Southern Excrementalism: Disaster and Waste in Modern and Contemporary Southern Novels

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Loose Vowels and Bottoms Up

We flushed raw sewage into Boston Harbor until 1991. Into New York Harbor until 1992. Not long after the Ocean Dumping Reform Act went into effect in 1991, "the sewage industry's main trade and lobbying group, known today as the Water Environment Federation (WEF), decided to sponsor a naming contest" for treated sludge that would be repurposed and marketed for new uses (Royte 211). Over 250 ideas were in the running, but "the comparatively bland" neologism "biosolids" won out (Royte 211). Of course, the more outlandish and more obviously scatological puns and portmanteaux would never do; "biosolids" effectively cleanses the end product of its taboo or sacred status much like the processes of sewage and wastewater treatment that transform our shit first into the state's shit and then into something generative and valuable to private enterprise once again. This linguistic cleanse is an important part of the work of the waste management industry — waste is processed not only materially but also figuratively. It is rebranded from waste to product, from excess to economic entity. These linguistic shifts follow the shifting values of human bodily waste most clearly, but parallel processes of connotative revaluing accompany transformations of geological, geographical, and demographic wastes as well. Landfills and hazardous waste dumps in the U.S. have become Superfund sites and then neighborhoods or public parks with names like "Love Canal" and "Millenium Park." Gentrifying urban neighborhoods are rechristened with names more palatable to the bourgeois consumer, like South Belmont instead of Shady Bottom here in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Despite common academic understanding of the social construction of race and gender and of the performative power of language, many still treat distinctions involving waste and filth as though they are absolute or transcendent. Almost every humanist writing on waste draws on

Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, the seminal work of structural anthropology that outlines the culturally constructed, culturally specific concepts of filth and waste. Douglas portrays the taboo around dirt as a cultural universal, but she does so through specific instances in specific cultures, showing that it is a cultural construct rather than a material fact, and this is the starting point for the vast majority of thinkers and writers of waste. Julia Kristeva turns Douglas's ideas inward by bringing psychoanalysis into contact with anthropological accounts of widespread human behavior, but even Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis stops short of positing a purely biological basis for psychological dispositions toward the abject. Like Douglas's account of filth, Kristeva's account of abjection presents itself as at once universal and culturally constructed. It might be the stranglehold of structuralism and post-structrualism, and of a critical method Rita Felski and Bruno Latour simply categorize as "critique" (Latour 225) that makes the deconstruction of hegemonic definitions of waste, refuse, and dirt so appealing. It is easy to get on board with feminist readings that trouble the association between abjection and femininity or with anti-racist readings that examine the relationships between skin color and myths of purity. Yet these academic discussions remain too large-scale or too abstract to influence our thinking and behavior around quotidian encounters with waste and refuse. Domestic environmental justice discourse dismantles the power structures that place people of color near sites of waste and by extension shows the contingency of the concepts undergirding U.S. waste management systems, but the disconnect still remains between the discussion of large-scale waste management structures and reflection on individual, day-to-day actions and reactions to our own bodily margins and those of others around us.

Toni Morrison's joke about the Bottom in *Sula* is cited so frequently because it resonates with the real experiences of so many minority communities; this naming and re-naming goes both ways. The hazards of environmental waste disproportionately threaten communities of color, and communities of color are disproportionately associated with waste through the figurative workings of the language used to describe them. The bottom is up in *Sula*, and the African Americans who live there are segregated from the white neighborhoods below but hidden in plain sight, both because of their geographic elevation in the world of the novel and because of their centrality in the narrative. *Sula* constantly reminds us that Sula, Nel, Eva, Plum, Shadrack, and so many others are up in the Bottom with images and plot points that hinge, like Sula's finger's flap of skin, on bodily abjection, boundary transgression, and disgust. By setting a novel of everyday encounters with forms of waste and refuse in a geographic or topographic location culturally coded by a logic of waste and value, Morrison realizes narrative's potential for bridging the conceptual and political divide between large scale critiques of waste discourse and everyday encounters with its minutiae. But proximity or propinquity is not the only link between the macro and the micro here. The language itself enacts the processes of valuation and refusal that it portrays in the text. It performs what it represents, performs in addition to representing. The literary, by which I mean any language deployed with some awareness of its figurative possibilities, allows for this provocative proximity of large-scale, often geographic or overtly spatial forms of waste with the quotidian ways in which we also encounter it, and it also allows for the performance in addition to the representation of the processes of refusal at play at each of these levels of waste and abjection. Juxtaposition brings attention to each of the entities it unexpectedly relates, highlighting real, material relationships that often go unnoticed in the social milieus in which these relationships arise and in which their political consequences play

out. These two kinds of literary matter out of place — the plot-level juxtapositions of waste with space and the semantic displacements of metaphors and puns — create waste at the same time that they draw attention to the cultural production of waste more widely.

This project examines representations of waste with particular attention to the forms of these representations in Southern prose from the 1930s to the present. Jani Scandura identifies the Great Depression and the New Deal as sources of many enduring U.S. ideas and practices around waste and refuse, from sanitized landfills to planned product obsolescence, and her work also examines the interplay of literal and figurative senses of trash — or literal, littoral, and litter-al senses of the language we use to talk about trash, following Lacan following Derrida following Joyce. Waste as a form of excess became a signifier of prosperity: "A plentitude of trash, it was thought, might suggest a burgeoning consumerism and the possibility that corporate prosperity could soon be at hand," yet at the same time, "For many of the more than one million homeless Americans, remaking refuse was a means of survival" (19). With great admiration for Scandura's wide-ranging and methodologically rich work, this project looks at how human behavior produces waste in all kinds of overlooked or unrecognized registers and attempts to upset the typically negative connotation of waste both as a signifier and as a material signified. But in covering 80 years of literary history, I also follow some significant changes in what waste means and how it resonates as so many political and social changes take place. With scientific consensus on global climate change, it is increasingly out of touch to think of waste as exclusively a cultural production. In light of environmental justice efforts, in light of efforts aimed at reducing greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere, in light of waste management issues in increasingly-populated global cities, we can no longer read the dangers of matter perceived as waste or filth as entirely a matter of perception. Whether this is a strategic essentialism or an

actual rebuttal of Mary Douglas and so many others, the End of Nature or the Anthropocene Era in which human life has irreversibly affected the physical universe makes it difficult to deny the physical dangers that many forms of waste pose to human thriving. While this project does not delve into the material details of things like germs and dirt, it does come to take seriously the physical dangers such materials pose, and particularly their implications for the U.S.'s — and by extension the world's — poorest people. Those dangers may have existed prior to the critical advent of the Anthropocene era and prior to international discussions of anthropogenic global climate change, but poor people, queer people, and people of color have been associated with dirt and filth since long before contemporary germ theory or environmental justice struggles were what they are today. Acknowledging that technology and population growth are changing what we should talk about when we talk about waste and acknowledging that forms of dirt and waste might pose real threats to the health and survival of real human bodies, there is still work to be done around the linguistic construction of waste and abjection.

Much like things for Heidegger, waste is most noticeable when it does not work as it should — when it is visible, when it stinks, when it lingers, when it is not properly flushed away. One way this project is indeed situated in the historical present is in how waste management is more of a challenge as the world becomes more crowded and as people move to urban areas, and increasing income disparities also contribute to concerns about waste, bringing questions about waste to the fore. And besides unflushed toilets and fetid streetside garbage, waste also becomes painfully apparent on a larger scale when our communal waste treatment systems do not work as expected. A citywide water shutdown is a turd left in the common toilet; a sanitation workers' strike is a rotting piece of food in the common kitchen; an industrial toxic waste spill is a vermin in the common house. These kinds of disruptions often result from "natural disasters" — and

whether it is a lapse in garbage collection after a snowstorm or a toxic waste spill after a tsunami, such waste management problems quickly become disasters of their own. We have become more likely to label things as waste and more likely to throw around the term "disaster" throughout the twentieth century, and now in the first decades of the twenty-first, U.S. concern about "disaster" is as high as ever. With more people and scarcer resources both material and monetary, the federal government declares more states of emergency than ever before. There are of course political reasons for this, as, for instance, there are more disaster declarations in presidential election years with incumbent candidates, but the political appeal of "disaster" goes beyond the money the label brings to localities and the photo opportunities it makes for politicians (Gross 30). At times of social pressure, "Disaster" negotiates increasingly important and increasingly stressed boundaries, reconfiguring the relationship between waste and value on social, spatial, and linguistic registers.

Like so many others who write about waste, I see opportunity in abjection, or at least in the discourse around it. Julia Kristeva links bodily and societal abjection with linguistic abjection, and the space of abjection that she locates outside of the linear, rational symbolic order is capable of creativity, plurality, and resistance. Jesse Goldstein considers waste from an economic perspective, exploring how, on the path to primitive accumulation of capital, the enclosure of waste lands contributed to our sense of what waste is today. In their pre-capitalist form, waste lands were far from the used up, valueless spaces we now think of, as "they might provide bark for tanning, bees to collect honey and wax, grasses to cut as hay, pastures for animals, and even small game. Poorer members of a village community heavily relied upon the resources they could glean from waste lands, effectively allowing them to function as a social safety net of sorts" (365). But with the enclosure of the commons, the salient sense of "waste"

shifted from noun to verb, and from a matter of individual use to one of broad economic right no longer situated with the individual:

> In the common right economy, wastage was primarily understood relative to specific use rights, and not as a general condition. Enclosure pivoted on the transformation of wastage, from a political (and particular) to an economic (and general) offense. If wastage was the act of exhausting or diminishing another's common right claim to a resource, then advocates for enclosure challenged that the entire edifice of common right was itself a wastage of the improvers' economic right — presented as a natural right — to realize the maximum productive potential of all things, at all times, and in all ways. Wastage may have entailed the exhaustion of property, but enclosure fundamentally transformed what property was in the first place (368).

Goldstein cites Adam Smith and Karl Marx and many subsequent economic and political thinkers, but he also cites poets John Clare and T. S. Eliot as evidence of the shifting senses of "waste." In addition to providing this reminder of waste's entanglement in capitalism from the very start, Goldstein is aware of how these shifts in the political and economic functions of waste are inextricably entangled in the semantic functions of "waste" and "wastage."

Despite its far different starting points and trajectory, his work on waste shares something of Kristeva's recognition of the space of waste as a creative and fecund, both as the sense of the word changes and as turns of phrase we still use today find their origin. This linguistic fertility coincides with economic and artistic fertility as it was the unenclosed common waste where literal "cottage industries" like spindling, spooning, and brickmaking arose and where tree branches were collected "by hook or by crook" (365, 364). And also like Kristeva and so many others, Goldstein acknowledges how it is often women and children who labor and produce

value out of wastes, and how this is part both of waste's devaluation and of the subjugation of women and the poor as liberalism "still to this day refuses to see the activities of women, children, or the poor as productive labor" (365). Vinay Gidwani's work on waste and capitalism in India echoes this sentiment, showing how waste is associated with non-white bodies and non-white economic activity, and it also takes Goldstein's work a step further, positing a dialectic of waste that "poses jeopardy to capital precisely because it confounds capital's attempts to discipline and contain life within the domain of utility and accumulation" (781). This economic approach to the common waste is rarely the framework I use to examine literary and linguistic wastes, but some of its lessons resonate throughout. I very much admire both Goldstein's awareness of language's influence on social life and politics and Gidwani's thematic, visual appeals via photography alongside his six theses as models for the relevance of close literary and aesthetic study of waste.

And as Sophie Gee notes, waste often arises as a literary trope at times of social and political change. Political revolution and questions of monarchy and republic were the reigning issues in Gee's long eighteenth century period of focus, but for this modern and contemporary American project, disaster is the overarching category under which I classify the questions or crises of the day. Whether it is the September 11th attacks, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Fiscal Cliff, or ancient apocalyptic prophesies, disaster in its myriad forms is a twenty-first century obsession. This dissertation looks specifically at events characterized and experienced as "disasters" by U.S. residents in order to explore the evolving senses of the term and its relationship to physical and conceptual forms of waste. So-called "natural disasters" will be a specific focus because of recent figurations of "natural disasters" as effects of anthropogenic global climate change and, more simply, because of the recent increase in such events. Both the

increase (real or perceived) and possible connections to climate change have the potential to disrupt our easy acceptance of the term "natural disaster," which indeed proves paradoxical with even the lightest scrutiny. This term allows us to too easily blame "nature" for all kinds of tragedies and to ask science for impossible "solutions" to problems that are far from scientific, all while human actors avoid accountability. Social scientists refer to climate change and many of the broad issues it impacts as "wicked problems" for which finding or devising solutions is so complex as to be impossible, for which finding solutions raises other problems in the process of disentangling the many factors in play. Existing preparation and response methodologies are increasingly insufficient, and some writers call for "a paradigm shift" away from reaction and toward the proactive value of resilience, which "recognises that there is no steady-state or end result. It is process without end" (O'Brien et al. 506). In the complex and irreversible Anthropocene, then, our concept of "natural" disaster and our response to it must shift in accordance with humanity's entanglement with the natural hazards that initiate them, and

"A disaster is usually regarded as an event that overwhelms coping capacity and can require external assistance;" that is, a disaster "exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources" (O'Brien et al. 505). Disaster is, by definition, excessive, and connections between waste and natural disaster abound: both engage with and at times trouble our sense of the divide between nature and culture and events become disastrous because of the amount of waste they produce. The negative connotation or devaluing of waste and refuse parallels the ethical or moral application of the negative term "disaster" to natural events or effects, and a close examination of the language we use to define and describe both these ideas will reveal how they are linked conceptually and in everyday life.

The Global South is disproportionately affected by this increase in environmental and meteorological disasters, and as Gidwani notes, the Global South's poor and non-white people are disproportionately associated with dirt and waste at the same time that they are more likely to have to deal with the wastes of the Global North shipped elsewhere. This project looks to the U.S. South in particular as just one example among many of a South abjected by a powerful and symbolically central North that seems to dictate the narratives and language by which people are able to create connections and community in the face of social, political, and environmental crises. And the project looks to the literary because it is precisely in the play of language and in narrative that writers, and by extension communities and cultures, can negotiate these shifting terms and perhaps even push against dominant narratives that keep the Bottom up and the wealth from trickling down.

Events are increasingly labeled as disasters just as objects are increasingly labeled as waste, and, just as the waste management industry helps produce waste in the conceptual sense, the technologies of disaster management and mitigation rely on such definitions and declarations for their continued existence. This project looks at material wastes and "real" disasters but with a particular interest in their conceptual production. It also looks at the interactions between these physical and abstract aspects by closely examining language, and particularly literary language. Looking closely at how we talk about disaster will reveal not just how our words drive our thinking and our actions but also how our words create the wastes in question. The semantic slipperiness that linguistics and analytic philosophy knows as polysemy and that most literary and critical theory knows as différance produces a kind of waste along the metonymic chain, and this linguistic waste produces the material waste it also represents. The metaphors and puns produced in the WEF contest with which I began represent human waste by designating it

obliquely and by designating it as something that must be designated obliquely, as something unfit for direct representation or reference. In giving waste the status of a linguistic joke, the puns and metaphors we so often use to signify piss and shit make these bodily wastes into wastes of language as well. Expelled from the body, they are also expelled from signification, referenced via words and phrases that typically refer to other things, and which therefore, even as they refer to waste, echo with their primary denotations and relegate abject materials to abject linguistic positions as well.

For an example of this linguistic capacity both to represent and to create waste, and of the reorientation or revaluing that goes along with it, we need not turn to psychoanalysis or linguistics or post-structuralist theories of language. Popular hip-hop lyrics will do the job. Shortly before my first year of graduate school, Lil Wayne released *Tha Carter III*. On this album and on the singles and mixtapes and earlier work, I quickly noticed just how much he mentions shit. But not just the word "shit," which is common enough in popular hip-hop, but the image of shit. Lil Wayne does not just use "shit" in a figurative sense; he forces you to think of actual human excrement as he does so, so his lyrics provide a clear example of the formal phenomenon I am trying to capture and examine here, with the added emphasis of dealing with waste on the level of content as well. "Started out hustlin', ended up ballin'/Nigga I'm the shit; get the fuck up out my toilet," he raps on " La La," and "Dear Mister Toilet, I'm the shit. / Got these other haters pissed/ Cuz my toilet paper thick" on "Money on My Mind" from the earlier *Carter II* album. Putting perhaps too fine a point on it, on the official "Lollipop" remix he brags, "Flushed out the feeling of me being the shit / Cuz I was leaving skid marks on everywhere I sit," and in his part of Keri Hilson's hit "Turnin' Me On," he emphasizes, "Baby I'm the shit, / And that's the only thing you smell around me." Each of these lines starts out with an idiomatic

use of "shit," but then Lil Wayne surprisingly reminds us that to be "the shit" is to be human feces. These lines pivot on both the word "shit" and the idea of human excrement. We are so accustomed to metaphorical uses of shit that they do not usually call up an image or idea of excrement for us at all, but in these lines, Lil Wayne reminds us that this dead metaphor is in fact a metaphor by bringing back its scatological referent within its metaphorical use. When he uses the word "shit" metaphorically, the image or scent of excrement is always lurking nearby.

This contamination of the figurative by the literal can extend to language much more broadly, and Lil Wayne's hit "Lollipop" was a particular help here. The prominently punning lines, "I say he's so sweet / Think I wanna lick the (w)rapper, / So I let her lick the (w)rapper" require some orthographic choices when transcribing, and while these lines do not say anything about shit, they do say something about a different kind of waste. Acknowledging the risk of evacuating these lines of any and all their humor and cleverness, I nevertheless think they reward extended examination. The lollipop wrapper is trash; it is the outside covering we typically throw away, but here it is also a pun with "rapper" without the "w," the artist himself. This line recuperates the waste of the lollipop wrapper by making what is usually thrown away a site of linguistic interest, the punch line of the joke. If the rapper who rhymes is also the wrapper we throw away, then maybe what he produces is a kind of waste as well. The pun on (w)rapper shows how we can think of all puns as creating a kind of waste. The secondary or supplemental meaning, whichever (w)rapper you take that to be, is cast off or forgotten just like a lollipop wrapper usually is. According to philosopher of language S. Morris Engel, the pun "depends […] on this ability of language to move on two or more parallel lines at once and to speak to us on several, more or less, isomorphic levels. Only one of these levels is meant to discharge its main or primary function; the others are by-products, 'linguistic waste,' the peculiar phenomena of the

'genius' of language" (39). Engel's 1965 article seems, from what I can tell, to be entirely forgotten in Western philosophy, and it is little wonder, since Engel embraces the linguistic slipperiness that his contemporaries during the emergence of ordinary language philosophy would have seen as problematic. I could say this article is a kind of waste and thus that I am engaging in some kind of repurposing or recycling when I revive the term "linguistic waste" and expand it from what Engel calls "the lowly pun" to much wider applicability as he suggests we might. Waste is "the peculiar phenomena of the 'genius' of language," something to be celebrated and embraced rather than thrown away.

Dominique LaPorte sees waste serving a social function in his *History of Shit*, but only after it helps establish the individual subject as such. He writes:

> "Each must keep his doorstep clean": a catchy phrase, an instant proverb. Or, perhaps, a call to arms, a mobilizing and rallying *doxa*: "every man is king of his own castle"; "do not air your dirty laundry," etc. This little pile of shit, heaped here before my door, is mine, and I challenge any to malign its form. This little heap is my thing, my badge, a tangible sign of that which distinguishes me from, or likens me to, my neighbor. It is also what distinguishes him from me. His heap will never be mine. Whether he be friend or foe, this alone will allow me to recognize if we are alike: neat, clean, negligent, disgusting, or obviously rotten. (30)

As with Mary Douglas's famous work on filth as a category that indicates the threat of the stranger or outsider, LaPorte shows how we differentiate ourselves from others through our waste, and for him, the domestication of waste, the moment when we stopped simply dumping excrement into the streets, is a moment in the history of private property and of capitalism. Whereas Goldstein explores the enclosure of the commons and primitive accumulation, LaPorte

focuses, with his psychoanalytic background, on the individual experience of this stage in capital's history. But his writing also suggests another latent possibility in waste. Waste can help us see what we have in common with others, and this possibility is realized when we face it in its larger, collective form rather than while we are keeping our individual doorsteps clean. And one way in which we grapple with waste collectively is through language, through the language games we play in order to indicate waste and manage it. Lil Wayne's lyrics provide just one clear example of a phenomenon I want to explore much more widely. His graphic metaphors and puns can help us realize what they glaringly do not do — they do not represent human waste by designating it obliquely, as something unfit for direct representation or reference. Like a snow storm that stops garbage collection in New York City, or indeed like Hurricane Katrina, which left over 100 million cubic yards of debris and countless stories of human waste in plain view, Lil Wayne's wordplay might make us confront our waste in all its rich, fecund, stinky universality, and there might be potential for a more inclusive community in the abject that we all share. On a larger scale, waste makes us face our interconnectedness, and disaster is so often the occasion for such encounters.

