamese refugees to the American system of values. Mai is aware of the power of language, the world of possibilities which mastering English will provide her and even Thanh recognizes that language gives Mai “access to the light-world” (37). By successfully crossing the language barrier, Mai is linguistically part of the South, though she is perceived a cultural outsider from the South.

In this regard, Suarez-Orozco et al, in *The New Immigration* (2005), point out that: “Language signifies identity and social relations. It is structured by power relations” (Suarez-Orozco et al xii). While Mai’s linguistic switch occurs almost effortlessly, the cultural adaptation is rather difficult to achieve. Cultural positioning requires a reconsideration of one’s values, belief systems, behaviors, and tastes to “reach deep enough into the folds of the earth to relocate one’s roots and bend [one’s] body in a new direction” (39). Relying on the scholarship of Chi Vu who indicates that the conflict between being linguistically immersed but culturally distanced from the corresponding society makes the 1.5 generation Vietnamese unique, I argue

that this linguistic and cultural tension deeply informs the immigrant teenager who constantly wrestles to find a middle ground between the Old and New worlds, and reconcile her queer insider/outsider position (135).

Cao delineates the complex culture and language relationship in Mai's potential to put language to creative use. One day, Mai and her mother watch a TV show about the Bionic Woman wherein the heroine rescued a teenage girl from drowning in a lake and made her promise to take her mother's advice seriously. Mai's translation to her mother goes as follows: after rescuing the girl from drowning, the Bionic Woman congratulates the adolescent for rescuing a prized police dog from the lake (38). However, no dog appears in the show. Mai does not translate the original plot; she alters the story by introducing an imaginary dog. According to Janette, "Mai establishes her ability to create worlds to which her mother can only acquiesce" (Janette 71). Mai compares her capacity to re-create through language to the cultural shock which proves unsettling and uprooting for the immigrant's identity. Simple hand gestures such as an upturned index finger to summon someone bear different meanings for both an American and a Vietnamese and can be destabilizing for the Vietnamese in exile. Despite her easy linguistic immersion, Mai clearly sees that she and her mother would not go back to "the familiarity of our former lives" (39). This passage sheds light on the complex relationship of the immigrant with Americanness, for, even though they attempt to assimilate into the host culture by crossing class, gender, ethnic, and racial boundaries, they find difficulty. Hinrichsen aptly articulates this intricate relation when she asserts that "Our individuality is always crossed, mediated, and "roped together" by culture, history, and family and the process of moving forward, especially for a survivor of trauma, depends upon a delicate crossing of boundaries and interconnections" (191). To be able to get through her trauma, Mai needs to transcend cultural boundaries.

*Monkey Bridge* examines the immigrant child that is culturally othered in the South because of her Vietnamese origins and the psychic trauma which derives from exile with its attendant cultural loss. These experiences of difficult immersion in a new southern culture coupled with the authority shift in the family which positions the child as the mother queer her as an outsider. *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* probes into the challenges of a Native American female adolescent, unacknowledged in the southern space because of her Indian heritage and who strives to maintain visibility. Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's text poignantly records the predicaments of a coming-of-age mixed-blood girl in the South. Against all odds, Hedge Coke, also referred to as Baby No, survives through her willpower and pride in Native American identity. As a child, the protagonist is abused by her mother Hazel, who suffers from schizophrenia, and as a result, alternately spends time in asylums and at home. Hedge Coke not only endures trials from the domestic space but she also experiences violence from the community outside home.

Hedge Coke suffers the consequences of the disturbing impact of her mother's schizophrenia on the family and on the children in particular. She highlights the traumatic effects of schizophrenia on her as an adolescent and how Hazel's mental illness threatens the family's stability and cohesion. Hedge Coke sadly observes that: "My childhood was forged schizophrenically by primal parental forces, grounded firmly through my father's trust, tales, and our Indian traditions while buffeted by the howling Bugger winds of my mother's insanity. What my father constructed, my mother's illness threatened to tear apart" (23). This passage delineates the tension, the oppositional forces (father's firm cultural values and the manifestations of mother's insanity) which nearly work havoc upon the family ties, thus affecting the children's self-esteem. Despite the father's endeavors to maintain the family's stability, Hazel's schizophrenic condition is devastating for the children who deeply suffered its repercussions.



The mother's actions, which derive from her mental illness, endanger Hedge Coke's and her sister Pumpkin Head's health. During holidays, Hazel would intentionally take her children to the homes of infected children so that they get contaminated with diseases such as rubella, measles, and other sicknesses.