For another pop culture illustration of this common cross-cultural phenomenon, we can consider Taro Gomi's 1977 children's book *Everyone Poops.* I spent some time reading the *Amazon.com* reviews for this book that aims to help with potty training, and, true to Freud's theories, they are full of parental stories of children who are terrified of their own poop. It seems that indoctrination starts early if 2-year-olds need an educational book to come to terms with something they do every day, and the book helps assuage bathroom anxiety by evacuating evacuation of its strangeness, by juxtaposing all these poopers — adults and children, zebras and giraffes — in a way that, paraphrasing Dominique LaPorte, likens everyone to her neighbor. The

children's book responds to a very common experience of embodiment that brings up feelings of isolation by showing how that experience might actually be a shared one. It builds community around waste practices, around a basic bodily need and also around the often-complex cultures we have built around hiding it.

Hurricane Katrina quickly became representative of major "natural" disasters, and it remains an icon of failures of disaster preparation and disaster response. In many media, failures of disaster management appeared as failures of waste management whether implicitly or explicitly, and Katrina became either a sudden, shocking exception to the American way of life or a terrible example of the overlooked oppressions that keep the American dream alive. Katrina might be a limit case for the idea of "natural disaster" itself. It is impossible to know what aspects of the event were "natural" and which were "unnatural," and often it is even impossible to pinpoint just what "Katrina" signifies in any particular context. Like climate change and other wicked problems, Katrina is at the center of what Susanne Moser calls "two differently pointed arrows – the human transformation of the environment and the human adjustments to the environment" (465). "Katrina" gets wielded as a signifier of nature's fury, of large scale governmental failure, of a commander-in-chief's public relations catastrophe, and this flexibility also makes it an illustrative example of the difficulty of describing or defining any particular "disastrous" event, and of the political and social consequences of how we assign blame and responsibility for the many forms of damage they cause. In this indeterminacy, "Katrina" is often an instance of polysemy, whether intended to include the multiplicity of possible signifieds or intended as a signifier of just one supposedly uncontroversial meaning of the term. This polysemy makes "Katrina" a particularly good word from which to explore and advance a theory of linguistic waste, and the conceptual confusion that this polysemy grows out of makes Katrina

a particularly appropriate cultural event to ground a study of the material connections and consequences of this linguistic phenomenon.

In the Anthropocene Era, we cannot know for certain whether Hurricane Katrina had entirely natural or non-human causes, and regardless of this question, we certainly should not blame all the injustices that fall under the title of "Katrina" on the storm of the same name. In some ways, Katrina is an accident, a byproduct, a "waste" of the complex networks and relationships that abject the U.S. South and its minority poor. The persistent poverty that Katrina revealed became exemplary of what and whom globalization leaves behind, of exceptions to the assumed trickle down effects of neoliberalism, so it revealed a kind of waste or by-product, and additionally, the event itself was a kind of byproduct — with so much manpower, money, and political will focused on the War on Terror and the global trade networks that inspire and sustain it, thousands of deaths and billions of dollars in damage can occur more easily in the U.S. That this is the U.S.'s Deep South is probably no coincidence either, and at the very least it is formally fitting: globalization sustains the abject Souths it opens to capitalist investment and progress; it treats them as places of waste.

But calling Katrina a waste of American progress or globalization is of course too neat and tidy. It remains unclear whether Katrina is an exception to the happy narrative of growth and expansion and the trickle down effects of opening new markets or an illustrative example of how this narrative is a sham. The former perspective allows for a neoliberal recuperation of the event and its aftermath, for the discourse and political opportunism that Naomi Klein so forcefully outlines in *the Shock Doctrine.* The latter, in contrast, indicts neoliberalism for its structural and systematic failure to account for the experiences, voices, and well-being of the underclass it sustains. Lloyd Pratt proposes the concept of the Event (after Alain Badiou and Jacques Derrida)

as a way around this dichotomy of example and exception (Pratt, “New Orleans and Its Storm," “In the Event”). “The event must fall upon us vertically; it must come from a place that never functions as anyone’s horizon,” so framing Katrina, or any complex historical event, in this way provides a way out of the linear or teleological historicism that is often American Studies’ methodology (Pratt, “In the Event” 6). We cannot predict an event, nor can we know it in the moment because it is always slipping away from us, and it resists historicizing after the fact: “as it slips away from us, the event draws us across conventional chronological and cartographical divisions of time and space” (Pratt, “In the Event” 7). Pratt’s example of an event is in fact Katrina, and the special issue of *Differences* focused on the event that he edited features articles on the Haitian revolution, the Algerian war, and the end of the world. Indeed, the descriptions of the event that begin most of these articles could just as easily define the concept of disaster, and I look to disasters as the historical formations around which this project’s chapters are loosely structured.

I begin with Katrina for personal reasons, having evacuated New Orleans 36 hours before the storm, a newly minted college graduate with mercifully little to lose but also little life experience to guide me through evacuation and recovery. I spent weeks on friends’ and relatives’ couches watching hours and hours of cable news, an activity I would not recommend under any circumstances now, and particularly not when you are a small part of the biggest news story at the time. Katrina holds an outsized place in my psyche and in how I narrate my own life, and it provides a methodological starting point for this project. Chronologically, Katrina and its aftermath end this project, but they do not provide a conclusion. There is no history here that leads directly and neatly to this disaster. Instead, Katrina as an Event and its location on the Gulf Coast provide a critical opening through which I could glimpse a project that brings together the

concepts of waste and disaster, explores the status of "nature" in the Anthropocene, and "cross-stitches time" and space, all on a foundation of close attention to the play of language (Dimock 39). Katrina is occasion for all these things, perhaps even a text itself for all these things, if we include under the name "Katrina" not just the weather event and the physical damage but also the experiences of millions of people in the U.S. and beyond and the many cultural artifacts they produced in response, both in late August of 2005 and for years to come. "Katrina" in this sense stitches time and space in one capacious word.

Katrina is also, even if indirectly, an event that launched Lil Wayne to international fame and prominence. He was making music long before, but his particular rags-to-riches story became much more widely compelling once images of dead bodies in the streets and very much living hot, sweaty, dirty, pissing, and shitting bodies were seared in so many minds after the storm, and his connection to a city I love and an event that affected me so deeply is a big reason I ever delved into his oeuvre. The popular post-Katrina interest in New Orleans in particular and the Gulf South more broadly only continues to grow as millennials head South in search of the financial, educational, and artistic opportunities that many other U.S. migrants have helped create in the wake of massive demographic and political changes in the region. It is difficult to analyze such massive shifts that include so much good yet come out of quite questionable governmental responses to the storm and its aftermath and tend to overlook the people who need resources most. Rebecca Solnit explains disaster's potentially salutary effects:

> For the individual, some of the distraction, pettiness, worry about future or brooding about past is swept away. People feel they have something in common with the people around them when the physical disaster isn't overlaid by racism or other imposed social disasters; they feel urgency and immediacy; and they feel satisfaction in resolving

> immediate and clear needs. Meaningful roles, work and social connections are all possible when things go well, which means that in the aftermath people are free to improvise the best conditions of survival. So there's both a psychological transformation and a broad social one. ("On How Disasters")

For Solnit, disaster can build community by diminishing selfishness, by breaking down the barriers we all erect between each other and allowing people on the ground to build up a thriving civil society, and even, by extension, allowing critics to make connections across accepted divides. But Naomi Klein emphasizes communal trauma instead of communal recovery: "the preferred method of advancing corporate goals: using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering" (9). "The shock doctrine," she explains, "mimics this process [of psychological shock] precisely, attempting to achieve on a mass scale what torture does one on one in the interrogation cell" (20). These vastly different accounts of disaster were each published and indeed developed with Hurricane Katrina as a prominent case study, showing how a multiplicity of interpretations or foci are possible in this vast array or assemblage of circumstances that constitute "Katrina" or indeed any disaster. In keeping with Katrina's fecundity for theorizing, this project starts and ends with that major "natural" disaster but also considers literary representations of other nodes of linguistic play, material waste, and disaster and its effects to gesture at an account of disaster as both a modern mode of organization and a formation particularly familiar to and associated with the U.S. South.

The first chapter examines William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, a 1939 volume of two alternating narratives that many critics have taken as having little or nothing to do with one another. Charlotte Rittenmeyer's abortion attempts and eventual death share something with the unnamed woman's labor in the Tall Convict's skiff, and these women's embodied experiences of

abjection are reflected in the geographies of each of their stories, with Charlotte and Harry continually disrupting their lives to move to new places and the Tall Convict and woman floating without much guidance around Mississippi and Louisiana. The 1927 Mississippi Flood is the occasion for one story while the Depression is the background of the other, each a major waste-producing disaster. Julia Kristeva points to the abject as giving access to a realm outside of logic, or an alternative logic in the semiotic sphere, and the openness of signifiers particularly as the two stories end demonstrates both how waste encourages linguistic play and how disaster can bring people and plotlines together in unlikely but potentially salutary ways. The two women never meet, but the two male protagonists very likely meet beyond the narrative horizon, bringing the two seemingly distinct narratives into some kind of unity after disaster and loss.

The second chapter does not take up a precise "Event" like Katrina or the 1927 flood, instead taking Cold War paranoia and concerns about the Nuclear Bomb as the disaster that looms over the mid-century. Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* features a narrator on an existential search who contends, repeatedly, that nothing can break the "everydayness" he seeks to escape except for "disaster" (145). Binx Bolling wonders and fears the bomb falling, but the disaster that helps end his search ends up being one of familial and romantic drama instead of nuclear war. *The Moviegoer* moves between global disaster and intensely personal misfit feelings in the face of such events. Speaking of his time wounded in a ditch during the Korean war, Binx explains, "what are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best" (11). This movement between the local and the global, which in its way marks a shift in meaning or metaphors for words like "disaster" to indicate both nuclear destruction and Binx's Aunt Emily's scolding, is of a piece with Percy's interests in both linguistic realism and community and connection. Language is the uniquely human method by

which we develop community, he explains in his philosophical writing in *The Message in the Bottle*, and this second chapter goes on to examine narrative as the method by which Percy conveys some of his existentialist ideas obliquely or indirectly and the mode in which knowledge is created and legitimated after scientific behaviorism lost its credibility in postmodernity. Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* provides a framework for considering Percy's relationship with the postmodern both as a novelist and as a philosopher. In the introduction to his *Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard famously defines *postmodern* as "incredulity toward metanarratives," and as he concludes, he writes, "we can resort neither to the dialetic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (xxiv, 60). His emphasis here on little stories as the constitutive building blocks of appropriate narrative language games leaves room for a much more literary form of philosophy that shares much with Walker Percy's own commitment to the novel as a path through the nothingness left in the wake of modern disaster. This chapter picks up a scatological thread in *the Moviegoer* (that runs through much of Percy's other writing as well) and ties it to the novel's literal and figurative disasters and to Percy's sustained interest in the ways disaster can, as Rebecca Solnit points out, bring surprising clarity and build community. Disaster is by definition disruptive, but stories, plots, literature also require disruption if not by definition, by custom or expectation.

Percy criticism, and indeed much literary criticism on Southern writers, shares in some assumptions or expectations that writers are influenced by and participate in a Southern history of storytelling and oral performance. Whether it is a real influence on particular writers or not, this image of intimate storytelling and cross-generational understanding through narrative

remains today, a Southern version of the Puritan call to narrate one's own salvation that lay the groundwork for so much New England literature. And the South capitalizes on this enduring image in many ways, via tourism and food culture and popular media. For instance, renowned storytelling performance series, public radio show, and podcast *The Moth* tells its own origin story with a hint of the local color of Southern writing a few generations earlier: "George [Dawes Green] wanted to recreate, in New York, the feeling of sultry summer evenings in his native Georgia, where he and his friends would gather on his friend Wanda's porch to share spellbinding tales. There was a hole in the screen which let in moths that were attracted to the light, and the group started calling themselves The Moths" (TheMoth.org) .The origin and appeal of storytelling as it is constructed here depends on a particular sense of the South from outside the South. That South remains charmingly old-fashioned, pleasantly slow in contrast to the quickness of New York as synecdoche for the rest of the country, a place where people sit around on a porch telling stories instead of working late or pursuing money and career goals. That porch — the same place where Janie Crawford tells her story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* — is both an interstitial space between the inside and outside and between the domestic and the public. In the case of *the Moth*, that screened porch is both sheltered from the sun and rain and permeable to heat and humidity, and that hole in the screen makes it additionally vulnerable to the bugs the screen is largely meant to keep out. In the same way that New York stands in for the North or the U.S. as a whole, this screened porch on the Georgia coast is a synecdoche for the South in the American imagination — slower, kinder, and rougher around the edges than the rest of the country that has moved beyond its antiquated, lower-tech ancestor.

My third and final chapter bites off quite a lot in attempting to account for both the evolving role the South plays in the American imaginary and the role that close attention to language and the workings of narrative might play in our understanding of the Anthropocene Era. Jesmyn's Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* returns me to Katrina, and it echoes some themes of abjection and women's association with waste from the first chapter. Narrator Esch's memorable 15-year-old voice brings in narrative forebears from the Ancient Greeks up to and including Faulkner, these literary predecessors providing a kind of inheritance that Esch's now-motherless biological family cannot. Esch is able to make sense, via the classics of tenth grade summer reading, of everything from her love life to the hurricane that destroys so much that she knows, a remarkable element of her narration that connects to Percy and Lyotard's ideas about narrative after disaster. Esch shares something with another young motherless female narrator, 13-year-old Ava of Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*, a novel released the same year in which a family of alligator wrestlers mourns the loss of their mother to cancer and the loss of the enchantment and pre-Columbian fantasies that allowed them to keep their dying Swamplandia! theme park afloat in the South Florida muck. If Esch is enchanting a poor, dirty, diseased world with Edith Hamilton's mythology, Ava shows us both the allure and the danger of enchantment. Sometimes storytelling and narrative create bonds when we need them, and sometimes they provide escapes we need just as much. But as Ava's sister Ossie's story and Ava's own misguided attempt to rescue her in the wilds of the swamp show, there are times when storytelling and fantasy are no match for the material realities of an Earth that can still resist human agency even in the Anthropocene. I end this project that is so much about sound and sense, about linguistic play and pushing on particular words or particular utterances to signify more and more and more, by acknowledging that language has limits and indeed that it can bring

us right up to our limits, that we might still be rendered silent by the world, that there might be some kind of Anthropocene hope in such silence.

Chapter 1
"Women, Shit": Abjection and Disaster in William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*

1.

In the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the media was scrambling for context, for historical precedent, for narrative, and often enough, they went back almost 80 years to the great Mississippi flood of 1927, which affected New Orleans and so many other places along the river's long course. Newspapers and magazines ran stories comparing the two events or just noting the spike in sales of books like Dave Barry's *Rising Tide*, about the 1927 flood. In the days following the storm, musicians from Tori Amos to Bob Dylan revived "When the Levee Breaks," a blues tune about the flood by Memphis Minnie and Joe McCoy, also revisited by Led Zeppelin in the 1970s. As time went on and the "flood" of Katrina commentary grew, academics started to make this Mississippi Flood comparison as well. In literary studies, Anthony Dyer Hoefer looks to William Faulkner's 1939 novel *the Wild Palms* (or *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*) as a point of comparison, showing how the multimedia representations of martial law and police brutality after Katrina looked and sounded a lot like the literary representations of Jim Crow violence.

While Hoefer looks to the novel's flood narrative involving two Mississippi state prisoners during the record 1927 flood, this story and Hoefer's analysis of it only account for half the text. *The Wild Palms* contains two separate stories with histories of separate publication, and it takes its name not from the story that so prominently features the 1927 flood but from the tragic love story that most critics, and Faulkner himself, considered the center of the "novel." There are not easy or obvious terms for the parts of this book, or the sections of this narrative or the chapters of this novel, for that matter. Book history, narrative theory, and plain old literary criticism overlap here as I delicately determine when to refer to the "book," the "volume," and

the "novel," and to call it a "novel" is indeed an interpretation as it is perfectly reasonable to approach its contents as two distinct works. Provisionally, I call each part a "narrative" or a "story," recognizing the shortcomings of each term as one goal of this chapter is to read against the grain of both the critical tradition and the volume and its paratextual elements and thus to trouble the easy distinction between the two parts. Hoefer rightfully returns to "Old Man" as a prominent point in the literary pre-history of Katrina, pointing to its representation of racial difference, criminality, and incarceration in a time of disaster. Yet he does not engage with the other narrative within Faulkner's work in any meaningful way, instead pointing out some striking parallels between Faulkner's work and Richard Wright's "Down By the Riverside," now collected in *Uncle Tom's Children* but originally published the year prior to "Old Man"'s first appearance. He explores connections between two related yet distinct narratives, but because his focus is more thematic than formal, similarities, parallels, rhymes, connections across the pages of *The Wild Palms* are not the work of his article. I take up a line of inquiry that is outside Hoefer's purview but which his return to Faulkner and his connections across texts invite. Wright and Faulkner write contemporaneous Mississippi flood stories almost contemporaneously, so what becomes possible or available if we consider the river's fertility for figuration in addition to the fertility it forces on the fictionalized lands it floods? The river gets title status in "Old Man," but it also provides geographical grounding and orientation for "The Wild Palms"'— and thus *The Wild Palms'* — erratic movement around the U.S.

The eponymous story follows the illicit love affair of Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer all over the U.S., never mentioning the river, and it is easy enough to see how this story might bear little formal or thematic relationship to the unlikely adventures of two male prisoners accidentally escaped from the state penitentiary during the great flood. But Harry and

Charlotte's story begins in New Orleans, a city dependent on and in so many ways determined by its relationship to the river, and it ends on the gulf coast in the state of Mississippi, bringing the seemingly disparate storylines strikingly close together geographically as well as thematically. The fictionalized river is indeed central to each story separately, whether in its presence or its absence, and it offers a physical and conceptual connection between the two much as the actual Mississippi connects spaces and communities across its watershed. It is not just the river that connects part of this volume, however; it is the flooded river of "Old Man" that exceeds, overflows, reaches beyond boundaries physical and narratological. The nameless man called the Tall Convict of "Old Man" ends up travelling hundreds of miles down the flooded river after rescuing a pregnant woman. Already a state prisoner and a woman with a child (presumably) out of wedlock, they inadvertently escape from prison, give birth prematurely, and find temporary refuge within a Cajun community on the margins of Southern society and American geography. The flooded river takes the plot to these places and it also makes the language of excess and overflow available as analytical tools for understanding the action and affects within the narrative and this narrative's connections with the other. In this light, the convicts' wayward movements are not only out of place because they are outside of the prison where they should be confined; they are also out of place because they are highly unusual events, movements, experiences for the geographical environment in which they occur. The latter emphasizes the former— it is easier to see the prison break as a displacement or even an abjection because it occurs as a result of a natural hazard that is itself an example of what Mary Douglas called "matter out of place."

The materiality of the river is so often at the forefront of Faulkner's narrative, and that materiality is wet, dirty, brown, and other adjectives evocative of filth and waste rather than

order, swiftness, majesty, or whatever our antiquated ideas of America's great river might be. In this flood, the river crosses over the boundaries it has created for itself and that so many of its living neighbors have reinforced in the built environment, making these muddy waters "out of place." The physical threats of this disruption are clear enough, but this flood also threatens the social order by muddying the physical boundaries that underlie or reflect so much of our social apparatus for designating difference and belonging. Geographical features like rivers form official municipal boundaries, and they also so often coincide with value judgments we make about people and places. Douglas's examination of kosher laws, for instance, suggests that eating pork is barred because of the pig's ambiguous status as a hooved animal that does not chew the cud. Its unclean status derives from how it disobeys not only conceptual boundaries but physical ones, not fitting neatly into one category or another. Douglas goes on, in a later preface to her earlier work, to explain that the pig's sacred status is tied to its behavior and its place in the wild and in captivity as an animal that is not herded by humans. It is "sacred" in the original sense of "sacer;" it is set apart, it is outside the conceptual boundaries that we use to make sense of the world and outside all the physical boundaries that indicate these conceptual categories in a kind of liminal space between them. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's account of urban rats reads similarly. Rats can live in many habitats including the home and the field, but they became more prominently associated with the sewer, where physical proximity to trash and human waste — abject material kept at a distance — makes them fearsome and Other (143). Similarly, the river in "Old Man," or more precisely, its water and the things it caries exceed the physical boundaries, natural and constructed, that dictate what is river and what is land. So when the river is running backwards or when logs and livestock are floating about, they are matter out of place, and so are the Tall Convict and the Plump Convict as they row the skiff in the flood. The skiff is

given to them by a prison guard who sends them to rescue stranded residents. When it capsizes, the Plump Convict makes it to safety but assumes the Tall Convict drowned, making him a dead man in the eyes and minds and ledgers of the prison guards and warden, making him at once a living breathing body and a being with no legal personhood, homo sacer. Giorgio Agamben emphasizes the homo sacer's paradoxical status as "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (*Homo Sacer* 8, 11). This "obscure figure of archaic Roman law" is thus another in-between instance, the human version of figures like the pig or the rat whose symbolic value supervenes on spatial categorizations into which it does not neatly fit (*Homo Sacer* 8). Theory is full of such figures and such troubled categories as the work of critique has categorization and its impossibilities perhaps right at its core, and the setting in "Old Man" brings this kind of thinking to the forefront.

But it is not just that Faulkner's work provides a nice narrative reflection for theorizing generations later. Rather, Agamben's work provides both insight into the boundary-crossings in *The Wild Palms* and a way of synthesizing much of the thinking on disaster and waste that this project brings into conversation. I seek to explicate Agamben's ideas with Faulkner's fiction as a guide and then to connect the state of exception as a political and juridical concept to the Event as a temporal one. The waste in Faulkner's double narrative emphasizes the exceptionalness of the events and people portrayed and serves as a site for examining the example/exception question that Lloyd Pratt so incisively outlines in his writing on Katrina, and then that question shares a structural similarity with the paradoxical "state of exception." The structure of *The Wild Palms* emphasizes this "included … solely in the form of its exclusion" structure not only in the subtly overlapping narratives but also in the language characters use to make sense of the exceptional world around them (Agamben "Homo Sacer" 8). When these narrative, linguistic,

and interpretive structures overlap, an aspect of modern American life and literature comes to the fore and we might conceptualize the peculiarities and transgressions of modern and contemporary Southern literature in a new light.

Informed by the U.S.'s actions after 9/11, Agamben develops his theory of the state of exception using events that push the limits of the state's sovereignty to explore the nature or definition of state power itself: "if the law employs the exception — that is the suspension of law itself — as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law" (Agamben, *State of Exception* 1). Agamben's interest in state power is not entirely abstract, so his focus on the suspension of law arises out of particular historical circumstances in which the law was in fact challenged, stretched, or suspended. His intellectual history of the state of exception or state of siege shows that, contrary to what we might expect (or contrary to what I myself expected), a major crisis or Event in Alain Badiou's sense need not precipitate these exceptions. He traces the origins of the concept in a few different political traditions: the "state of siege," that arises when a government consolidates decision-making and defense power during the dire wartime circumstances as outlined in late 18th century French law, "martial law" and "emergency powers" in Anglo-Saxon theory, and the German "state of necessity" are all terms he examines, but he chooses "state of exception" to

> "[imply]a position taken on both the nature of the phenomenon that we seek to investigate and the logic most suitable for understanding it. Though the notions of *state of siege* and *martial law* express a connection with the state of war that has been historically decisive and is present to this day, they nevertheless prove to be inadequate to define the proper structure of the phenomenon, and they must therefore be qualified as *political* or

> *fictitious*, terms that are themselves misleading in some ways. The state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept." (4)

So while it is easier to identify the state of exception at moments or defined periods of crisis with clear beginnings and ends, a major import of his resuscitation of Carl Schmitt's early twentieth century political thought is this recognition that the state of exception is not so exceptional in this important sense. Many thinkers across disciplines have noted that geopolitical conflict increasingly takes the form of ongoing undeclared war without clear beginning or end, but even beyond this extension or transformation of our sense or definition of crisis, the state of exception does not in fact depend on exceptional circumstances.[1] The state of exception for Agamben is another of the exceptional theoretical concepts that creates the rule, or in this case "defines law's threshold or limit concept." But even if the state of exception is a kind of status quo, it remains rhetorically — and I think thus philosophically — expedient to focus on the acute catastrophe or the temporally bounded war as we characterize and analyze the state of exception. Just as my introduction looks to instances of linguistic waste in Lil Wayne's words and phrases that at turns obscure waste and then point to it, the disaster of the 1927 Mississippi Flood as Faulkner represents it provides an occasion for understanding not just the state of exception at an exceptional time but the state of exception as a modern phenomenon.

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[1] Another situation that deserves consideration here is what Rob Nixon has famously termed "slow violence." Nixon links this temporally extended form of destruction to chemical spills, nuclear waste, dam-building and water management, and the myriad and wide-ranging effects of global climate change. Slow violence is disaster's odd twin: like the catastrophic and (seemingly) timebound events that structure this project and on which this project comments, slow violence affects the global poor disproportionately, but precisely because it is slow enough for outsiders to ignore, slow violence does not result in furious and frenzied responses and exceptional situations yet it nevertheless points to the state of exception as the status quo. Slow violence provides conceptual access to the state of exception without war, siege, or event. See Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Harvard UP, 2011).

The idea here is simple, but worth rehearsing again for the semantic play that can arise. For something to be exceptional, there must be some standard from which it deviates. Lloyd Pratt explores this phenomenon in his work on Hurricane Katrina, though he gets at much broader applications than the storm that so dearly damaged his hometown. The paradox, though, is that when something is exceptional, it no longer belongs to the class of things from which it is excepted. An exception is an excerption, so it cannot also be an example, a property that would challenge this approach of looking to exceptional circumstances to understand the status quo. Yet the notion of the example presents its own ontological issues, as it is impossible for something to be or to be made into an example without it also changing its status as a member of a class. The example – the synecdoche, the singular instance by which we semantically and conceptually access a larger whole – can never be representative, can never actually make the connection we want it to make. This paradox of the included excluded that arises so frequently is an example of the waste-making capacity of language, a property that is both omnipresent and acutely remarkable in instances such as these where language is not only unable to capture thought but is what makes thought impossible to represent. Discussing the example-exception problem requires getting entangled with the problem at best, or it is just impossible at worst, making my attempt at discussing and synthesizing these decentered dialectics a potentially vain one, or just another instance of the slippery phenomenon I seek to pin down.

So what then can the flooded river, the birth, the abortion, the adultery, the accidental jailbreak show us? These events and more are so extraordinary as to be unbelievable if, say, you heard of them in conversation, but in fiction they are the things for which we suspend disbelief. Most fictional plotlines, poetic moments, and chapters in a memoir have something that makes them notable and worthy of writing, but even regardless of content, all literature is, by nature,

exceptional. We can think of this exception as something in literature like the defamiliarization and plot (as distinguished from story) that Russian Formalist Victor Schklovzsky sees as constitutive of the literary or instead as an effect of how literature circulates and how we read it (Schklovzsky 16). Regardless, we tend to differentiate literature from the larger categories of writing or language or communication, so even the category "literature" itself is excerpted from a larger semiotic class. All of this is to acknowledge how difficult it is to make a case for the exemplarity of a particular text when exemplarity itself is at issue, but nevertheless, Faulkner's narratives in *The Wild Palms* offer exceptional social and environmental circumstances, exemplary images of waste, and plots that exceed their textual boundaries — a combination that makes the volume a site for clearly examining and explicating phenomena and philosophy that connect form to content and text to context.

Early in *State of Exception*, Agamben points out that the state of exception "constitutes […] an emptiness of law, and the idea of an originary indistinction and fullness of power must be considered a legal mythologeme analogous to the idea of a state of nature" (6). That is, the notion of the state of exception relies on a political ontology of a chaotic pre-legal state of nature from which the moral and political contract allows humanity to escape and form society. So an exception or departure from that peace-keeping and order-making and modernity-defining contract might be a return to the state of nature, a return to an original condition. And despite the nastiness and brutishness of that originary chaotic indistinction, returns to prior conditions are usually associated with renewal or rebirth. The conditions that led to the state of exception, whether war or disaster or even the slow violence of inequality, are conveniently erased by this return to an idealized and imagined earlier condition. In this light, the state of exception would mark a break with the status quo that, no matter its merits, would be associated with worldliness

or even sin. The break from it then might carry some of the symbolic or social resonance of a return to Eden after a rapturous destruction of a society that had lost its way. But Agamben establishes from the start, in *Homo Sacer* as well as in S*tate of Exception*, that the state of nature is a "mythologeme" that his ideas on the sovereign exception deconstruct. In his view, the sovereign's power over life is evidence of the persistence of the state of nature even after the social contract, destabilizing the differences between the state of nature, society, and the state of exception and reinforcing his depiction of the state of exception as the first principle or first situation of the law (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 35). The mythologeme of the state of nature is thus an invidious one that contributes to the expansion or consolidation of powers with the executive during times perceived or presented as exceptional. This post-traumatic "clean slate" is an important part of Naomi Klein's theory of disaster capitalism in *The Shock Doctrine*, in which she traces the centrally-controlled takeover and sell-off of the commons that so often comes on the heels of war or disaster. Whether it is Klein's critique of a particular strain of global neoliberlalism or Agamben's political-theoretical deconstruction of the state of nature as a first principle, the idea of the exception brings with it the invidious idea of a return to an idealized earlier time.

Cleansing, renewal, rebirth, a return to Eden — these ideas are also the promise of every flood myth, an archetypal story on which *The Wild Palms* draws. If "generally the flood marks a new beginning, a second chance for a sinful humankind or for creation itself," then the possibility of the Tall Convict's escape from prison is not so much a criminal act as a chance at redemption (Leeming). But in keeping with Naomi Klein's portrayal of authoritarian disaster response, that possibility recedes as the mechanisms of the state of exception that created this hope and potential also shut down the prisoner's transformation with redoubled force. Mary

Douglas's notion of matter out of place characterizes the geography and materiality of the flood in particular and the work of Agamben and Klein characterizes the legal or political situation during and immediately following a disastrous event like the 1927 flood Faulkner depicts. A flood physically moves matter out of place and occasions a state of exception in which power is concentrated and force is amplified, and the literary representation of a flood invokes or at least inherits the symbolism and ethical implications of the Biblical flood and flood narratives the world over.

Ted Atkinson's recent reading of *The Wild Palms* in relation to the Popular Front picks up on the importance of the river here and across Faulkner's oeuvre:

> "The Mississippi River and the 1927 flood add both archetypal significance and meaningful historicity […]The river may run through "Old Man," shaping the plot and driving the action, but it breaches that storyline to surface implicitly through recurring images of water, waves, and flows that underscore the chronic precariousness of Harry and Charlotte's predicament and create resonance between the stories." (50)

Additionally, the excess and overflow of the flood in "Old Man" emphasize the corporeal and symbolic abjection for the text's women, connecting them formally across their distinct narratives, and since "[t]he flood myth is the given culture's 'dream' of rebirth, re-creation, and renewal from the chaotic maternal waters," it is in these characters' exceptional experiences that excess and abjection and the exceptional situation that arises with the flood waters can come together and reveal connections between language and waste, waste and the state of exception, exceptions and Southern life (Leeming).

2.

In “the Wild Palms,” Charlotte and Harry’s illicit love affair is troubled but also sustained by experiences of physical and psychological abjection and by the social liminality that these events cause or reflect. Feminist readings of Faulkner seem to emphasize these relationships and narrative crossings, but often in ways that end up reinforcing the patriarchal categories and hierarchies their emphasis on fluidity and connection claim to disrupt. Deborah Clarke claims that the female bodies in *the Wild Palms* elude male power and control, and Charlotte and the nameless woman are two of many Faulknerian women who “reveal masculinity for what it is: a fiction” (122). Minrose Gwin suggests that the mighty flooded river provides structure for the entire volume by connecting the storylines (130). On the other hand, Joseph Urgo looks to Charlotte’s abortion as a structuring device of disruption, emphasizing the disjunctions between the two storylines (257). While I sympathize with Gwin’s view that Charlotte Rittenmeyer’s excessive desire is mirrored in the text’s intertwining form and thus find Urgo’s emphasis on disruption limiting, I see these neat narrative metaphors as related rather than opposing, each offering something the other lacks (134). Charlotte’s abortion and the nameless woman’s labor suggest the abject as a category for analyzing each story, and for understanding the volume as a whole. Gwin’s reading offers a metaphorically rich account of the book as feminine, sexual, corporeal, but, as Anne Goodwyn Jones points out, “Gwin's optimistic reading of Charlotte Rittenmeyer depends on suppressing certain more ominous textual moments in *The Wild Palms*,” namely the real physical pain she suffers and her death that results from all this desire and overflow (Jones n.p.). Urgo’s reading takes more seriously what Jones calls “historical women” and the impossible situations that gender binaries create for them, so a union of Gwin’s reading of menstruation and flow with Urgo’s more realistic social engagement might allow for the kind of formally rigorous and socially aware reading that this chapter’s theoretical framework sets up.

One of Patricia Yaeger's goals in *Dirt and Desire* is to provide a corrective to "a huge Faulkner industry that both overshadows and tames the terms we use for reading southern women's fiction" by recovering "a sense of the ways race functions in the nonepic everyday." With some hesitation, I redirect her insights about texts written by women to writing by a man from whom she wants to distract the academy's attention, and to a text whose elements are anything but quotidian (Yaeger xv). But her category of "throwaway bodies" can and should include men and women alike such as the Tall Convict, the stranded woman, and Harry and Charlotte because their marginality is written on their bodies by the forms of wastes they encounter or produce and cannot properly flush away (63). And the Mississippi flood creates a landscape of waste that emphasizes the transgressions within each story and the narrative transgressions that connect them in the end, a spatial and location-specific reading that would be at home in her book and in her later work on waste and water (Yaeger, "Sea Trash"). She finds Mary Douglas's structuralist ideas too limiting, the pan-cultural binary between dirty and clean or holy and unholy too neat and tidy for the images and metaphors that her archive offers up (Douglas 9). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's oft-cited formulation is more appropriate for her reading and for mine: "what is socially peripheral is frequently symbolically central. The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of the political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture" (5-6). The excluded low-Other is included by the very act of its exclusion, and thus the moral judgments attached to dirt and cleanliness reveal that a theory of dirt, waste, or refuse is, to return to and rework Agamben, "the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds, and at the same time abandons any living being" into the laws of gender and the laws of narrative as well (1).

Julia Kristeva divides the abject into the categories of the menstrual and the excremental, and it is the menstrual that informs Gwin's explicit focus on menstruation and also her interest in flows and flooding. The menstrual threatens the subject from the inside. Rather than Mary Douglas's dirt that always symbolizes the threat of the outsider, the menstrual contaminates from within and thus threatens the distinction between inside and outside or self and other. Charlotte and the unnamed woman, Harry and the Tall Convict, "the Wild Palms" and "Old Man" are both opposed and mutually constitutive. Faulkner himself said that "Old Man" provides a "contrapuntal quality" and serves to "underline the story of Charlotte and Harry" (Gwynn and Blotner 171), but we should know better than to trust the author, and so many critics who follow his word and focus more closely on Harry and Charlotte than on the prisoners in the flood. Many people who write about waste note the potential for waste or dirt or filth to serve as a kind of crossroads, as a point of contact for disparate ideas or for working across conceptual categories. Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox say it can "link theoretical work, physical spaces and environments and their representations, the world of material objects, communities and individuals" (6). William A. Cohen sees filth as "a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity, and material objects converge (viii). Rebecca Solnit explores the ways in which disasters bring people together across all kinds of social divides that become obsolete during crises and in their aftermaths. And even though she ultimately disagrees with Solnit quite significantly, Naomi Klein also presents a picture of disaster in which moments of collective shock are moments of vast political change, but rather than individual citizens (re)forming an ideal civil society as Solnit sees it, it is the powerful central government that finds opportunities in the wake of disaster to take freedoms away from the shocked populace in what looks much more like the consolidation of powers in Agamben's state of exception. Disasters

and waste, then, are both crossroads, and as process or events, they are both transgressive. Waste is both literal and figurative, and the physical and environmental effects of disasters rhyme with the social ones. In *the Wild Palms*, the 1927 flood creates a landscape of waste and brings certain characters into association with literal and figurative forms of waste, and these associations bring them into unlikely relations with each other.

Rather than seeing the Mississippi River and its epic flood as central, Urgo follows Faulkner's own statement and the way the printed volume emphasizes "the Wild Palms" over "Old Man" and focuses on the lovers' story and finds structures from it to expand to the volume as a whole. He interprets Charlotte's abortion as an attempt to transgress female gender roles, but because it is also an attempt to "unplug" from the only source of female power (motherhood), she not only fails to transgress or transcend, she must die. In Urgo's terminology that follows the MTV "Unplugged" trend of the 1990s, "the unplugged man signals life and vitality, but the unplugged woman invites death: she is suicidal" (255). He goes on to claim that *The Wild Palms*, with its two separate storylines and the fits and starts within each of them, "is comprised of a series of narrative abortions" (257). And because "An abortion, moreover, declares an end not only to an embryo, a potential child, but also aborts a mother and a father, potentialities contained as well within the womb," Charlotte's abortion aborts the entire parenting triangle, not just the fetus, and it also aborts Harry and her life together (Urgo 259). Like all transgressive acts, abortion risks reinforcing the relations of power that it pushes against and exceeds, in this case, the feminine gender role. Thus if the book is a narrative abortion, it is also somehow feminine in form, a broader idea with which Minrose Gwin would agree, but which does not fully account for "Old Man." Urgo claims, "no matter how many parallels in theme and image we can find, these two stories still have nothing to do with each other" (260).

For Urgo, the abortive aspects of the book are not enough to connect the sections in a significant manner, perhaps because he sees abortion as an abrupt end to something rather than a process that might in any way offer connection or community as part of its embodied social practice. A revised version of this abortion trope and closer attention to the "real" abortions in the text can reveal how the sections relate to each other and connect the abortive process of abjection to other forms of refuse in the text.

Harry and Charlotte's story takes place ten years after the flood so this great disaster is not exactly part of their story, but their adulterous love leads to catastrophe as well. But first, their story is only possible because of something found in a trashcan. As he leaves their first disappointing rendezvous without having consummated their affair, Harry finds twelve hundred and seventy eight dollars in a trashcan:

> So he walked on to where a trash bin sat at the curb-edge and, while the people passing glanced at him with curiosity or briefly or not at all, he opened the bag and removed the bricks from the towel and dropped them into the bin. It contained a mass of discarded newspapers and fruit skins, the casual anonymous droppings of the anonymous who passed it during the twelve hours like the refuse of birds in flight. The bricks struck the mass without a sound; there was no premonitory buzz or whirr at all, the edges of the papers merely tilted and produced from among them, with the magical abruptness with which the little metal torpedo containing change from a sale emerges from its tube in a store, a leather wallet. It contained the stubs of five pari-mutuel tickets from Washington Park, a customer's identification from a national gasoline trust and another from a B.P.O.E. lodge at Longview, Texas, and twelve hundred and seventy-eight dollars in bills. (43-4)

This list of discarded items is a great example of the unlikely convergences Jani Scandura identifies with the material propinquity of waste landscapes, and here the literal and figurative blur together as the "little metal torpedo" of the analogy piles up with the tickets and the ID and bills. The waste bin's capacity for juxtaposition and for this blurring of literal and figurative recurs in the unlikely experiences and encounters in the novel. This money that he finds allows Harry to leave New Orleans and live with Charlotte, to live a life outside of or even as the waste of bourgeois society. As Dominique LaPorte points out in *History of Shit*, modern definitions of waste contribute to modern ideals of private property and personhood. LaPorte literalizes Thorstein Veblen on conspicuous waste. Whereas Veblen claims that the "wastefulness" of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption is a purely economical concept completely divorced from the excremental basis of the metaphor, LaPorte maintains that the accumulation of wealth parallels the accumulation of dirt and shit. In an inversion of Laporte's image of sweeping one's bourgeois Paris steps, a destitute Harry finds money in the trashcan of a city that France long ago discarded, and it allows him not so much to become an individual but to unite with someone else. Instead of becoming a bourgeois individual through the management and domestication of his own waste, Harry flouts the restrictions of polite society by taking on someone else's waste and revaluing it not as his own but as fully and completely shared between himself and another.

A part of LaPorte's focus on shit is that it always stinks; waste always carries a trace of its bodily origin, and that is precisely why it is troubling: "Shit is not pernicious in and of itself — only through its recent association with the flesh" (36). Harry and Charlotte's relationship thrives on this abjection, on how their illegitimate love is almost respectable enough to let them pass as married, but strangers can always tell that they are not. They hover near legitimacy, near the

behaviors of a typical marriage, but their love depends on keeping this close but never attaining it. Charlotte becomes pregnant through a failure of waste management, both because it was the result of a frozen and broken douchebag and because the seed was not wasted after all. She insists on an abortion, another abjection required to maintain their love, another form of waste that, like the cash from the trashcan, metonymically reflects their marginality while also bringing them closer together. Charlotte undergoes the abortion and suffers the direst consequences, but Harry performs it. The narrative presents the abortion as about a collective an act as it could possibly be, and the fetus is perhaps a perfect example of a form of waste that can make one recognize one's relationship to another.