And her mother's behavior impacts not just her mental health, but her physical well-being as well. For Hedge Coke, holiday times equate with deep anxiety, dread, and sickness. The most destructive impact of schizophrenia on the family is Hazel's differential treatment of her three offspring that rests on the "divide-and-conquer" strategy (29). Hedge Coke has been singled out by her mother as the "extra" or "bad girl" and "the most deserving of Bugger punishment," who "[always needs] the most severe discipline, fixing, and changing" because she is often considered wrong (28, 29). Such a treatment weakens the ties among the children, thus pitting them against one another. As a result, a chasm has been created between the once intimate sisters who grow distant from each other. This traumatic experience out of the outcomes of schizophrenia unsettles Hedge Coke, and destabilizes "the foundation of [her] self-worth [and] identity" laid by the father's traditional values (27). For the child who witnesses her mother being subject to terrible "torture," events prove to be so confusing and unsettling that Baby No (another name for Hedge Coke) acknowledges her "lack of control over the situation and dissociates" as a form of self-preservation (26).

The mother's mental illness forces the parents to separate from the children and creates emotional chasm between Hazel and Hedge Coke. Whenever Hazel is taken to an asylum, children should be taken from the father who, according to child welfare services, could not keep the house as a mother. Hedge Coke lays bare how government institutions sanction the

separation of children from the father, thus disrupting the paternal role and influence over his progeny. The father decides to place his children with some relatives to circumvent child welfare institutions interference. Hedge Coke is barely three when she experiences the first family split, something she “vividly remember[s]” (19). At her relatives, she always carries a postcard that substitutes for the absent father and serves as a connection between father and daughter. Living with relatives does not erase the feeling of estrangement and alienation that Baby No experiences. She realizes that they “were tabooed, because of insanity, because of the law” (19). Hedge Coke and her sister suffer ostracism from the community. The neighbors consider the mother’s illness “contagious” by avoiding any contact with them and their peers at a party isolate, and “made fun of us,” due to class difference (19-20).

Rejected by her community and suffering the harshest treatments in her family, Hedge Coke finds in stoicism and self-mutilation coping strategies for her trauma. Exposed to motherly abuse and being the target of her brother’s beatings, Hedge Coke chooses silence over her predicaments. Hedge Coke is alienated from the family and community spaces where she needs to find a sense of belonging. Also, she would rather bear physical punishment at school than telling her teachers her home sad reality. Hedge Coke’s tardiness at school results from the extra house chores Hazel demands such as “picking up dog feces [...] scrubbing the enamel-painted baseboards with a toothbrush [...] As punishment for my tardiness and bad attitude, the principal would hit me with a wooden board punctuated with drilled holes, blistering my skin where it landed” (31). Given school’s failure to comprehend and provide any help for her trauma, Baby No develops a certain hardness to pain that touches on lack of sensitivity: “No matter how hard [...] the principal struck, I did not shed tears or complain [...] I was steadfast. I continued to [...] put up with rough treatment as a part of school life. I would not cry again for years” (31-32). The

internal chaos with which she has to cope leads her to self-destructive inclinations. She regards self-starvation and attempted suicides as ways for her to solve family difficulties because she feels guilty, “responsible for our family problems and shame” (37). Smoking and alcohol compounds her self-destructiveness at a very early age: “I began to drink and smoke, tasting alcohol first at the age of eight” (38). Without a solid mother-daughter bond, stoicism and self-destructive propensity deeply influence Hedge Coke, who chooses to conceal her trauma because of a lack of support, guidance, and a nurturing presence around her. To make matters worse, Hedge Coke becomes involved into a cycle of drug-addiction, overdoses (starting in the ninth grade), and shoplifting, which bring her to a juvenile detention institution in Raleigh, North Carolina. The self-harm (mutilation, drug, alcohol), criminal activities already takes away Hedge Coke’s childhood innocence and queers her as a “deviant” child.

In addition to the self-destructive cycle in which Hedge Coke gets caught, she also suffers sexual abuse. After finishing her job at a Hardee’s restaurant, Hedge Coke naively accepts a ride from one of the restaurant’s customers. The man, taking advantage of her vulnerability, grabs her tightly to immobilize her despite attempts to free herself. He violates her even though she is having her first menstruation; “I was having my first woman time then, but it didn’t stop him. He hurt me before, during, and after he took me” (62). For a teenage girl who has left the domestic space and has no one in which to confide, this first experience of menstruation coupled with rape is so devastating that she quits her job and literally cuts herself off from the community, wandering for days in the woods, “stealing food from fields and porches and vowing never to be around people again” (62). She finds security and comfort in solitude since family and community failed her.