As mentioned, Urgo looks to Charlotte's abortion as a structural metaphor for the volume of alternating chapters. He calls it "abortopoeisis," saying that the volume with all its fits and starts "is comprised of a series of narrative abortions" (257). It is no surprise that he sees the volume as disjointed when the pain and ugly reality of Charlotte's abortion is his focus; for him, the "real" social and physical and existential consequences for Charlotte and Harry (death and prison, to name the most obvious ones) take critical precedence over structural metaphors Charlotte's body and decisions about it might offer. Deborah Clarke and Minrose Gwin (above) embrace excess and flow as connective, a modification of earlier Faulkner scholars like Irving Howe who were committed to examining the well-wrought earn of the novel rather than a potentially messy or excessive narratives. But each nevertheless emphasizes connection, whether through fluidity or through crisp analytic parallels, and recognizes ways in which "the Wild Palms" and "Old Man" overlap and interact, and this brings me back to the idea of waste as a "crossroads." Following Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's ideas on transgression across conceptual categories, I see this crossroads in Faulkner's text at the same time that I want to use

this text and all the texts in my dissertation as theoretical crossroads. Forms of waste bring Charlotte and Harry together and the Tall convict of the other story also constantly encounters literal and figurative forms of waste, and the interpersonal or community-building possibilities that I was exploring earlier are enacted in the form of the narrative, both in the way the chapters alternate in the book itself and in the way that images and themes from one story contaminate the other.

In this "secondary" story, the convict's chance at escape from Parchman penitentiary is both created and prevented when he is sent out to rescue a woman stranded in the flood. All the worry about adultery and about women who might "have done this kind of thing before" (38) and who bleed from unspeakable places early in "the Wild Palms" bleeds into "Old Man" so that even before he (and we) discover the stranded woman is pregnant, she seems like trouble, just because she is a woman. These stories are not simply placed side-by-side or anthologized together; they could certainly be read independently, but they would be different stories than the ones in the book. Charlotte's abortion is mirrored or inverted in the unnamed woman's premature labor in the skiff. Sexual inexperience connects Harry the almost-doctor to the Tall Convict serving time for train robbery. Instead of conceiving of this style as "abortive" for each story, Minrose Gwin sees the style as specifically menstrual, and she sees the interruptions as "bends" in the river of the story, emphasizing unity and celebrating female fecundity rather than focusing on disruption, separation, or the trauma of abortion. And even while Urgo sees Charlotte's "unplugging" from traditional feminine sources of power as dangerous, tragic, and narratively disruptive, that disruption provides the kind of upheaval that might allow for both the theoretical connections he resists and the attention to the real conditions of women's lives that he repeatedly returns to.

The flooded river brings narrative tributaries together. In "Old Man," the convicts first see the flooding river from the back of a work truck that is driving down the road "on a raised levee, known locally as a dump" (52). Presumably this is because levees are built out of dredged up earth dumped and packed near the river banks. Often levees blend in — plants grow on them, roads are built atop them, etc. — but like so many objects they become noticeable when they stop working. They become "matter out of place," Mary Douglas's oft-quoted and fundamentally spatial definition of dirt (44). Adding to the spatial peculiarities of this scene, Parchman penitentiary, where these convicts are imprisoned, does not even have what we consider a typical prison campus; it is more of a chain gang, a camp in the colloquial sense and in Agamben's sense of the perfect model, and reality, of the state of exception. Parchman prisoners are inside the prison camp whose purpose is to keep them outside society, but when the camp does not have clear physical boundaries as at Parchman, that absence of demarcation makes the camp's interstitial legal status more apparent. And since the prisoners are working on that levee when the river exceeds its boundaries and sets their narrative in motion, their multiple interstitial positions emphasize their exceptional status. When the levees break along the Mississippi, their status as a form of waste becomes apparent as well. The dump becomes dirt once again, and that dirt itself is distributed or dissolved in the river, which is portrayed as brown and dirty or muddy throughout the novel. The river becomes a "dump" in Jani Scandura's sense — it collects a hodgepodge of plants and animals and refuse, and it also brings people together in ways that parallel Rebecca Solnit's invocation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in her studies of disaster. Once the Tall Convict is floating down the river in a skiff with a pregnant stranger, these two people are in metaphorically abject positions much like Charlotte and Harry, but unlike the doomed lovers, they have not chosen their situation. It is the flooded river, brown and full of

flotsam, that brings the Tall Convict and his female passenger into contact with so many forms of waste and thus metonymically emphasizes their abject societal roles, and it also brings them into an unlikely relation with one another. Left to scrounge for food, to look for water, and even to deliver a premature baby in the absence of any kind of bureaucratic assistance, the Tall Convict and the unnamed woman form one of the "spontaneous communities" Rebecca Solnit celebrates as a result of disaster.

Even while Charlotte and Harry intentionally evade "respectability" and bourgeois standards, attempting to control their own fate in a world that makes it difficult, the imagery of natural forces in their narrative emphasizes what they are up against. Surprisingly, it is from Joseph Urgo that I take this structural metaphor for understanding Charlotte and Harry's situation, and by extension, the Convict's as well: "When the man is unplugged, a nostalgia for lost power in turn provides him a new source of vitality. When the woman is unplugged, it is not nostalgia that emerges but a kind of natural disaster" (255-6). Harry and Charlotte travel to a number of different places — Chicago, Utah, San Antonio — when they leave New Orleans, but they go to the Mississippi coast after her abortion. There seems to be no particular reason why they go here instead of any number of other low-rent locales, but the flood overflows the "Old Man" section and pushes them here, allowing these two sections to connect. Charlotte dies shortly after they arrive in Mississippi, and when Harry refuses to run away as she wants him to, he is charged with her death.

So Charlotte's particular suffering, the emotional agony of her desire proving at last unsustainable and this heartache transmogrified into the pain of infection, transforms into something only describable obliquely, in metaphor. After Harry's arrest and after some very nervous time spent in the interstitial space of the hospital waiting area, he is allowed to see

Charlotte after her death. In some combination of free indirect discourse and Faulkner's characteristically modifier-filled narration, death is described:

> "It was more than just a slackening of joints and muscles, it was a collapsing of the entire body as undammed water collapses, arrested for the moment for him to look at but still seeking that profound and primal level much lower than that of the walking and upright, lower than the prone one of the little death called sleep, lower even than the paper-thin spurning sole; the flat earth itself and even this not low enough, spreading, disappearing, slow at first then increasing and at last with incredible speed: gone, vanished, no trace left above the insatiable dust." (257)

Charlotte desires to "unplug" from motherhood and the expectations and repressions of women's lives in the 1930s South, but like water flowing beyond the dykes and levees and floodwalls created to contain it, her desire is only disastrous or tragic because of all the social structures that have been erected to contain female desire and autonomy. Harry sees her reaching "that profound and primal level" not so much because she is no longer living but because she died trying to achieve a way of life without the encumbrances of traditional gender roles and class expectations. Some of the worrisome clean slate and state of nature associations arise with this disaster metaphor as they do with most flood narratives, but the result of this figurative return to a more primal time and space is neither quashed dissent nor beautifully anarchic civil society. Harry seems to recognize the magnitude of Charlotte's death for his own life and perhaps even as a cultural event in these words, but this final chapter of "the Wild Palms" narrative witnesses the development of his commitment to keeping Charlotte's individuality differentiated from the "low" and "disappearing" dust that her limp body on the stretcher indicates. Far from heralding some shift toward her own empowerment, her death — this form of "unplugging" that proves all

Charlotte's other attempts and approaches insufficient — leaves her as yet another woman spoken about and spoken for, cataloged and made anonymous by the civic institutions that perpetuate the gendered expectations from which she seeks to escape. Undammed water, in other words, is just plain water.

A problem with this imagined return to Charlotte's primal "undammed waters" for Harry is that he wants her memory to live on as long as possible. Even as he accepts her corporeal death, he wants so badly for her identity, her spirit, not to be subsumed by the "spreading, disappearing" he sees in her dead body on the stretcher. With some difficulty, he slowly tries to understand his own situation and Rittenmeyer's motives for assisting him. During his time in a Mississippi jail cell before his court appearance, "a driving squall, the tail of the hurricane struck," and while listening to the roar of the storm and the river and gulf's response, Harry recalls Charlotte's body, the clinical efficiency of his and her treatment at the hospital, and that "natural disaster" of her death and its aftermath (264). Considering the calmer weather inland, he thinks, "it would be a good deal like the park where he had waited, maybe even with children and nurses at times" and "there would even be a headstone soon, at just exactly the right time, when restored earth and decorum stipulated, telling nothing; it would be clipped and green and quiet, the body, the shape of it under the drawn sheet, flat and small and moving in the hands of two men as if without weight though it did, nevertheless bearing and quiet beneath the iron weight of earth." (265). This squall transports Harry, or his thoughts, back in time to the park where he waited for Charlotte and in space upriver from the jail's Gulf view to the spot he imagines (erroneously, surely) where Charlotte will lay unremarkably to rest. "*Only that cant be all of it* he thought. *It cant be. The waste. Not of meat, there is always plenty of meat.…But memory. Surely memory exists independent of the flesh*. But this was wrong too. *Because it*

wouldn't know it was memory he thought. *It wouldn't know what it was it remembered. So there's got to be the old meat, the old frail eradicable meat for memory to titillate*" (265). Here Harry begins to recognize that death can be a process of becoming waste. Charlotte's individuality would so easily slip away into the formalities, customs, and civic structures (that "the jail was somewhat like the hospital" shows how it all blurs together) that can make her into a mere thing and then into nothing at all (258). It is a hurricane, another waterborne disaster, though in this case a real one, that occasions this realization, a point that supports so many critics' varying views of water, flow, and overflow in the text but one that fewer have examined through the framework of disaster and emergency. Solnit shows us how crisis can put things in perspective, how disaster can prod us to examine our values and commitments, but here Harry himself faces no harm from the edge of the storm so it is the figurative associations of the storm that inspire him rather than imminent threat.

But a more acute personal crisis does shortly follow on the heels of the storm outside the jail walls. His hurricane-inspired reflection "was the second time he almost got it. But it escaped him again" (265). Soon he gets a shave, a new shirt, a public defender, and a walk to the courthouse (which "was like the jail in its turn") for his arraignment, and after he pleads guilty and is swiftly sentenced to "hard labor in the State Penitentiary at Parchman for a period of not less than fifty years," he finally comes to understand Rittenmeyer's persistent attempts to help reduce his punishment (266, 270). With "the palm clashing and murmuring dry and wild and faint" outside the jail as he has observed it and listened to it throughout his time there, Harry understands in "no flash of comprehension" but in "just a simple falling of a jumbled pattern" that Rittenmeyer has consistently, persistently come to his aid not out of generosity or forgiveness but because of a promise to his wife that Harry now finally recollects (271-2).

Rittenmeyer's bail money, his escape ideas, his attempt to speak in Wilbourne's defense in court, and even the cyanide tablet are all tokens of a kind of chivalry because they are done for Charlotte, for her own desires and despite or regardless of his own. All those offers of assistance, then, are part of the culture of respectability that Harry and Charlotte were always evading, and part of what Harry finally comes to understand is that he must reject each and every one. Harry knows her memory can only be alive in the flesh, and particularly in his own flesh, so he grinds up and discards the cyanide pill, finally and forcefully rejecting the almost-too-late return to respectability it offers.

In an elaborate gesture, an impromptu but weighty waste-disposal ritual, Harry Wilbourne "rubbed the tablet carefully into powder on one of the lower bars, catching the last dust in the box and wiping the bar with the cigarette paper, and emptied the box onto the floor and with his shoe-sole ground it into the dust and old spittle and caked creosote until it had completely vanished and burned the cigarette paper" (272). Having made waste of the tiny pill that held the potential to make him into waste, to transform the memory-holding flesh into just the plain dead meat to which he always compares it, he finally synthesizes, finally comes to the epiphany he has been approaching and avoiding since Charlotte's death: "*Because if memory exists outside the flesh it wont be memory because it wont know what it remembers so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be. Yes* he thought *Between grief and nothing I will take grief*" (273). These grammatical sentences also keep Charlotte's memory alive in characteristically Faulknerian style by dancing around what would seem to be the most relevant or central words, "forgetting" and "death," making a point of their absence, including them as it excludes them. This is also a kind of linguistic waste not with the multiple meanings of a pun or metaphor but instead with a kind

of plurality in conspicuous absence. And also haunting this excerpt is Faulkner's original title for the novel, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* drawn from the 137th psalm, which reads "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." The allusion is now typically bracketed in the volume's title and cast off in shorthand, as I have done throughout this chapter, so the book history generates some waste here as well. With this rich sentence, Harry accepts his prison sentence — he accepts the abject status of a lifelong inmate in order to keep his love for Charlotte from ending completely, and in keeping with his emphasis on living memory or memory in the flesh, we might say that Charlotte ends up in prison as well. Harry will be sent to Parchman penitentiary, where the Tall Convict is serving the extra ten years he gets for supposedly attempting to escape during the flood ten years prior, when he ended up hundreds of miles downriver toward the trash bin where Harry and Charlotte's affair begins. Encounters with waste bring each pair together, and disasters in each narrative — "natural" and otherwise — bring the two narratives together on some extra-narrative horizon. So when the Tall convict, back on a prison bunk once again, gets the last word in the book 10 years before Harry even finds himself in jail, his final dismissive comment is so rich with connotations, with possible interpretations, with linguistic waste: "'Women, shit,' the Tall Convict said" (287).

When I give presentations drawn from this work, I avoid reciting this line so as not to intone any particular interpretation or close off any others. Shit is fertile, and so is the particular construction of this seemingly simple sentence. The structure of the quotation leaves the verbal punctuation of the Tall Convict's statement vague — "Women, shit," perhaps with something to follow it or the more definitive "Women, shit." with the period only assumed, occluded by the line's syntax. Besides foregrounding the mediation of literary representation or even of writing itself, the grammar here leaves this line not so much open for interpretation as overtly inclusive

of many meanings, all the possibilities of which I cannot fully account for. And this ambiguous or deliberately inclusive syntax also emphasizes the fecundity of the diction here as well. This is not shit at its most fecund, but it is "shit" at its most metaphorical and most fertile because of its precise location within the sentence and its place of emphasis in the text's final line. Whatever the Tall Convict said has a certain amount of pith and poise just because it concludes the last chapter of "Old Man" and the volume as a whole, and that this story that Faulkner called "contrapuntal" to the love story of Charlotte and Harry gets the last word in the divided text also seems significant, a structural aspect that brings attention to this incredible line and elevates it to retroactive, overarching, teleological significance. Yet it remains so frustratingly open-ended and opaque all at once, a point of analytical entry perfectly befitting the account of critical waste reclamation and recycling I am developing here. This sentence is in the position to make an impact, to tie a neat bow around a story, or two stories, in which little goes as planned, and it is spoken from the confines of a prison bunkhouse, from the position of excesses and deviations once again cleaned up and contained. But Parchman is a strangely open prison that contains people as they move about the state, and this line spoken there moves between many semiotic possibilities through its semantic content, through the performance of its utterance, and through its orthographic rendering. "Shit" has force and finality precisely because it contains so many possibilities. Just as the text never satisfies our desire for a narrative synthesis of Harry Wilbourne and the Tall Convict together in this strange space, it also evades linguistic univocality or conclusion, instead opening wide the possibilities for interpretation of desire never quite consummated and unions and unities never quite reached.

3.

But it all ends just like it begins for me, with Katrina. In the novel, the Tall Convict and the woman drift uncontrollably southward to the Atchafalaya basin, another space of waste, where a cajun man takes them in. This man and the community he is a part of are, like the Convict and the woman, on the limits of American society. The Tall Convict recounts his first encounter with them, prompting his interlocutor "the Plump Convict" to ask if he was "clean out of America."

> "Because now, he told them, he began to notice for the first time that the other people, the other refugees who crowded the deck, who had gathered in a quiet circle about the upturned skiff on which he and the woman sat […] staring at him and the woman with queer hot mournful intensity, were not white people—
>
> 'You mean niggers?' the plump convict said.
>
> 'No. Not Americans.'
>
> 'Not Americans? You was clean out of *America* even?'
>
> 'I don't know,' the tall one said. 'They called it Atchafalaya.'" (Faulkner 201)

These cajans are, to two white convicts sitting in a jail bunkhouse, even worse than black people. Their speech, which the convict goes on to describe as "gobbling" (201), is so strange that it somehow makes black people into proper Americans in comparison. This place is not "clean" out of America—the Tall Convict does not know where he was, so it is interstitial, or abject in the sense that it is neither in nor out. The convict's abjection is magnified by the river's dirtiness, excess, and unpredictability, and the cajans' abjection is magnified by the convict's defensive reaction toward them. And the geographic location matters here as well. The Atchafalaya is the area straight South before the Mississippi curves eastward toward Baton

Rouge and New Orleans (see fig. 1). This is where the river "wants" to go, but the levee system keeps it from following its "natural" course. If we think of the Mississippi River as central to American geographic identity, the Atchafalaya is an American bottom. So also is New Orleans and areas further South. LaSalle claimed territory for France in the sixteenth century based on what land the Mississippi River drained, and "drainage" maintained some kind of nationalist connotation at least until the late nineteenth century when the "source" of the river was memorialized in Minnesota (Heyman 311).

Figure 1. "Gulf of Mexico States and Watershed," *epa.gov.* Web. 28 July 2016.

What, then, is the significance of a disaster at one of the lowest points along a drainage system? As Lil Wayne calls it, Lousiana is "the boot at the bottom of the map" ("Georgia Bush") and if we take the drainage idea a step further, the "mouth" of the Mississippi is where America shits. This is funny, but I also think it might be useful for making a big stitch to Hurricane Katrina as a space and time of abjection and historical rupture. Anthony Dyer Hoefer points out

many interesting connections from Jim Crow literature to the response to Katrina, including the striking similarity between the police shooting at the Tall Convict in Baton Rouge and all the shots fired at people trying to evacuate New Orleans after Katrina (550). This is just one example of how people were treated like and linguistically figured as waste post-Katrina, and there is also the media obsession with overflowing toilets in the Superdome, repeated images of corpses in the streets, and the whole "refugee" issue. The South is not only the North or the whole nation's Other; it is also America's bottom. It is a place for all kinds of social, economic, and environmental troubles we do not want to think about but that an event like Katrina forces us to confront. I may run the risk of glorifying tragedy, of capitalizing on the pain of others simply by writing about disaster at all. But following Rebecca Solnit and many others, I hope we can find fecundity in waste and build community after disaster precisely because such an exceptional and exemplary event can allow us to dwell in the interstices from which communities are built and new ideas become possible. Surely there is an American history through disaster, and there can also be a literary history through the linguistic play and the conceptual switchpoints of wet, muddy, excessive, dirty Southern literature.

Chapter 2
Out of the Shithouse and into Desire: The Mid-century of Merde and Walker Percy's Postmodern Subject

"Q: You even seem to take certain satisfaction in the disasters of the twentieth-century and to savor the imminence of world catastrophe rather than world peace, which all religions seek.

A: That's true."

"Questions They Never Asked Me" from *Conversations with Walker Percy*

Binx Bolling, narrator of Walker Percy's first novel *the Moviegoer*, is most easily read as a shell-shocked white Southerner who evades his self-styled malaise by driving convertibles, pursuing his secretaries, and reflecting with an air of superiority on the vapid contemporary life in which he readily partakes. Percy's is a mid-century novel haunted or even pervaded by the threat of the nuclear bomb, a trait it shares with so much of the "postmodernist" literature produced shortly after it. But *the Moviegoer* does not share in the obvious playfulness, difficulty, distraction, or kitsch that characterizes so much of this aesthetic moment and gives those works a certain staying power and relevance to their millennial ironist inheritors, and neither does it contain the grittiness that characterizes so much of twentieth century Southern literature and indeed the most popular cultural productions of the South today. *The Moviegoer* may not invite discussions of race and class in the Jim Crow South, but neither does it deflect such engagement by means of postmodern playfulness or pastiche. Yet the novel features a protagonist who laments living in "the great shithouse of scientific humanism where […] one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God" (228), a situation akin to Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern condition of incredulity toward the metanarratives of both science and religion. Bolling takes refuge in desire, the only thing he sees as remaining after the death of the human spirit with the bomb's literal and figurative fallout. He ogles, flirts, and philanders with secretaries and a step-cousin, but Lyotard takes a kind of refuge in desire as well,

ending his "Report on Knowledge" not with information or data but with a political desire for the unknown that only a flexible, evolving, narrative form of knowledge can begin to satisfy.