Aside from the assault on her body, Hedge Coke learns the hard way that the position of a mixed-blood in North Carolina is complex. She describes how dangerous it is to publicly acknowledge her Indian identity although she looks white. Hedge Coke's apparent whiteness highlights the fluidity of race and ethnicity and destabilizes the white/black binary in the South. She is subject to rejections and threats for hanging out with other people of color and sometimes in restaurants, waitresses will put "pubic hairs in [her] food as warning" (88). As Hedge Coke explains, Jim Crow North Carolina "was not an easy place to be an Indian or mixed-blood" (53). In this Jim Crow context, racial categorization pervades public institutions that Hedge Coke's father has been asked to identify as an Indian in the statements of his multiethnic job place. Sadly, these categorizations give rise to tensions among the ethnically diverse groups that inhabit and call North Carolina "home" while "a progressive diverse society might have emerged from such circumstances and intermixture" (53). In referring to the black-white divide in the South, Hedge Coke calls attention to the ironical position of the Native American, who, though originating from North Carolina where "[his/her] blood ran deep," is unacknowledged as a southerner and rendered invisible (54). The mixed-blood subject is disempowered by her position of being an outsider from the mainstream southern culture in her own land. In spite of the antagonistic relations between Native Americans and white southerners, both groups share commonalities expressed through "a fixation on storied pasts and insurmountable loss forms of a shared Lost Cause" (Benson Taylor 3). However, the Jim Crow system in the South deeply affects children's perceptions of one another, fostering violent behaviors in them. The assault of some redneck children on Hedge Coke while she is hitchhiking in Arkansas sadly illustrates the intensity of racial intolerance which has plagued the South (76).

Notwithstanding the domestic and community violent environment that informs Hedge Coke, the role of the father becomes critical in the daughter's self-perception and his teachings deeply shape her identity formation. As Hedge Coke acknowledges: "My father raised us to believe being Indian was what made us who we are – what *shaped* us" (7). Immersed in her Cherokee, Huron, and mixed blood heritage, Baby No manages to survive the rejections, violence, and abuses she has gone through. Growing up "primarily conditioned in the knowledge of [...] ancestors" through stories and myths, the father imparts a strong sense of Native American cultural identity to his daughters (Gansworth 35). Baby No recalls her father's commitment to

telling about our past surrounded us with stories, real, meaningful tales of identity that gathered us up like strands in our paternal grandmother's handmade rag rugs, pulling and binding us together so it was difficult to unravel us even when we stepped out alone. We fibers in the fabric where we came from – an Indian family, intertribal, mixed-blood, whose parents were educated yet still maintained old-way beliefs and values, who believed in ghosts but were practical minded, and who worked hard and adjusted to whatever came our way (15).

In this passage, Hedge Coke sheds light on how her parents are able to maintain a balance between and blend traditional Native American beliefs with modern American values. The father has been supportive during Hedge Coke's moments of silent self-affliction and, endurance, taking her on walks and telling her about Native beliefs in the Great Spirit (37). These moments Hedge Coke shares with her father prove valuable because they have helped her turn to rituals (prayer and burying) which have kept her from "harming [herself] much" (38). Native American cultural values provide her with a backdrop against which she can find resilience in times of challenges. Deeply immersed in her cultural heritage, Hedge Coke begins a kind of internal spiritual search, "a search and a wandering, a string of leavings" that will enable her to find emotional and psychological balance (39). Hedge Coke's immersion in indigenous cultural

values denotes Native Americans' attempt to preserve their culture that has been infiltrated by European immigration (Benson Taylor 73).