The Moviegoer is hardly postmodernist in form like so many fractured and self-referential narratives that follow just a few years later, and Percy himself was committed to a realist linguistic philosophy and to Catholicism in contradistinction from the nihilism he saw in continental theory. Lyotard explores themes common to some of the European contemporaries Percy would dismiss, but he also engages much more directly with analytical discourses in philosophy, science, and mathematics, bringing their commitment to material realities into conversation with what he calls the human sciences. Lyotard's ideas provide a way to integrate Percy's novel with some of the ideas he dismisses outright as nihilism in his philosophical essays and commentary, a project worth pursuing for literary purposes as much as philosophical ones. So often read as a philosophical or religious novelist first and foremost, Percy is often taken as a novelist of ideas rather than an artist whose works take particular care with craft and detail and form. Binx Bolling might be on a Kierkegaardian quest, but the prose of *the Moviegoer* demonstrates some of the epistemological and narrative shifts that Lyotard identified as characteristic of the postmodern condition.

One of those shifts is toward a recognition of the semantic richness and epistemological possibility in language games precisely because of the increase in quantity and accessibility of information that computerization could, with the right political choices, make possible. In light of Lyotard's frameworks and formulations, *the Moviegoer*'s playful language and extra-regional digressions can appear as responses to contemporary legitimation crises that make secular humanism so disdainful to Binx, thus situating the novel as postmodern and perhaps even on the cusp of being postmodernist. At the same time that mid-century American life is presenting Binx

with a glaring everyday emptiness he seeks alternatively to fill and to avoid, both his recent experience in the Korean War and the social, economic, and geographical changes afoot in his Jim Crow New Orleans position the novel at the beginnings of a (more) global(ized) Southern literature that features growing, changing Southern cities instead of or in addition to the rural (and often dirty, poor, backward) scenes characteristic of Percy's Southern generation and his predecessors. Connecting Percy's religiously-informed ideas on language and thought with Lyotard's godless epistemology reframes Percy's novel as not only a regional one and not only a philosophical allegory.

Binx Bolling flounders in a Southern city that is coming to resemble all the other sprawling, suburbanized areas of the U.S. If *the Moviegoer* is primarily confined to the upper-middle class strivings of stockbroker Binx Bolling and the Garden District Cutrers and thus seems to share little with William Faulkner's Mississippi or, say, *Duck Dynasty*'s recent rural Louisiana, the novel's sustained interest in waste and the abject would then seem to point to questions not of race or region but of meaning or meaninglessness long associated with the excess and dreck of the postmodern, and Lyotard's emphasis on the emancipatory potential of language games gives some additional framework and context for interpreting the forms of linguistic waste that this text produces. *The Moviegoer* is very much a New Orleans text, a Southern text, and a text through which we can discern, perhaps against the grain and via linguistic play and vibrant bodily imagery, an engagement with the questions of abject bodies and abject spaces. This examination of waste and excess connects the novel to both the excess and dreck that scholars of postmodernism highlight and to the damp dirty places associated with the American South, for reasons in turn and at once genuine and insidious. These themes position Walker Percy's first novel in relationship with increasingly global Southern literature

and postmodernist fiction and theoretical discourse, yet we should not lose sight of the religious and philosophical underpinnings that no Percy critic can entirely ignore. The waste imagery and playfulness with the language of waste provide a framework for these connections, and for connections between Percy's ontological realism and Lyotard's narrative-driven epistemology.

In *the Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard looks to narrative knowledge in the face of the "legitimation crisis" he diagnoses in traditional science, pointing out that postmodern science "is producing not the known, but the unknown" (60). This is not so different than Binx Bolling's sense of the emptiness of his friends' and family's beliefs in God, in humanity, in pharmaceuticals, and in the virtuous activities of their daily lives. Indeed, Binx Bolling sees through both the rational individualism that helped create the atomic era and which persists as scientific humanism on the one hand and the religious belief on which many people, including some of his family, rely in the face of destructive atomic power (Boyer 211). For Lyotard, both science and religion offer "grand narratives" that suffer "the problem of the legitimation of knowledge" because "We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse" (Lyotard 60). But we still have "the little narrative" or the story as "the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (60), a leftover of modernism that postmodernist literature and science alike, according to Lyotard, work with in the face of this collapse of certainty and metanarrative. Little narratives, little stories, are what can still inspire and affect and educate, so the age-old human practice of storytelling still holds sway even after its much grander metaphysical offshoots have collapsed under atomic force. Little stories are indeed the things we now think of and refer to under the signifier "story" even if

"grand narratives" share structural similarities and give little stories narrative framework with which to play.

Mythmaking and storytelling are of course pan-cultural practices, but in the U.S. South storytelling has a particular cultural history that artists have drawn on, celebrated, and transformed for hundreds of years. Lyotard's emphasis on stories and storytelling in the absence of grand ontologies or moral systems shares something with this contemporary and historical Southern practice of storytelling as community-building. It also relates to Lyotard's use of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games to account for legitimation and variations in belief and behavior across discourse communities. Games are played, and play is a practice that Lyotard emphasizes more and more as his study goes on. Storytelling, yarn-spinning, "spellbinding" with tales that entertain and connect teller and listener are all language games that emphasize their own status as games as they rely on the play of sound and sense to effect their speech acts. The sensory qualities of language signify along with the semantic. These are games played by rules that precede them, rules developed collectively and progressively and modified by previous players, but also with room to be modified by each individual. Rules are themselves a form of play, so here the two senses of "play"— as organized, rule-bound moves and countermoves on the one hand and creative, non-teleological, clever, or indirect action and communication on the other — reveal their shared origin. And story, or the novel more specifically, is essential for Percy as it is of a piece with his religious and philosophical projects:

> For Percy, the novel afforded the best means to 'bind together' the mysterious truths of concrete experience, unable to be represented by theory, with the ramifying extensions of meaning and significance encoded in particular signs. Stated differently, novel writing was the mode through which Percy could best conduct his own personal search for

> meaning and community. It was a test of his faith in the power of the word, and not just an intellectual challenge or an aesthetic exercise. (Desmond 11)

The process of writing is part of spiritual quest and development for Percy personally, and this approach also shows how the aesthetic can do the analytic work of philosophy. Like his existentialist predecessors, Percy philosophizes in and through narrative, and more specifically like Søren Kierkegaard, the philosopher he most admired and who gives *the Moviegoer* its epigraph, Percy attends to form, to detail, to nuance in words as a way of exploring and exemplifying the Word he read and believed. Yet there is room for a secular reading of Percy's linguistic play. Both the Kierkegaardian existentialism and the (Charles) Peircian linguistic and ontological realism that Percy's own philosophical writing guides us to look for in his fiction arise for him out of the same cold war aimlessness or emptiness that Lyotard examines, and the terms Lyotard uses can help connect Percy's fiction to contemporary American trends beyond his region and beyond the conservatism with which he is usually associated. Because he considered himself as much a philosopher as a novelist by the end of his life, Percy presents some difficulty for the contemporary literary critic accustomed to a less authoritative author, an author who does not so extensively offer section-by-section interpretations of the philosophical underpinnings of their work. But those philosophical underpinnings come from a literary-minded philosopher whose work gives us plenty of groundwork for seeking out and embracing obliquity and against the grain interpretation.

Kierkegaard, or rather his pseudonymous creation Johannes Climacus, offers some methodological assistance in the "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," where he explains direct and indirect communication and its relation to objectivity and subjectivity:

> When one person states something and another acknowledges the same thing verbatim,

> they are assumed to be in agreement and to have understood each other. Yet, because the one making the statement is unaware of the duplexity of thought-existence, he is also unable to be aware of the double-reflection of communication. Therefore, he has no intimation that this kind of agreement can be the greatest misunderstanding and naturally has no intimation that, just as the subjective existing thinker has set himself free by the duplexity, so the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free, and for that very reason he must not communicate himself directly; indeed, it is even irreligious to do so. (Kierkegaard 192)

Indirect communication is thus preferable because subjective thinking is a step on the path toward the religious worldview that is the goal in Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism. The religious stage can only be reached by a leap of faith, a process so irrational as to be radically individual and impossible to capture in words, impossible to communicate directly or even indirectly. Subjective thinking requires awareness of one's own particular situation rather than moves to abstraction that characterize the objectivity Climacus delineates above. He explains that the subjective thinker's thought "has to include the thought that he himself is a thinking person" (226). Further, subjective, indirect communication is more interactive than its objective cousin, requiring understanding on the part of the audience to complete the "double-reflection." That is, subjectivity requires and promotes sympathy, a bridge to knowing the other that makes it a hallmark of the ethical stage, a step away from the esthetic and toward the religious. This ethics of subjectivity and indirect communication sounds a lot like accounts of the novel's sympathetic and ethical possibilities that still hold influence today, and with Kierkegaard's attention to form, the connection to the literary is quite strong indeed (228). The "Postscript" is just one place of many in Kierkegaard's polyonymous oeuvre where this

exaltation of subjective thinking and indirect communication emerges, and indeed Kierkegaard's many pseudonyms or characters exemplify this interest in obliquity and attention to the form of philosophy as much as the content. And here too we can see existentialism's kinship with the literary and get some context for Percy's sense of novel-writing as itself a philosophical and even religious activity. The novel and the literary more broadly are defined by a kind of indirect communication, an awareness of form and multiplicity and slippage that direct communication and objective thinking lack. The literary and the indirect and the subjective invite us to read aslant, to consider the hidden, the metaphorical, the unintended; like any novel, *the Moviegoer* invites interpretations and is no less a philosophical novel for this openness.

Faced with that collapse of the grand narratives, Binx Bolling turns to the small ones, and to the playfulness they are made of. When he runs into his cousin Nell Lovell at the library and she tells him of her soul-searching and meaning-making, he glazes over and describes her as talking "as if she were dead" (102). A standard Kierkegaardian reading of the novel positions Nell as emblematic of the ethical stage, but she also represents a particular contemporary bourgeois type, empty-nested, "taking philosophy courses in the morning and working nights at Le Petite Theatre," she and her husband "re-examining their values," something we learn just after Binx tells us he likes to "read controversial periodicals. Though I do not know whether I am a liberal or a conservative, I am nevertheless enlivened by the hatred which one bears the other" (100). He recognizes and appreciates the games of political rhetoric precisely for their meaninglessness or pointlessness, or more appropriately, for their playfulness. "This hatred strikes me as one of the few signs of life remaining in the world," he explains, "This is another thing about the world which is upsidedown: all the friendly and likable people seem dead to me; only the haters seem alive" (100). This hatred is not so deep and passionate; it is just a form of

linguistic and rhetorical play that animates and enlivens while the "friendly and likable" people like cousin Nell seem hollow and "dead" with their kindness and desires "to make a contribution" (101). In Kierkegaardian terms, Nell has reached but remains content in the ethical stage. In Lyotard's terms, she finds narrative legitimation in these practices of bourgeois life. Binx does not simply dismiss these forms of narrative legitimation as illegitimate or insufficient. He does express straightforward distaste, but he also *shows* what he thinks of Nell and her philosophical philanthropy with what he narrates alongside his conversation with her:

> "I don't find life gloomy!" she cries. "To me, books and people and things are endlessly fascinating. Don't you think so?"
>
> "Yes." A rumble has commenced in my descending bowel, heralding a tremendous defecation.
>
> Nell goes on talking and there is nothing to do but shift around as best one can, take care not to fart, and watch her in a general sort of way: a forty-year-old woman with a good open American face and another forty years left in her; and eager, above all, eager, with that plaintive lost eagerness American college women get at a certain age. (101-2)

"Humor," Climacus writes in the "Postscript," "is the *confinium* [border territory] between the ethical and the religious," and here in the novel the humor arises in reference to a physical border territory of that descending bowel (231). Even as Binx humorously turns his nose up at the stench of Nell's ethical striving, he is himself at that same stage, mired, we might say, in the same merde he has such a nose for, aspiring but unable to transcend it. If humor stems from the unexpected and the out of place, waste is quite frequently a source of humor if we are hearing, reading, or thinking about it at all, and since "the comic certainly does not cancel the

contradiction (on the contrary, it makes it apparent)," all of Binx's comical blundering and lewd musings and dismissals of those mired in "everydayness" do not indicate his uniqueness or vision or keen nose for merde as much as they point to his own entanglement in the mere aesthetic and ethical concerns he smells (236).

Binx is somehow charming in his difficulty and ennui throughout, and his irreverence here is so crass as to be an ironic indicator of his own predicament. Nell is talking about Le Petit Theatre and making a contribution to the world, and Binx is thinking, in rather precise physiological detail, about his digestion. The stark contrast between Nell's bourgeois sense of self-worth and Binx's disdain for all such talk is amplified by Binx's turn toward the physiologically internal, but that contrast becomes a kind of contradiction as Binx's position is just another form of the bad faith he decries. Nell is interested in mind-expanding experiences like philosophy classes and community involvement that allow her to connect to the world around her, but she searches for community and connection, as so many of her mid-century contemporaries did (Boyer), in order to shore up her sense of self or self-worth. As a contemporary woman, she does not turn to spirituality or religion, stylish only as a connection to community and no longer as a framework for understanding and valuing the self or connecting to the universe. She turns to philosophy, books, and volunteerism rather than the intense introspection and self-awareness Kierkegaard sees as requisite for ethical and religious status. This is textbook scientific humanism for Binx, another kind of grand narrative that he finds even more repulsive than practical religion. To the notion that "Books and people and things are endlessly fascinating," he responds with commentary on an impending bowel movement (101). He exposes, by jarring juxtaposition, the self-serving nature of Nell's seeming generosity, and yet the humor of this narration exposes Binx's own limited view. Her outward engagement is all

in self-interest, as meaningful and moral as monitoring one's own bowel movements and pointing out the stench. Binx and Nell are each absorbed with their own shit, and as that old saying would remind us, Binx's nose for merde suggests its source.

This turn to bodily waste takes on an additional connotation in a scene set on the steps of the library. Nell is entering the building, returning a recent novel she has just read, while Binx is departing after a lunch hour spent reading those political periodicals. The doorway, the threshold, becomes a kind of orifice, the talk of bowel movements awakening the latent spatial metaphors that govern the built environment, making the stairs an interstitial location between inside and out. And the circulating library itself takes on an ecosystemic nutritional role as Nell takes sustenance from the library's holdings and returns the reading matter in order for another person to benefit from it. This transactional space highlights the interactions between individuals, demonstrating the kind of interpersonal interdependence or community that critics make so much of in Percy's work. In his study devoted to the topic, John F. Desmond notes that "the South in which Percy grew up and lived his adult life was, and to some extent still is, lauded for its sense of community," but Percy saw a "poetic pessimism" in the "Old South" "transformed into a progressive consumerism like the rest of America, further undermining whatever vestige of genuine community the South once possessed" (14). Percy's concern for community-building could be a sign of Southern provincialism to be analyzed as an element of his works' Southern character, or Percy's religious and intellectual Catholicism might be the more important influence here. Desmond points out, "Percy believed that human community is not the ultimate community. Union with God is the final goal of the search," though Desmond acknowledges that it is not clear in *the Moviegoer* that Binx's search has quite such a transcendental goal (9). Desmond sees the search for community becoming more and more central to Percy's works over

time, acknowledging, "With increasing insistence and directness, Percy's novels record this search for community" and "Such movements came to be portrayed more explicitly in his later fiction," so as the first of Percy's fictions, *the Moviegoer* does not display quite the overt teleology of some of his other work (3, 4). More precisely, David Crowe points out that while Binx's search is very much central to the narrative, it is not clear that that search leads Binx all the way to the religious revelation and Christian commitment that a standard Kierkegaardian reading would assume. Percy himself seems to have thought otherwise, but insofar as I read the novel with Kierkegaard's philosophy at hand, I see Binx progressing from aesthetic stage dalliances with secretaries to ethical stage introspection, self-awareness, and deeper loving relationships but never making the kind of irrational, unnarratable leap into the religious that a proper Kierkegaardian hero must make. The obliquity, indirectness, and subjectivity of Kierkegaard's ethical stage supports this disagreement with Percy's own interpretation of his work by allowing us to read the work on its own rather than as a direct communication of the author's intention. While Crowe reads backstory into Binx's narrative as though it were the biography of a living breathing man by claiming that Binx must have read particular texts of Kierkegaard's that inform his behavior and language, avoiding this strange approach to literary character opens the text to wider literary interpretation and, because it is Kierkegaard whose existential philosophy remains the one primarily in question, literary reading is a philosophical act as well (Crowe 195-6).

The connection between "the search" and Percy's eschatological impulse is clear enough, but Desmond also connects that search to Percy's lifelong engagement with the ontological and linguistic realism of Charles Peirce. While Peirce's work was not overtly religious, Percy integrated Peirce's ideas with his own religious beliefs: "the vision of

community presented in his fictions and essays was grounded in his attempt to synthesize his theological beliefs with the realist philosophical tradition as it had developed from the Scholastics through the triadic semiotic developed by Charles Sanders Peirce" (5). Percy certainly looked to Peirce for relief from the linguistic and epistemological relativism he saw rampant in post-war life, or what would in Lyotard's terms be signals of the legitimation crisis that has "altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (xxiii).

The semiotic realism he embraced is not such a hard swing in the direction of essentialism or scientism as its name might suggest; Desmond explains that Percy's take on Peirce's three-part semiotics instead "affirms the open-endedness of the sign," a description that squares with Binx's disdain for scientific humanism and suggests this philosophy's compatibility with the literary and with Lyotard's approach to language games as well (10).

Binx's conversation with Nell, or more precisely his narration of that conversation, illustrates the novel's synthesis of these disparate discourses, and linguistic play around human waste is the occasion for it. Binx does not bring waste into his conversation with Nell directly; he only brings it into his already odd, irreverent, idiosyncratic narration. That descending bowel and avoided fart are in the story, but they are just as much in the story's form, a form of Kierkegaardian indirect communication. That shift draws our attention — but not Nell's — to structural similarities, spatial metaphors, and also, if we dwell there a little longer, to linguistic possibilities that emerge when we talk (or think) shit, a fluid and exemplary open-ended sign. The playfulness that Wittgenstein suggests and Lyotard embraces is particularly apparent when waste is what is being talked about because talking about waste is almost always playful. There are of course occasions for communicating directly about excrement, dirt, and trash, but most human excreta that occur in conversation serve a figurative role. We get pissed off, we know we

are the shit when we are able to spot bullshit, which is such a shitty practice. We are so accustomed to such figurative uses of shitty words that we rarely notice them as figurative, that is, we do not notice the presence of shit, we do not smell the merde. The same could of course be said of plenty of other now-dead metaphors, and examining the metaphorical and conceptual workings of waste will indeed shed light on language more generally, but the novel shows a persistent interest in shit in particular. On the steps of the library, excrement is once again a kind of *pharmakon*. It highlights the interplay of formal elements like narration with contextual elements like the actual farts and bowel movements that threaten to interrupt the exegetical quiet surrounding Binx's musings, and here as elsewhere in this project it also serves as a kind of pivot or crossword between the literal and the figurative, between the concept of waste or abjection and the figurative possibilities of such a concept, between views of language and narrative that we do not often read together.

When Binx heralds his defecation he introduces an element of linguistic playfulness into the narrative, or, more accurately, he draws our attention to language already and always at play. Many critics note Binx's "nose for *merde*" (Crowe 194), but few delve into *merde*'s fertile resonances and playful possibilities. Lyotard looks to the pragmatics of Wittgenstein's language games for his method for analyzing the postmodern condition, and Percy's novel demonstrates or explicates this approach largely through images of waste. Lyotard offers "three observations about language games":

> The first is that their rules do not carry with themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules. The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a 'move'

> or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game. (10)

It seems that Nell and Binx are playing a language game that is easy enough to understand: friendly, familiar small talk, if with a bright veneer and gestures at something bigger. And we as readers are also players in a language game that draws some of its rules from the assumed relationship amongst readers and texts (which, following Lyotard's first observation above, is informed from beyond the text, beyond the author, beyond the reader), and others from the particular forms and styles that are established around and through Percy's particular text. The shift to the internal here does not itself mark a big modification of this game's rules since we are accustomed to Binx's internal monologue in the midst of his narration, a narrative style that seems in keeping with Kierkegaardian subjectivity, but the digestive interruption is something else. It "does not belong to the game" that the assumed rules define, the assumed and accepted rules of the game of the novel and the game of narration, and of course the game of polite conversation, of which it only threatens to be a part. If every utterance is a move in a game and every game is altered by even the slightest modifications in the rules governing the roles and possibilities for utterances, then waste, in its capacity to cross so easily between literal and figurative, almost always shifts a conversation and thus alters the rules. In that pause of surprise, that moment of semantic recognition, shit is a game changer.