Additionally, the adolescent Hedge Coke adopts a nomadic lifestyle in her quest of emotional, psychological and spiritual stability. From her ninth grade in school, Hedge Coke has been hitchhiking around “from town to town, county to county, rez to rez, and state to state” (162). The life of wandering proves full of challenges (rapes, physical abuses, racism, and juvenile delinquency) risky to her own life, but Hedge Coke manages to survive them with her dreams, her capacity for resilience and her sense of undiminished promise. Mobility is part of Hedge Coke's ancestral way of life because she and her family either move to maternal grandparents in Canada, or to other relatives throughout the U.S. or in times of the mother's mental crisis. Thus, Hedge Coke addresses the question of migration typical of many Native Americans' lifestyle and illustrates how “moving crisscross from original to migratory ancestral homes and back would [ ... ] enable us to maintain identity” (163). Mobility is part of Hedge Coke's Indigenous identity and symbolizes Native Americans' way of defying the confinement into which they have been forced in reservations. Drawing from her father's ability to reconcile mainstream scientific knowledge with traditional cultural knowledge, Hedge Coke in her wanderings turns to activities such as gardening, field work, fishing, and hunting to survive (156). She is a “‘child bride’ sharecropper, having gardened since early childhood, taught the environment and [her] place in it by [her] father” (110). For a teenage girl, working hard in the field contrasts the standard of white southern femininity. With a non-normative female body of fully developed side muscles that can “carry fifty-pound sacks as if they were boxes of oatmeal” and by her capacity to work “non-traditional” jobs, Hedge Coke is set outside the normative standard of southern femininity (110).

In addition, Hedge Coke's growing subjectivity as a Native American in the South is intertwined with her deep connection to the land and stresses the significance of the land in Native American cultures. According to Hertha Dawn Wong, "reverence for the land was and is a traditional pan-Indian perspective" (157). In the text, Hedge Coke's connection to the natural environment through activities such as gardening, fishing, and hunting, which become normalized as part of her daily experiences, enables her to gain self-esteem in a southern environment that erases her culturally. After almost missing her ninth grade academic year as a result of constant mobility, Hedge Coke spends the summer "picking beans, digging potatoes, working horses, and doing other odd jobs" and confides that "[she] needed this work [because] it rooted [her], cementing a connection to the land" (73). Many Native American cultures have relied on subsistence economy in which women have played a major role because they are the ones who farm. This mode of production is oriented toward working for the sustenance of the community not producing wealth as in the capitalist system. Hedge Coke garners attention toward her "eco-ethos consciousness in an econ-ethos era" which emphasizes the interconnectedness of her life and work with nature (Gansworth 35). Here, she takes an ecofeminist approach which sees a connection between the exploitation of the environment and women's oppression. In her work *Shifting the Ground*, Rachel Stein states that both women and Native Americans have been subordinated in Europeans' conquest and foundation of the American nation. As a result, women's and Native Americans' treatment parallels the exploitation and devastation of American wilderness "for progressive development to thrive" (Stein 6). Despite her alienation from the mainstream southern culture, the attachment to the land represents young Hedge Coke's appropriation of her southern roots.

The presence of the non-black child of color belies the black-white divide which has characterized the South. As racialized subjects that are culturally othered, both Mai and Hedge Coke have “inside information.” Mai is able to craft a hybrid Vietnamese-American identity while Hedge Coke can reconcile Native American and mainstream southern values. Both of them experience displacement and loss, with Mai who involuntarily leaves Vietnam to reside in Virginia in the aftermath of war, and Hedge Coke forced to move regularly in reaction to the family and community abuse. Notwithstanding their southernness, both protagonists are attached to their land of “origin,” here reflected for Mai through her insistence on knowing the truth about her family’s past. To Hedge Coke, the ancestral land goes beyond geographical limits and despite her displacements, she would always “be tied to our people’s lands, where our ancestors had been born, shed blood, and were buried [...] Our original lands reached much farther than the imposed statehood boundaries encompassed anyway” (155). However, the childhood experiences Cao and Hedge Coke portray differ in terms of the trauma each child figure has gone through. War memory, exile, combined with a karmic family past and cultural adjustment shape Mai’s identity, whereas domestic and community abuse overshadows Hedge Coke’s childhood.

Because of their status as racialized subjects excluded from the normative white childhood innocence, Mai’s and Hedge Coke’s “racialized double consciousness” places the Vietnamese and Indigenous heritages in constant tension with the mainstream southern cultural values (Choys 362). Although they have been psychologically unsettled by their traumatic experiences, both figures successfully work out unique strategies that compensate for their powerlessness by “bend[ing] with bad winds but retain[ing] [themselves]” to revisit a southern identity inscribed in a transnational paradigm (155). Lan Cao and Allison Adele Hedge Coke provide counter narratives that “rewrite hegemonic and exclusionary narratives of belonging”



tied to the South and acknowledge that multiethnic realities make up the South (Hinrichsen 164). Thus, the representation of the child figure in the South highlights the fantasies created around the white innocent child and underscores the idea that trauma, hardship, rejection, alienation, and abuse shape the consciousness of the child regardless of their class, race, ethnic, and gender identity.

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