These moments of change are moments of slippage between forms of signification in the sense that waste words so often work metaphorically and literally at once. The sign shifts from one signified to another quickly but not instantaneously, revealing a delay in understanding and thus in meaning-making that is not unique to waste words or to this kind of linguistic

playfulness, but which this kind of play makes apparent. Linguistic waste can be understood spatially, as overlapping or interwoven meanings, and it can also be understood temporally, as delayed understanding of these multiple meanings, and these senses of linguistic waste are influenced or even determined by the metaphors – i.e. the figures, the wordplay — we have available to describe it. "Linguistic waste" is itself a metaphor that we can unpack and explain only by the use of more metaphors, so it illustrates its meaning in its form, highlighting the overlap (spatial) and coincidence (temporal) of the literal and the figurative so much so that they are indistinguishable. As outlined earlier, "waste" is a kind of *pharmakon*, a chain of metaphors that brings its own processes of signification into view. Waste, as a word and a concept for the workings of language, operates as both a metaphor with primal processes of abjection as its basis and as an indicator of the way language itself performs such abjections of thought and signification. There is no way to explain, discuss, and debate this stuff without figuration, without metaphor, a point on which Kierkegaard's Climacus perhaps anticipates deconstruction with his emphasis on indirect communication of subjective thought. Using a metaphor of overuse and decay that follows on his connection between language and currency, Jacques Derrida writes in "White Mythology," "we have no access to the wear and tear of a linguistic phenomenon without giving it some kind of figurative representation" (7). The metaphor of "wear and tear" is part of Derrida's discussion of linguistic usage (as opposed to abstract signification or semantics) and it is one that suggests a material durability but also a mutability of signs not unlike Percy's version of Peirce's semiotics. In his essay "Metaphor as Mistake," Percy similarly acknowledges that all language works via metaphor, writing, "We can only *con*ceive being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside" (72). In "the Delta Factor," the first essay in his 1974 collection of philosophical writings about language *The Message in the Bottle* in which "Metaphor and

Mistake" also appears, Percy posits a theory of language in which the signifier, the signified, and the human subject are three "absolutely irreducible" points in a triangle that he sees as answering the limitations, on the one hand, of the scientism and behavioral worldviews that reduce the complexities of human subjectivity to observable behavior, and of the freedom and individual uniqueness espoused by Judeo-Christian philosophy and theology (40). Language is his focus because language, whether as thought or behavior, is for him the signpost of human uniqueness, what both distinguishes us from animals and connects us each and all to the realities of the world beyond our subjectivity. Percy's persistent orthographic use of the Δ in his essay only adds to the impression that the term "the delta factor" makes; playing on the equilateral shape of the Greek letter in addition to its accepted meaning of change in scientific language games, Δ exemplifies the kind of linguistic complexity that Percy indicates with it. The visual signifier mirrors the signified and the linguistic signifier calls on the subject's foreknowledge of metaphorical deltas past, creating a multisensory and multi-metaphoric bit of language that shows how and how well Percy is thinking through semantics and use and the baggage words carry.

Binx's bowel is very much materially present in the narrative, but its status as waste — or even more aptly, as interstitial, as almost-excreta, as heralded and descending rather than already abject — points to its figurative value in addition to its material presence. The instances of waste that I look to throughout this project highlight this multiplicity in waste materials and waste signs, but they are a specific subset of waste words for which the figurative value does not outweigh the literal. Binx deflects the seriousness of Nell's philosophizing by shifting attention away from her weighty existential concerns toward the more lighthearted figurations of waste, and he simultaneously distills those concerns down to the immediate and the bodily, indeed to his own body's rumbling, but he must still take care not to fart. He manages the narrative focus

by managing and mentioning his waste, his descending bowel's presence in the narrative highlighting his power not just as a narrative voice but as a flesh-and-blood embodied being who can redirect focus to his own concerns both physical and emotional. Waste has a figurative ability to move between so many registers — literal and figurative, external and internal, large-scale and local — and yet it destabilizes these tidy oppositions with its material insistence on slipping, leaking, or contaminating the categories it would seem to move, and to move us, betwixt and between. If we understand this slippage (or if we can absorb this spillage) in its multiple layers and tangents and undermined oppositions, we also confront the material metaphors by which we establish and maintain this understanding. Waste prods us toward encountering the conflicts and confusions and cross-purposes of language in its use and its abstract states; it highlights the materiality of language of which Percy is acutely aware and to which his post-modern language theory responds.

In some ways, Binx Bolling is one more semi-autobiographical protagonist in a first novel by a group of authors a recent panel of women writers called "the midcentury misogynists" (Hess) Such writers are concerned with self-actualization and rampant alienation in the face of technological progress that threatens human life on the largest scale, and with the innumerable microaggressions of a changing mediascape and burgeoning civil rights movements that threaten the comfort and privilege of a single middle-class white male like Bolling. I do not often see Percy grouped with his contemporaries like Norman Mailer and Philip Roth and Henry Miller, all of whom Emily Gould and others cite as examples in their discussion of how these male writers so concerned with alienation in fact alienate women readers like her (Hess). Percy seems to be out of favor with both the acolytes of the "Mi.Mi.s" and the new Southern Studies in both its gritty provincialism and its shinier sunbelt New South aspects. I suspect he is out of favor or

overlooked by the former because of his Southernness and because of the search for meaning that he and his protagonists hold to in earnest even as, in the typical postmodernist view, meaning and stability fall away in the Cold War era and there would seem to be nothing left but to play and pastiche. But his Louisiana life and settings hardly diminish some of his period-era portrayals of two-dimensional women and his masculine preoccupation with a dialectic of desire and transcendence. Even as he cleaves a form of Christian eschatology to a realist semiotics, his novels take up the postmodern condition and respond to the same crises of faith and epistemtic stability as his contemporary mid-century and high postmodernist peers. In bringing Percy's work into the mid-century, cold war, and early postmodern(ist) conversation, I acknowledge critiques from feminism and critical race studies of the concerns about alienation and fragmented identity that characterize the at-times disparate writing under this umbrella. Part of reexamining Percy is pointing out what he has in common with the revered male writers of his time, but a project concerned with waste, women's bodies, and disparate understandings of male and female first person narrators must also acknowledge that this is not necessarily great company to keep. Emily Gould takes down the midcentury misogynists not for their own sake but in order to point out the more insidious issue of young male readers "identifying with them, and acting out their perspectives and narratives"; she does not take down the midcentury misogynists as much as their fans, followers, and current admirers, the thinkers and speakers and writers through which their influence continues and expands (Hess). In this regard Percy does not provide much assistance, as even if Kate does accompany and assist Binx on his search for meaning and self-awareness, she seems more of an enabling accessory than a fully subjective character, a kind of manic pixie dream girl *avant la lettre*.

But in addition to paying attention to Percy's life and his philosophy alongside his fiction, I also seek to subject his work to a criticism that is more culturally conscious and historically situated than the closely biographical approach that seems to dominate the decades of discussion of the man and his work. His parents' early deaths, his time in a sanitarium, and his conversion to Catholicism all play outsized roles in analyses of his characters' motivations and his works' philosophical themes, perhaps even so far in this chapter as elsewhere. The Korean War features somewhat, but concerns about disaster, catastrophe, and particularly nuclear fallout are too often and too quickly read religiously, eschatologically in the Percy criticism. If we refuse to make this jump to the transcendent, the symbolic, or the metaphorical, or at least if we refuse to make it so quickly, refuse to make it as a jump and take it rather as a process with associative steps and no leap of faith, we may find rich resonances in the material or the mundane, in the actual face observing dung beetles in the Korean earth, in the living, breathing, digesting body trying not to fart. These literally and figuratively terrestrial concerns can ground historicist and theoretical approaches in the text rather than in the writer's biography just as the materiality of the water is as necessary to Percy's Helen Keller example of the delta factor as Keller's mind and the water sign made in her hand. An appropriate reconsideration of Percy diverges from the man and moves closer to the text, but with linguistic richness and play as the focus, such an approach will not so much read against Percy himself as against or beyond many critics who approach Percy's work as illustrating a philosophy without fully delving into the ways difficulty and play might complicate, enrich, and extend that philosophical viewpoint. By submitting his work to forms of contemporary literary criticism that recognize the slipperiness and fecundity in language and to forms of Southern Studies that have complicated or rejected both the Agrarians' romantic nostalgia and the broad tendency to treat "the South" as a stable

idea and location, I attempt to reexamine or reposition Percy in relation to postmodernist contemporaries, and thus to complicate the sense of regionalism or provincialism that sustains "Southern literature" as a persistent category much more defined and bounded and recognizable than literatures of other U.S. regions.

Considering Percy as a writer of his time first and of his place second will reveal a similarity of concern with so many contemporary writers seen as representative of America at large rather than of a delimited region. Here is where disaster and catastrophe emerge in addition to waste. His work shares in mid-century preoccupation with the threat of the atomic bomb, and in his autobiographical and philosophical writing Percy frequently acknowledges the affinity for disaster and destruction that his novels' protagonists so often espouse. In *The Last Gentleman*, he writes of protagonist Will Barrett: "It was his impression that not just he but other people felt better in hurricanes" (LG 25), and Binx Bolling famously muses "the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall" (MG 228). *The Moviegoer*'s dénouement is itself a kind of fall-out, or rather its clean-up, after what Binx calls the "catastrophe" of Kate's breakdown and their impromptu elopement. There is a play, or at least an amusing coincidence, with classical dramatic theory in which the "catastrophe" is the tragedy's version of the comedy's dénouement (Vince). *The Moviegoer* does seem ultimately to have the arc of a comic novel with its marriage and its happy-enough ending, but we know from Percy's Kierkegaard that the comic is not just lighthearted fun as it heralds the ethical. And it is indeed catastrophes, plural, that bring Kate and Binx together and make space for their peculiar union. Comic conflicts tend not to be so (figuratively) catastrophic, and it is the conflict's resolution that is the dramatic catastrophe, not the conflict itself. So there is a shift in dramatic structure here to which this figurative use of "catastrophe" can alert us: a mid-century

tragi-comedy, *the Moviegoer* transforms from tragic seduction novel to comedic marriage plot, the catastrophes of mental breakdowns, shellshock, ennui, and an accidental elopement transforming into dramatic catastrophe. This latter way of characterizing this shift in the plot or in the interpretation of such a plot is facilitated by a linguistic slipperiness that grows out of this particular narrative arc.

"Catastrophe" most immediately indicates Kate's precarious mental state and the subsequent "fallout" of their elopement, and Binx's reference to that catastrophe also echoes his attachment to catastrophes ranging from car accidents to nuclear war. Here Rebecca Solnit's cautiously confident advice comes to mind: "We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological" ("Paradise" 5). Binx loves disaster in a way that Solnit does not quite account for but which could potentially fit into her Bakhtin-inspired vision of the carnivalesque aftermaths of social disruptions large and small, as "the Delta Factor" also notes the modern tendency to feel good when times are sad or troubling but sad when times are good. For Solnit, disaster has some immediately salutary effects and only becomes catastrophe via political appropriations and interventions akin to what Naomi Klein characterizes as "the shock doctrine" (Solnit, "Paradise" 269). Binx sees things similarly, enjoying the jolt and the thrill of disaster to break the "everydayness" of the nostalgia, repetition, and malaise that constitute contemporary life. Reflecting on the "everydayness" he finds so oppressive, Binx muses "Now nothing breaks it — but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch" (145). Kate feels similarly, though her disaster is not war but the car wreck that killed her fiancé Lyell a few years back: "'Have you noticed,' she asks Binx, 'that only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real? I remember at the time of the wreck — people were so kind and helpful and *solid*. Everyone pretended that our lives until

that moment had been every bit as real as the moment itself and that the future must be real too, when the truth was that our reality had been purchased only by Lyell's death'" (81). These jolts out of the ordinary relieve the repetition and malaise that Binx finds everywhere around him and throughout his mid-century middle-class life, giving support to Solnit's sense that disaster can work like or as carnival to expend energies and express desires suppressed during daily life. For Solnit disaster is salutary while the transformation into catastrophe is politically fraught and deleterious or even tragic to the social bond, marking the politicization of a seemingly "natural" human response to disruption, and while Binx and Kate are certainly never as straightforward about their terms, *the Moviegoer* maintains a similar distinction between the two seemingly interchangeable words. Disaster jolts Binx and Kate alike out of everydayness or unreality, but catastrophe brings Kate near to suicide and Binx in for scolding discussions with his Aunt Emily. Disaster makes them feel alive, real, solid, but catastrophe moves the narrative along through conflicts and toward resolutions. Catastrophes, like suicide attempts and elopements, are narratological catastrophes in this existential tragicomedy.

Plenty has been written about Percy and Percy's novels' existentialism, and Percy's presentation of disaster has been noted recently (by Walter Isaacson in *the New York Times*) and the connection between the two is worth noting and is a reason Percy's writing is prime for reconsideration. In jolting Binx out of the everyday, disaster throws him into the vibrant present. Quoting inaugural disaster sociologist Charles Fritz, Solnit points out "'Disasters provide a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions, and anxieties associated with the past and future because they force people to concentrate their full attention on immediate moment-to-moment, day-to-day needs within the context of the present realities'" ("Paradise" 108). In this view, disasters jolt people into the self-consciousness that existentialist self-actualization

demands. The existentialist attitude, that confusion in the face of an absurd world that is the starting point for the subjective philosophy, is much like the immediate response that disaster evokes. While disaster in its time-bound, evental sense was never a requirement of the existentialist writers whom Percy read and admired, it is not difficult to see how such events might induce the existential attitude that serves as a kind of first principle for their philosophy. For twentieth century existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the cultural and political context of the world wars is the kind of situation that might inspire such a sense of confusion or absurdity, whether they called it by the name of disaster or not. Solnit crucially explains that for disaster sociologist Fritz, also writing at the height of the cold war, everyday life was a kind of disaster from which people quite reasonably would want to escape. The starting points for Fritz's ideas on disaster and for the existentialism of Sartre and Camus is the same Cold War paranoia and malaise that Binx Bolling finds himself in.

Percy himself acknowledges that he is writing in or out of the same postmodern condition of his more experimental prose-writing peers as he explores the role and potential of the novel in "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," a speech he gave at Cornell University later printed posthumously in the essay collection *Signposts in a Strange Land*. Once again Percy makes clear that both "the mechanization and homogenization and dehumanization one hears about so often" and "the decay of Christendom" constitute the cultural conditions for the contemporary novel, and indeed it is World War I that marks "the end of the modern world…because it was then that Western man, the beneficiary of precisely this scientific revolution and Christian ethic, began with great skill and energy to destroy himself" (208-09). Percy sees "novels and plays from Kafka to Sartre to Beckett to Pinter to Joseph McElroy" responding to this disaster of the massive and efficient destruction of human life through mechanized warfare, but he calls for a

response “more venturesome and challenging than a mere documentation of isolation, depersonalized sex, and violence” (217, 215). It is by his own admission, then, that he writes from the same postmodern condition as so many of his more experimental peers, yet he views the role of the artist in postmodernity not as that of a documentarian of the nothingnesss but as “an epistemologist of sorts” who “must know how to send messages and decipher them” (217). Even when Percy’s characters share some similarities with aimless, philandering neurotics or the dissatisfied bourgeoisie he identifies in nineteenth and twentieth century novels, he contends that they retain some of the interiority and hope that their fictional peers lack because he understands the paradoxes of scientific behaviorism in relation to the individual psyche, and perhaps more importantly, because he believes in the enduring importance and uniqueness of the human psyche at a time after Judeo-Christian ethics has lost its pervasive cultural influence. Literature thus “may be the only instrument we have for exploring the great gap in our knowing, knowing ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others” (216). This view might not be the most original theory of the novel, but it is nevertheless one that depends on cultural and epistemological crisis for its validation. “The cognitive exploratory dimension of art” that Percy develops here is a kind of synthesis or third way out of the two metanarratives the disaster of modernity has extinguished just as his delta factor balances three elements of signification in order to offer a way out of the semantic realism v. relativism binary (216). This relationship is not just parallel or some kind of formal rhyme; Percy’s fiction demonstrates the vital role narrative can play in the postmodern era as a form of knowledge production and as a form of Kierkegaardian indirect communication that connects individual subjects to one another.

Binx is thinking and feeling and narrating from a situation characterized by both the dissemination of information via new media (the radio and television feature prominently) and

the destruction of hierarchical value systems, or the crisis of metaphysical faith that Binx's time lying bleeding in a Korean ditch has precipitated. This situation may not produce the fragmented narrative that we associate with John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and some of Percy's other near-contemporaries, but even here in his first novel Percy's work shares in some fundamental aspects of the literatures we take as exemplary postmodernism. The novel features a conventionally, recognizably plotted narrative; its setting is realistic; the laws and logic governing its fictional world are the same as in ours. Yet with closer attention to its finer structures, sentences and phrases reveal their openness and play. As with the library scene above, signs signify in multiple ways and resignify based on linguistic and social contexts. Roland Barthes's focus on the illusion of realism in *S/Z* is particularly helpful for getting at attributes and understandings of cold war texts on the cusp of what we consider the postmodern. While the plot is easy to follow, the words through which it reveals itself have space to play in the many language games readers might be engaged in.

Reframing *The Moviegoer* in closer relationship to postmodernism and postmodernity might also reframe it in relationship with the New Southern Studies, a collection of recent methodological reframings of the South as a social construct rather than a definitively bounded geographical region with a distinct culture. Michael Kreyling takes troubling or relaxing boundaries as a starting point when he points out, "Becoming 'new' has always been a problem for a discipline with so much of its foundation dedicated to strict borders: who was white and who was not, what was literature and what was not, what was Southern and what was not" (4). Recognizing slipperiness in the language of a novel so often read as strictly allegorical for its philosophical interest allows for not only this connection to postmodernism but also for a sense of Percy as a writer exploring a relational sense of region at a time when the nation was

undergoing changes that could be seen as making region less important. But many critics have shown how social and political change can prod us to cling to definitions and categorical distinctions even more, as Binx's Aunt Emily's commitment to old Southern chivalry and racial distinctions shows. So much more interestingly and relevant to critical conversations today, these connections to the discourse of postmodernity can also be connections to new Southern Studies approaches that treat region as a relational construct just like, say, waste. As a stockbroker, Binx ostensibly deals not only with national corporations but also international ones, so he represents a new Southern man who, even as he laments "everydayness," finds comfort in the nowhere of the New Orleans suburb which, insofar as it is generic and nondescript and familiar, shares much with suburbs all over the U.S., regardless of region. It is often Aunt Emily or Uncle Jules or Binx's mother who construct *the Moviegoer*'s "South" that looks like an old and antiquated version of one, especially today, as another valence of Binx's "search" might be progress toward a newer, more encompassing and less essentialist sense of what it means to be a Southern man after war has brought people together across U.S. and international regions. It is fitting that Jennifer Greeson borrows Stallybrass and White's description of dirt, filth, and waste to describe the South as a part of the American imaginary that constitutes an Other contained within the whole: "The case of our South provides a textbook example of what studies of the politics of culture, over the past three decades, have taught us to expect: that what is materially peripheral to the modern nation often becomes symbolically central to it" (2).

In *the Moviegoer*, semiotic indeterminacy is precipitated by the same cultural change or decay that creates the flattened, dispersed, multimedia landscape in which Binx wanders and wallows, and that indeterminacy positions the novel for New Southern Studies analyses that do not take inherited definitions as fixed but rather in need of genealogical inquiry and disruption.

Lyotard approaches the postmodern condition from the starting point of the natural or "hard" sciences of mathematics and physics. Rather than humanism reaching outward toward the heretofore untouched parts of nature, for Lyotard, postmodern science is observing natural phenomena near and far that do not fit the predictable models of Euclidean geometry or a descriptive, reproducible scientific method; it is not humanism expanding its reach so far as to bring an end to "nature" but the natural world itself always already acting a little more human. To better understand Binx Bolling's situation and attitude, it is helpful to look to Lyotard's explanation of what he sees as the accepted distinction between the natural and human sciences:

> It is generally accepted that nature is an indifferent, not deceptive, opponent, and it is upon this basis that the distinction is made between the natural and human sciences. In pragmatic terms, this means that in the natural sciences 'nature' is the reference—mute, but as predictable as a die thrown a great number of times – about which scientists exchange denotative utterances constituting moves they play against one another. In the human sciences, on the other hand, the referent (man) is a participant in the game, one that speaks and develops a strategy (a mixed strategy, perhaps) to counter that of the scientist: here the kind of chance with which the scientists is confronted is not object based or indifferent, but behavioral or strategic – in other words, agonistic. (57)

Postmodernity is not so much flat immanence for Lyotard as an agonistic unpredictability that would seem more bumpy than flat, but that unpredictable inconsistency is flatly consistent across all disciplines, all areas and forms of knowledge. While Percy would not distinguish the human sciences from the natural sciences in the first place, instead seeing any knowledge produced inductively via the scientific method as too abstract to account for subjective individuality, he nevertheless recognizes the limitations of modern science and the postmodern realization of how

destructive that abstraction has proved for human life and happiness ("Malaise" 211-12). Like Lyotard, Percy's sense of the contemporary condition is one of a crisis in all forms of knowledge scientific and subjective. Percy feels called to respond via the literary, a methodology that Lyotard's emphasis on narrative knowledge would seem to support or even invite. This emphasis on story is at once traditionally "old" Southern Studies, but understood in the context of the collapse of metanarratives and scientific rationalism, it can become a path to a more up-to-date approach to reading Percy and thinking Southern writing.

The Moviegoer represents some of these cultural changes toward this figurative flatness as not so subtle, and neither are they slow and cumulative in Lyotard's view of the postmodern world. Explaining the concept of the catastrophe from mathematician René Thom, Lyotard gives an example of what he calls postmodern science in Thom's "mathematical language allowing formal description of the discontinuities that can occur in determined phenomena, causing them to take unexpected forms" (58-9). Phenomena previously assumed to be unmotivated, docile, and thus predictable reveal themselves as animated in some manner, able to push back against human attempts at understanding, but postmodern science nevertheless describes their unpredictability in mathematical terms: "Catastrophic antagonism is literally the rule: there are rules for the general agonistics of series, determined by the number of variables in play" (59). Postmodern science for Lyotard parallels the postmodernist fiction that Percy dismisses. Each attempts description but misses something vital in its primarily documentary, rather than prescriptive or ethical, aims.

"Catastrophic" here describes discontinuous and unexpected forms that geometric curves can take, such as "continuous functions for which no derivative exists," but Lyotard, like catastrophe theory founder René Thom, is just as interested in the practical or historical

implications of this shift in abstract mathematics, such as "the crater-filled surface of the moon, the distribution of stellar matter, the frequency of bursts of interference during a telephone call, turbulence in general, the shape of clouds" (58). The poetics of this list foreshadow further extensions of catastrophe theory, further shifts or expansions or recognitions of the multiplicity of the signifier "catastrophe" beyond the mathematical. Lyotard is interested in changes toward a postmodern science or mathematics as much as he is interested in postmodern arts, literature, culture, etc., as he describes a flattening of the distinction between the natural and human sciences, or between what he calls scientific and narrative forms of knowledge. Earlier in *the Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard methodically characterizes scientific knowledge as comprised strictly of denotative utterances for which the audience is irrelevant to the effects or operations (25-6). An important aspect of this language game is that it is unable to reach beyond itself, unable to legitimate its own truth claims, let alone the truth claims of language games with different rules, and a widespread misunderstanding of this fundamental aspect of scientific discourse is, for Lyotard, at the center of the postmodern condition just as a misapprehension of the truth claims of science inspires Percy's ideas about the end of the modern era. Whereas narrative language games make space for or tolerate different forms of knowledge, such as scientific discourse,

> The opposite is not true. The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children (27).

From a scientific perspective, narrative is primitive, subjective, feminine, yet there is postmodern nostalgia and desire for such forms of knowledge. "Lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity," Lyotard explains, "boils down to mourning that fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative" (26). Narrative, and specifically the novel for the purposes of this literary-critical project, allows for access to individual subjectivity in addition to abstractions or generalizations about particular communities and cultures, and this flexibility is its promise as epistemological method for Percy and for Lyotard alike.

While most of Lyotard's epistemological exploration of the postmodern condition focuses on narrative knowledge as the way to make sense of our postmodern condition and its future, it does so with irony as the book's format is well-ordered and precise and its language for the most part direct, declarative, scientific. I lean perhaps too heavily on Percy's philosophical writings to establish his interest in postmodern narrative, but his novels provide the additional element that Lyotard's writing, with a few exceptions, lacks. Percy's fiction performs some of the ameliorative effects he discusses in many lectures and essays, demonstrating the vitality of narrative in the postmodern age as not just a response to this loss of meaning but an active — Lyotard might even say agonistic — rebuilding or re-creation of meaning through the literary.

From René Thom's catastrophe theory, and the connections he suggests to psychology as well, Lyotard claims "Postmodern science…is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown" (60). The legitimation of knowledge is Lyotard's overriding concern throughout his study, and this legitimation crisis in scientific discourse extends far beyond the lab or the university precisely because of the elevation of scientific knowledge that enables modern

mechanization and alienation. When science can no longer legitimate its own claims, neither can a culture built on empirical certainty and the comforts of abstraction. Lyotard claims "the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation seems to be inadequate" (60) and Percy takes "the deterioration of the consensus," as his starting point for a new account of the literary ("Malaise" 207). For each of them, narrative is what fills the gap this crisis opens up: "We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives," writes Lyotard, "we can resort neither to the dialetic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science," and participation and innovation in language games is the practical method by which these little narratives propagate and sustain community (60). It seems crucial for Lyotard that language games allow for individuality, nuance, and change, that they are more flexible in the social and epistemological bonds they create than the consensus-bound scientific discourse they replace: "they would also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussion would never risk fixating in a position of minimax equilibrium because it had exhausted its stakes. For the stakes would be knowledge (or information, if you will), and the reserve of knowledge — language's reserve of possible utterances — is inexhaustible" (67). Like Percy the philosopher and like Binx Bolling the malaisian and Kierkegaardian searcher, Lyotard finds hope in the possibilities, the creativity, the fecundity of language at play.

Rebecca Solnit concludes her account of disaster communities with a kind of populist optimism: "One reason that disasters are threatening to elites is that power devolves to the people on the ground in many ways: it is the neighbors who are the first responders and who assemble the impromptu soup kitchens and networks to rebuild. And it demonstrates the viability of a

dispersed, decentralized system of decision making" ("Paradise" 305). It is not large-scale consensus that defines what is right and just in these communities but small-scale improvisational, evolving, and flexible language games from which, ideally, no one is prevented from participating. Solnit acknowledges but opposes Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* for its harsh portrayal of disaster response that lacks nuance and subjectivity, and Klein's approach does indeed share structurally in the abstract social-scientific accounts of behavior that Lyotard and Percy each critique. Solnit provides an on-the-ground, interview and oral-history based collection of little stories instead of a sweeping account of the workings of late capitalism, but Klein's account does portray the disaster- and trauma-based opportunism of elites as akin to Lyotard's account of terror: "the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened" (63-4). Solnit's project is about refusing that silencing, about giving voice to individual experience in its nuance and imperfection, and about recognizing the salutary possibilities that arise out of crisis. So too, then, does Binx Bolling recognize disaster's salutary possibilities, after his near-death experience in Korea, during the cultural changes of the Cold War, and amidst Kate's breakdown and the family conflict his behavior induces. The novel's coincidence of bad weather with emotional disturbance and awareness of ennui, then, is not mere happenstance. Kate's dangerously declining mood is heralded by "storm warnings" that Binx notes but her stepmother misses (33), and not unlike Will Barrett's observation about hurricanes in *The Last Gentleman*, Binx describes his return to New Orleans with his secretary Marcia as "a little vortex of despair moving through the world like the still eye of a hurricane" (121). Despair proves productive for Binx, as it should for any good Kierkagaardian hero, providing in this case a point of calm, a

center amidst the maelstrom of modernity's collapse and the myriad responses to it. This hurricane image elevates individual despair to the level of a destructive weather event, or perhaps it unsettles that spatial and value-based hierarchy in favor of a kind of immanence where hurricane and acute individual malaise are equally disastrous.

Solnit maintains, "Earthquakes and fires are comparatively clean disasters; the flood of New Orleans left behind silt, mud, debris, and indoors, toxic mold," but if we think a little more figuratively we can see all disaster as by its very nature productive of waste ("Paradise" 278). Earthquakes and fires and hurricanes alike rearrange our sense of what is valuable and what is not. They do this not only via physical damage that transforms the materials of everyday life into trash and environmental waste, but also by transforming the practices and even the ethics of everyday life so as to allow for introspection, community aid, and deeper interpersonal connections at the local level. As Binx reflects on his thirtieth birthday, his home in "Gentilly is swept fitfully by desire and by an east wind from the burning swamps at Chef Menteur" (227). These swamp fires appear, or more often give off their odors, repeatedly throughout the novel, so often at times of reflection and despair, and they signify not only acute awareness of Binx's malaise-inspired search but also heightened attention to the physical geography in which that malaise roots and grows into a more mature account of the postmodern condition:

> Now in the thirsty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on the earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies — my only talent — smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one

> hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall — on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (228)

For a Kierkegaardian reading, the humor of Binx's diatribe might very well be the incognito of the religious, to borrow terms from "Postscript," or more precisely, it could indicate the budding transition from the ethical stage to the religious, suggesting that Binx might yet make that leap of faith out of malaise or despair over all that merde. Percy strives to be "a writer who has an explicit and ultimate concern with the nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself," and if we take the final phrase literally, we should not overlook and plug our noses at that stench of which Binx continually reminds us, nor should we ignore the burning swamps that lend a less figurative stench to this and many other moments in Binx's Gulf Coast narrative (*Message* 102). Percy and his protagonists share an enduring interest in the Cartesian split or the dialectic of body and spirit, and through the humor and excess of this passage Binx begins a synthesis. He previously notes that the malaisian is caught up in the mind while ignoring the body, but here this sudden turn to desire can integrate the two. But before desire, there is the shithouse, a place architecturally between inside and outside or between public and private, a place figuratively between human culture and animality, and a place where, in large part thanks to the stench of literal or material shit that all these figurative uses of *merde* induce, the individual spiritually-capable subject confronts their immanent, dirty bare life. Desire is another synthetic experience of immanent physical and transcendent spiritual integration that promises some relief from the fall-out of (post)modern life, and the malaisian must pass through the shithouse on the way to becoming desire's victim because it is the shithouse that opens him to an

understanding of human relations and of language that includes both the objectivity of science and reason and the slipperiness and indirectness of subjectivity's sympathetic call, that recognizes the mutability and multiplicities of language games along with their immediate material particularities. Lyotard concludes with desire as well, calling for "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown" (67). Percy's novel performs the kind of narrative legitimation of evolving language games that Lyotard calls for, illustrating in dazzling particularity the changing mid-century Gulf South geography both physical and human and the predicament of the individual subject in the postmodern world.

Chapter 3
Lonely Girls in Low Places: Female Confessional in the Anthropocene with Jesmyn Ward and Karen Russell

1.

When you tell people you work on waste, your interlocutors who do not walk away in disgust offer a lot of excited suggestions. I would divide these roughly into the scatological on the one hand and the environmental or ecocritical on the other. They are not mutually exclusive, of course, but the first makes a lot of intuitive sense to me and is what my original dissertation focus on linguistic waste grew out of, while the latter group's worldwide implications continue to be difficult for me (and most of the world's political leaders) to grapple with. I tend toward the formal and precise rather than the social and historical, but I have been trying to move from the one to the other, and I think a few recent novels that have enjoyed both critical and popular acclaim might help me do it. Given the way women's bodies and sexuality have been associated with excess and abjection for centuries, and at the very least in the texts of the previous chapters, it is appropriate to turn to two novels written by women that feature young, motherless, female narrators, and also, by way of illustration, to a film that has been both lauded and criticized for its portrayal of another young, motherless, female protagonist. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* both use the tropes of female confessional writing to connect the personal to the political and the ecological while Benn Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* lays the mythic atop the mundane in a manner that, at its best, might ground some kind of new grand narrative in the little stories of a neglected place and neglected people. This chapter also turns to narrative form, though it examines novels with much different narrative conceits than earlier sections. As with Faulkner's *the Wild Palms*, linguistic waste results from particular polysemic or playful utterances, and that turns out to be a metonym for the wastes produced — or excreted — by these narratives themselves.

The women of Faulkner's tales (in *The Wild Palms* and beyond) are persistently, predictably, often problematically fertile and Faulkner's narration is characteristically complex and some variation of omniscient. The topic of Faulkner and women, or the potential for feminist readings of Faulkner, has been explored more and more in recent years, but even with the incredible and expansive critical interest in his work in American literary and cultural studies, his work of course remains that of a privileged white male author. Patricia Yaeger explores the workings of dirt and waste in writing by Southern women in *Dirt and Desire*, where she argues that these images and situations arise in response to social change or crisis. This chapter will connect Yaeger's earlier work with her later work on global climate change, extending her ideas about dirt's connection to issues of race and gender and social and political changes in the South by exploring how dirt, waste, and abject geographies can also point us toward new ways of thinking the Anthropocene. By focusing on these two recent novels by women with first person female narrators, I follow Yaeger's lead in literary-critical integration, allowing the temporal coincidence of their publication to inspire a critical integration that does not isolate Ward amongst black women writers or overlook the critique of cultural appropriation that Russell's novel makes. Just as the housework and dirt in Yaeger's work at first seem part of the typical domestic and thus limited or even navel-gazing purview of women but in fact respond to much grander social and political disruption, it is tempting (perhaps more for reasons of sexist social pressures than literary criticism) to dismiss Russell and Ward's work as Oprah book club fodder and overlook its engagement with fundamental questions of human agency in the Anthropocene.

The jump here is quite large, from lonely girls narrating longing for lost parents and nascent sexual desire to wide-ranging suggestions that literature might save the world from the ravages of anthropogenic climate change. This expanding purview of literary inquiry participates

in a trend in recent literary studies toward engagement with questions formerly considered the realm and responsibility of science and technology fields. Such moves sometimes seem to have reactive motives or unclear or unsound methods, but following the previous chapter's exposition of Jean-Francois Lyotard's views on narrative knowledge, expanding humanistic inquiry beyond traditional texts or even beyond "texts" in any sense does seem a promising, even optimistic next step. A vastly wider archive of not only literary and cultural production but phenomena at the edges of human experience could indeed inspire and even require methods beyond close reading, but close reading and literary analysis remain at the heart of my approach. As with the examination of Percy's word choices and metaphorical usage and the trash bin and the final word of *The Wild Palms*, this chapter looks to particular textual details of dirt and waste and from there develops an account of greater historical, cultural, and geographic scope. And by engaging with such recent novels both narrowly and widely, this chapter might bite off a bit more than the previous ones, but for that it also could have greater potential for relevant cultural critique in this moment.

In some of her final work, Patricia Yaeger makes just the kind of leap I am trying to avoid in her examination of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, another work in the growing class of dirty young girl narratives in abject Southern settings. She dismisses Arlene Keizer and bell hooks' criticism of the film's use of (or, at best, entanglement with) stereotypes of the sexualized young black girl and the drunk, violent black father and of its portrayal of (Southern) poverty as dirty, drunk, and dysfunctional by insisting that *Beasts* works on the level of myth rather than on the level of realist narrative. For Yaeger, the film aims not at naturalistic or realistic portrayal of the conditions and experiences of life in one of this nation's forgotten and forsaken places; it is instead a mythopoetic projection of a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an ethos for life in the

Anthropocene, the era in which humanity's irreversible influence on the Earth is undeniable, our carbon footprint so large that the health and vitality of future generations seems seriously suspect. While this approach provides an explanation for the juxtaposition of aurochs and glaciers with fried alligator and a rusty pick-up truck turned boat, and while it makes some sense of how to move between these narrative layers, Yaeger's review essay — and her presentation at the 2012 meeting of the American Studies Association where I was in the audience — are necessarily short and rather general, simplifying or overlooking complications and nuance that I am sure she recognized. Nevertheless, as a work in the field of American Studies, a field that so often puts cultural politics and even questions of social justice front and center, her commentary on this popular but critically controversial film feels too forgiving. Yeager dismisses what seem to be legitimate, important questions about race, class, region, and the visual and linguistic representation of a region and a culture at the recent focus of so much popular attention. The Deep South or Gulf South are increasingly popular destinations for artists, start-ups, what we might shorthand as millennial culture in general, appearing more frequently in film and television and with musical and artistic roots from the South giving a certain kind of credibility to popular and independent music. While it is impossible to name a single cause, this turn Southward strikes me as an offshoot of the visual and affective aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, the event evoked but not directly invoked by Zeitlin's film — not directly referenced, Yaeger and others would maintain, in favor of a much grander, allegorical interpretation. Yaeger's refusal to engage the gritty particulars in their sociological reality, not to mention the film's actual creation by a Northeastern filmmaker in Southeast Louisiana, strike me as novel approaches for American Studies scholarship, that typically historicist enterprise that builds its grander claims up from a close engagement with specifics and, at its best, never loses sight of the

implications of its claims for real people. There is so much to consider, even in part, between the juxtaposed elements that make Yaeger's mythic reading work; her essay serves as a reminder both of the potential for humanities scholarship to reach beyond textual specifics in an age of ever-expanding everything and of the role that dirty, polluted, abject places and stories can play in such a project if we tease out all their fertile possibilities.

Whether we feel it directly and acutely or in a more diffuse or oblique way, there seems to be a growing sense during this "crisis of the humanities" that someone or something is calling us to defend our work against charges of navel-gazing, obscurantism, ivory tower-ism, or sheer irrelevance. In that light, the sweeping adoption, after Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential essays, of the geological concept of the Anthropocene along with increased interest in various forms of post-humanism are understandable moves in the direction of empirically verifiable relevance. Yet the way writers like Yaeger and Ian Baucom get to the Anthropocene is more associative or impressionistic rather than inductive, transforming the scientific discourse into a narrative one by borrowing a term and making it their own. This catachresis, if it can be called that, is hardly a bad thing, but the linguistic and conceptual shift that Chakrabarty inaugurated seems lost in many discussions I have seen and been part of about "the Anthropocene" because they tend to take the term as a direct indication of a real shift in geological time, as a scientifically verifiable and legitimated concept. My understanding is that geologists do not use the term nearly as much as humanists, and indeed the Anthropocene of Yaeger's *Beasts* or Baucom's *Cloud Atlas* is as speculative as the works of art through which we access it, but no less important for its non-verifiability. This might leave the humanities in the abstract and speculative and non-scientific morass from which its disciplines seem to be trying to escape via digital projects and data-driven methodologies, but following Lyotard's claims that science can no longer legitimate its own

claims in postmodernity and that "the little narrative […] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science," we can embrace narrative knowledge, subjective knowledge, and subjective communication's capacity to capture things that scientific discourse cannot (60). As Percy and Lyotard each point out in their own ways, it is, after all, blind faith in scientific behaviorism that inaugurated the measurable changes that supposedly constitute the Anthropocene, and more importantly also got us into this far too simple science/humanities binary to which the humanities, in its institutional forms, often seems in danger of succumbing. I echo some recent criticism of the digital humanities' turn away from cultural criticism here, striving to keep my own work focused on the kind of work that makes the humanities the humanities and not a STEM field, and even more importantly, the kind of work that we as humanists and as humans might be able to leverage toward not only staving off the diminishing of quality work and opportunities in our field but also equipping ourselves to comprehend and respond to the environmental crises that STEM research does not seem to be preventing (Liu and Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia).

Ian Baucom has emerged as a leading thinker not only of literature's possibilities and limitations in the Anthropocene age but more specifically of literature's capacity to represent the Anthropocene in a way that might allow us to grasp its complexities and, by extension, respond accordingly. Following the likes of Chakrabarty, Karl Marx, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek, Baucom recognizes the challenges that both the concept of the Anthropocene and its petroleum-fueled material realities pose to our understanding of history: "We seem to be living, already, in the moment of ultrahistory, in the 'end times' between catastrophe and apocalypse, as the past that has made the present now includes not only a political, social, or economic past but, emerging from all of these, a carbon past that appears to have predetermined the ruinous deep

future of the planet" (138). Baucom examines the challenges this poses for literature, and specifically for "the contemporary novel, particularly the contemporary historical novel, which finds the 'situation' of contemporary life at once radically deepened (backward and forward in time) and, apparently, fixed" (138). While Russell and Ward's works may not be "historical novels" in the usual sense, Baucom's account of changing scales of human history in relation to geological time shows that even a novel set in the present might grapple with some of these same temporal issues in what we might call the deep present. It is this aspect of time that Yaeger highlights in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, its moves from the ramshackle school room in the Bathtub to Hushpuppy's confident pronouncements about the universe's long history and impending, foreboding future. Baucom also grounds his thinking on the relationships between the human and the non-human in existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas on multiplicity and individuality. Writing in Walker Percy's "very century of merde" where fears of nuclear disaster underlie so much human experience, Sartre asserts, "A man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects; he requires simultaneous examination from both ends" (ix). Sartre is a thinker of crisis even if he is not a thinker of the Anthropocene, and so is his predecessor Walter Benjamin, to whom Baucom also looks for a sense of the overlapping scales and spans of human experience and the narratives in which human life is lived. But after his survey and synthesis of so much historical and philosophical thinking about human being in time, it is with his turn to the literary that Baucom makes his particular contribution to thinking the Anthropocene. Using the character Sonmi-451 of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, he asks "What, at this point in time, can we know, neither of

Gustave Flaubert nor of Walter Benjamin, but of Sonmi-451? What — by knowing something of her — can we know of the mixed epoch, the heterogeneous circumstance, the multilayered human and posthuman situation she sums up? Of the futures she might summon into thought and, by summoning into thought, perhaps also into being?" (146). Baucom suggests quite a leap here, that a fictional character might summon a new future into material reality, that changing our thinking on the spatial and temporal scales of climate change might change human behavior, human politics in ameliorative ways. But Baucom knows as well as anyone the limitations of the Anthropocene as he has outlined them with great urgency on multiple occasions; with repeated reminders of Marx's dictum about making history in circumstances we have inherited not of our own choosing, his work explores not how literature will save us from those 4 degrees of irreversible anthropogenic climate change, but how it might help us get our individual and collective minds around the crisis of our historical present (Baucom 138).

While Ward and Russell's works are not the speculative-yet-historical fiction of *Cloud Atlas*, my turn to young female narrators actually finds additional inspiration here. First, that these texts all feature teenage narrators — Esch is 15 in *Salvage the Bones*, Ava 13 in *Swamplandia!*, and Hushpuppy, if she counts as a narrator of *Beasts*, is even younger — unites them not as texts for young adults but as texts that each utilize the long-established literary trope of speaking from the position of a naïf. Just as Sonmi-451 is an unfamiliar imaginative creation whose strangeness gives her unique access to her fictional world and, to use Baucom's terms, makes seeing the world through her a particularly promising form of defamiliarization, Esch, Ava, and Hushpuppy's perspectives might also allow us to see the world differently. They may not be clones in a technological dystopia, but children are a different, if more familiar kind of Other with access to natural and built environments many readers do not have. While each text

could be, and indeed probably has been, called a *bildungsroman*, this label is an obstacle to discussion of the nuance and possibilities for playfulness these young narrators offer. Russell appreciates "the double optic that children possess - the way they can develop kid-theodicies and fantastic explanations, but also shift gears and have a nascent adult sense of the world, a more 'realistic' vision" just as Ava does throughout the novel ("A Conversation"). In fiction and in life, children's limited vocabulary but wider, untamed creativity can lead to surprising figurative language and playful coinages, a phenomenon that plays out in interesting, perhaps complementary ways in Russell and Ward's novels, each with their particular vernaculars or idioglossia that highlight the flexibility and fertility not only of language as a human activity par excellence (as Percy would have it) but also of English in particular, with its many varieties spoken in the many U.S. Souths and its particular capability of naturalizing words from other languages, slang, or figurative catachresis turned literal or direct reference. These young narrators produce so much linguistic newness and also reuse and recycle so much linguistic material from myriad sources oral and written, literary and commercial, showing the state of some of America's forgotten people as climate change-influenced environmental changes and weather patterns come their way in addition to the promise and possibilities of new narrative forms, of new little narratives as creative sources and as sources of hope.

Ava, Esch, and Hushpuppy are not just children with the charm to get us to think differently. They are all young girls narrating the details of their everyday lives alongside the deep grief and deep longing that impact their every moment. Chris Kraus comments with great insight and sensitivity on the expectation that first-person writing by women will be confessional, on how the "I" is rarely interrogated as a narrative or aesthetic creation and is instead assumed to be confessional, an index of the mind and body of the writer herself. The

tropes of female "confessional" writing are often overlooked as tropes and read as straightforward or artless in both senses. In a 2006 interview with Selah Saterstrom, Kraus describes her early approach to literary writing, informed by performance: "I'd spent a great deal of time reading literature, history, philosophy, 'my subjectivity' included all of those things, but only as channeled through my own body. Naturally this writing was very physical, and I was terribly shocked when it was widely perceived at face value, as a cheap confession" (Kraus). Kraus admits here to a kind of double intention — her writing is at once a sophisticated artistic presentation of subjectivity and a naked, direct production of her body. This duality of course fails to capture the nuance that Kraus's characterization of her writing process gestures at, and it is that complexity, or something analogous, that I want to explore in Russell and Ward. Kraus's *I Love Dick* "was widely perceived at face value, as a cheap confession" and even though Ward's and Russell's work is fiction rather than memoir, a similar perception contributed to their novels becoming bestsellers, book club favorites, and somewhat uncomfortable texts for academic readers (Kraus). This ambiguity makes these texts available for both a close reading and for a more distant analysis as cultural artifacts. I approach these texts not only with close attention to language, then, but also with sustained awareness of the gritty and poor situations that these creative linguistic adaptations depict and how these depictions might affect these cultural artifacts' circulation and reception in a society increasingly affected by the global forces they represent. This chapter embraces the complexity that Kraus's reflections point to alongside the linguistic play that these narrators' youth makes possible, and it is there, in the indefinable space between confession and construction, between body and intellect, between reason and affect, that some possibility for social impact arises. The confessional offers language and figures that allow us to examine our collective or cultural intimacy with natural bodies big and small.

I also look to Chris Kraus's ideas as guiding principles because I want to acknowledge the ways my work is personal, bodily, inspired and continually informed by my own embodied subjectivity. Pure logic and abstraction attract me, but attraction is hardly a logical and abstract form of engagement. I am probably exploring my own relationship with my mother through this chapter, obliquely considering the ways in which I am orphaned and the foster mothers and surrogates I cultivate in literature and life. With Baucom, I want to participate in a critique and a discipline "that has long understood its vocation as simultaneously descriptive and transformative; as oriented to mapping the situation in which we find ourselves and to making something emancipatory of that situation; as committed, in the terms of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach,' not only to 'interpret[ing] the world' but 'to chang[ing] it'" ("History 4°" 125-6). In the face of climate change, Baucom offers a new way of thinking time and culture's place within it as a way for the humanities to grapple with and have some kind of ameliorative impact on the growing environmental crisis. The concept of an "Anthropocene era" is attractive to humanities scholars because it reminds us of, or perhaps exaggerates, humanity's impact on everything, and because we can take this as proof of the humanities' impact on everything. But method or framework is not the only thing necessary for a transformative critique; the object of study matters too. If critique remains in the province of an academy that seeks to justify its continued existence by speaking for culture at large, it risks repeating or reinscribing the erudition and elitism that keeps its readership low and its impact theoretical. Turning to the popular is hardly a novel move, but examining popular literature and the reasons why it seems to be popular might help us see what invites people into the ways of thinking or experiencing time that Baucom and Yaeger advocate.

2.

In her writing on *Beasts* and in *Dirt and Desire*, her famous monograph on Southern women's writing, Yaeger points to dirt and trash as reflections of social and cultural changes in the fictional worlds of characters and the historical worlds of writers. Domesticity is not the polite starched and lacey domain of rich white women; it is greasy and snotty and shitty and much more frequently poor and nonwhite. Outsourcing the dirty work of keeping clean to poor women of color long ago associated such racialized and classed people with filth and waste in not just the Southern imaginary but the American one. The "throwaway bodies" Yaeger points to in *Dirt and Desire* are not just antebellum holdovers, not just Jim Crow productions, though she does much to show how writers like Alice Walker and Flannery O'Connor expose the processes by which these bodies became abject. This work remains a model for interrogating the ways in which the South's people and the South's spaces and places remain dirty, abject, and other to the U.S. imaginary and the processes by which we continue to construct them as such well into the twenty-first century. Yet in her later work on *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Yaeger offers, yet never satisfactorily answers: "Why summon inaccurate, dirty clichés about the hopeless lot of underclass blacks, Louisiana, and the marginal Southland, so blindly?" While they can hardly be accused of the same blindness, I still take a modified version of this query as a guiding critical inquiry for my examination of Russell and Ward's works as well as Zeitlin's. In the course of a year and a half, these three narratives of motherless, dirty Southern girls became popular and critical successes all at once. They somehow engaged readers and viewers across gender, educational, partisan, and many other perceived divides. There is something about such "inaccurate, dirty clichés" that appeals (always, of course, but also) as the U.S. continues to climb out of a recession.

In her historical study *Dreaming of Dixie*, Karen L. Cox examines how "the South" was created as an imaginary idea not by Southerners but by everyone else via just about every form of media and pop culture, tourism, and popular music. She points to a need for a narrative of reconciliation and reunion after the Civil War and, later, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction to modernization as drivers of a surprisingly unified sense of Southern mythology both in the South and across the rest of the United States (2-3). Tara McPherson's concept of the "nostalgia industry" that peddles an "imagined South" adds to this discussion of a South created from the outside, and the nostalgia element is particularly relevant to the faux-primitivism and imagined genealogy of the Bigtree clan of *Swamplandia!*.Preceding Cox, Anne Goodwyn Jones also examines "the South" as signifier and "shifts the focus of attention from 'the South's' putative referent(s) to its historical development as a linguistic construct," and the connections she makes between Southern literary language and post-structuralism provide a helpful reminder of "the interests its deployment as signifier has served and continues to serve, even in theoretical work that aims to deconstruct it" (Jones, "Tools of the Master" 177). That is, this chapter and this project rely on so many forms of shorthand for "the South" or some kind of mutually understood "Southernness" even while interrogating these notions and attempting to expose their limitations, a reminder that is particularly important for work that looks to linguistic play as part of its method. Combining these new Southern Studies reminders of just how imaginary a community "the South" really is with Baucom's postcolonial environmental approach to shifting our thinking about the human, about the global, and about time, the "lonely girl phenomenology" of Esch and Ava provides new narrative knowledge of Southern history in the present.

Returning to Yaeger's question about *Beasts* — "Why summon inaccurate, dirty clichés

about the hopeless lot of underclass blacks, Louisiana, and the marginal Southland, so blindly?" — I extend it across space to Southern Mississippi and South Florida, and expand its concerns to include gender as well as race and class. In certain respects, the poor white world of Russell's *Swamplandia!* is the outlier in the company of two narratives with young black female protagonists, but as noted above, all three feature motherless female narrators, all prematurely or problematically sexualized to varyingly problematic extents. Why summon these stereotypes and predictable aesthetic tropes and why subject these young women to violence? I propose that these works utilize such predictable tropes not just to critique them but to transform them into methods for far-ranging social and political critique. That potential impact for our thinking and feeling about climate change arises here, via long-established associations of female bodies with the Earth and fecundity with rebirth in all its literal and figurative forms. By trafficking in these literary and cultural tropes that border on stereotypes, Ward, Russell, and Zeitlin's works also open themselves to criticism from the academy at the same time that they enjoy popular acclaim and success. Female sexuality and reproduction are mirrored in or figured by the landscapes these novels so vibrantly depict, but Esch in *Salvage the Bones* and Ava in *Swamplandia!* are hardly earth-mothers. Esch's pregnancy promises (re)birth and renewal after Hurricane Katrina, but Ava seems heir to Janie's nonreproductive sexuality from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, that other novel of the South Florida muck, and here it is the resilient wild that promises renewal instead. Like Kraus, these lonely girls narrate the "banal facts that comprise straight female life" but they also use the form of female confessional to create stories of personal, communal, and environmental sustainability that reach outside of the Pit, the Bathtub, and the Island.

I turn to Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* to explore the workings of waste and abjection and also to wonder at the popularity of a novel with so many scenes of dirty,

sweaty, excessive, desiring bodies. On the third of the twelve days the novel covers, 15-year-old narrator Esch pines for Manny, her unrequited love and the father of the child a stolen at-home pregnancy test confirms she is secretly carrying. This female confessional has all the melodrama of a jilt in a precocious teenager's still-narrow worldview: "I loved him before that girl. I imagine that this is the way Medea felt about Jason when she fell in love, when she knew him; that she looked at him and felt a fire eating up through her rib cage, turning her blood to boil, evaporating hotly out of every inch of her skin" (56-7). In the midst of her summer reading, and on an oppressively hot August day, Esch narrates her heartache on a world-historical scale, but the intimacies and intricacies of her embodied experience are so often what inform the connections she makes from her life in Southern Mississippi to the classics of Western art and literature. Like Medea before her, she has "a fire eating up through her rib cage" for Manny, and she also tells us, "I imagine the food turning to mush, sliding down my throat, through my body like water through a storm drain to pool in my stomach. To make what is inside me grow to be a baby in the winter" (41). Her secret pregnancy makes her sick to her stomach and awkward on her feet, and these new physical sensations contribute to her sense of the magnitude of her emotional pain. The pathetic fallacy is seeing one's own emotions reflected in the workings of the natural environment, but this is some kind of inversion in which the physical environment of her body reflects or provides a living metaphor for Esch's feelings. Her "feelings" are just that—physical, sensory, material — as she feels sick, she feels hot, she feels unsteady, and she feels heartsick, fiery, and romantically unsteady or unrequited as well.

This novel shares in the form of confessional writing that Kraus talks about, and its narrator and its author might be subject to the same interpretive assumptions Kraus exposes. In the same way that a memoirist might have blind spots, some inability to see certain parts of

herself, 15-year-old Esch is not able or willing to see herself, her family, and her predicaments with any kind of critical distance. But even with her limitations, Esch tells her story with as much art as any male narrator or female life-writer. Like Kraus, Esch the captivated high-schooler has spent "a great deal of time reading literature, history," so her "'subjectivity' include[s] all of those things, but only as channeled through [the] body" (Kraus). Kraus suggests but never directly asserts that the very idea of "pure confessional" or direct self-representation of subjectivity is not just an impossibility but a sexist construct. It is hardly big news after deconstruction, or even after Wittgenstein, that the conventions of narrative prose and writing and language itself mediate all confession, but a convenient forgetfulness about this generally accepted view of language informs the hermeneutic assumptions that take writing like Kraus's "at face value, as a cheap confession" (Kraus). Language and culture write Esch, and Esch artfully enriches her "confession" by attaching it to the classics of a culture that I suspect many white readers might have a hard time seeing as her own. Anne Goodwyn Jones expands Addie Bundren's famous take on language in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to language and life in the South more broadly, saying that the signifier matters more than the signified in Southern life ("Tools of the Master" 179). Addie thinks "words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" and are "just a shape to fill a lack," and it is hard to say whether this way of thinking is a cause or an effect of the dismal life she leads, but for Jones, these mismatched signifiers and signifieds or even missing signifieds can have some troubling effects (Faulkner 171-2, Jones 179). But Jones ends her discussion of theory and the South with the suggestion that this regional culture where signifiers matter most — where "blackness" and "whiteness" and "Southern womanhood" do not rely on empirical verification or direct reference for their cultural power — is one where the poststructuralist disregard for the reality of the signified might actually be

popular, despite our expectations otherwise. So Esch's sense of herself as Medea and other mythical women, then, might participate in this linguistic slipperiness that Addie Bundren senses and explains in beautiful figures. Esch might also inherit a budding version of Addie's bodily awareness as Addie's ideas on language connect or even arise out of her experience of sexuality and motherhood while Esch's inspired connections with Medea and other women of literature and myth are all grounded in the physical sensations of longing, hunger, and pregnancy.

This is the cleverness and the brilliance and perhaps also the discomfort of Ward's novel. As with so much literature, readers are invited into the mind and body of a character who represents a perspective they would never have access to, but in this case Esch also occupies a disproportionately prominent, overdetermined symbolic role in contemporary culture: the impoverished pregnant Southern black teen. The first person, confessional mode takes us from voyeurism to the uncomfortable yet pleasurable closeness of slumming, and then Esch's insistent connections to the canon further universalize her seemingly abject situation. In his examination of the epistemological value of narrative, Jonathan Culler points out that narrative gives us access to perspectives and ways of being far from our particular situations and points of view (84). The idea that novels are about sympathy with Others is hardly a new one, and that sympathy is rarely apolitical. Narrative intimacy might move us between escape and entertainment on the one hand and engagement with the biggest issues of our time on the other as sympathy grounds Baucom's take on Sonmi-451 before she can possibly connect us to or represent Benjamin's historical scales or Chakrabarty's account of the Anthropocene. This universalizing vector of Ward's work begins with the tropes of and expectations about seemingly simple female confessional, travels through the dirty forgotten places of the Deep South and extends toward national and global senses of sustainability, even to the Anthropocene.

If the faux-naive narrative perspective draws in a (somewhat) naive reader, the poor and rural Southern Mississippi setting is fertile ground for a narrative of environmental awareness. In this chapter in which Esch feels the deep feeling in her gut as both her love for Manny and her affinity with Medea, the aptly named Pit (the low, dried up pond area on her family's property) is the site of all kinds of bodily excrescences and abjections that befit its name. Hurricane Katrina is threatening the Gulf Coast and their father, despite his numerous limitations, has been preparing the house and stockpiling supplies as much as his meager income allows. At the same time, Esch's brother Skeetah's prized pitbull China has just given birth to a litter of puppies that could bring Skeetah hundreds or even thousands of dollars in the dogfighting community, but one is quickly dying of Parvo and the disease threatens to spred to the others. Professional veterinary care is out of the financial question, so Esch and Skeetah set out on an excursion to steal medicine that might help from a neighbor's barn. As they depart, Esch narrates: "Skeetah has stolen this: bread, a knife, cups, a half-gallon jug of punch, hot sauce, dishwashing liquid" (45). This sparse list points to the poverty of their storm stockpile, and then, before their brother Randall and some friends join them to camp out in the Pit, Skeetah shoots a squirrel saying "'wasn't enough cans of meat to steal'" (46). Skeet's resourcefulness and circumspection are remarkable here, but so, of course is the abject situation that requires them and the ways in which the dogfighting plotline feeds into racialized stereotypes. Poor black teens speaking vernacular English, fighting pitbulls in a place known as the Pit, and eating burnt squirrel meat over a cinder block grill are twenty-first century versions of the things for which Ward's predecessor Zora Neale Hurston was accused of writing a minstrel show. I suspect these elements are part of what makes this text palatable to "mainstream" audiences and high brow critics alike; it is not entirely clear that we should unequivocally celebrate Ward's winning the National Book Award for this

novel. But Ward also shares with Hurston her characteristic puzzling and provocative narrative voice, a linguistic talent that helps these works speak to multiple audiences in multiple ways. Though Ward's narrative does not have Hurston's striking layer of free indirect discourse, the two novels share in a proclivity for linguistic play that produces the linguistic waste this project also explores and develops. The first person perspective allows for an additional implication of such play. As we witness Esch finding her rhetorical voice, it is often unclear if the playfulness is her own or the novel's more generally, and this ambiguity makes for another layer of semantic slipperiness that harkens back to that final ambiguous utterance in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, another instance of waste in the words of a character that slips and signifies beyond its immediate context.

Yet these scenes that might disgust and delight at once also reveal that Esch's relationship to her abject circumstances is not pure disgust or depression. Her ongoing interest in the classics is not mere fantasy or escapism; it instead interacts with and balances the dirty details of daily life. Witnessing the squirrel's gruesome death at Skeet's untrained hands, Esch thinks of Manny: "*He makes my heart beat like that*, I want to say, and point at the squirrel dying in red spurts" (47). This comes not 10 pages before the Medea and Jason stuff above, and this close juxtaposition of the immanent and abject with the classical and mythic continues throughout, and is key to understanding how this novel might work both as a kind of disaster tourism or slumming experience and as a new narrative of the Anthropocene. Baucom and Yeager both emphasize a need for trans-historical and interspecies framing, for narratives that encourage us to situate ourselves not simply at a crucial moment in history, and not simply as parts of a complex global network of civilizations, but as entities or even forces in networks of living and non-living actors. A challenge for such art and literature seems to be in how this

mandate looks downward to minutiae as well as upward and outward to the very limits of narrative, or at least to mythology, in Yaeger's sense of the term as an ordering system, a "sacred narrative with overtones of awe and cosmic investigation." Indeed, in writing about *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Yaeger minimizes and never adequately answers bell hooks' criticism that the film traffics in convenient and oppressive racial stereotypes like the neglectful and violent black father or Arlene Keizer's point that it "luxuriates in dirt, disorder, and mental disturbance" and closely associates these things with the racialized poor. She dismisses these critiques as too grounded in the real, instead contending, "Beasts is not a slice of life or a realist screed; its business is mythological" (Yaeger, "Beasts"). The film's power is here for Yaeger; precisely because it is not a realistic "slice of life," it is able to reach beyond the everyday, beyond the historical and cultural situations out of which hooks, Keizer, and others' objections arise, and to rise to the metanarrative level on which the Anthropocene can begin to be addressed, if not actually represented. While there is no actual Bathtub, no Hushpuppy, no Aurochs, there are plenty of Louisiana residences below sea level, plenty of children living there in poverty, and plenty of nutria (albeit not with their pelts worn by potbelly pigs with tusks attached, the secret to the film's Aurochs) eating up the vegetation that buffers such places and people from actual storms like the one in the film (Yaeger, "Beasts"). Glossing over these realities, and the realities of the film's production on location, makes the idea of a new Anthropocene mythology rather hollow. Wai-Chee Dimock displaces the nation-state as a unit of human community and as a site of aesthetic categorization in favor of "global civil society" and "deep time," but she manages to do so while still attending to the details of the global texts she examines ("Through Other Continents" 8). This approach might be an even better methodological model than Baucom's examination of sections of *Cloud Atlas*, if only because Ward, Russell, and Zeitlin's works refer

more urgently to the present rather than to a speculative future. Like Hushpuppy, Esch reaches outside of her particular time and place to existing mythology, and she is able to do so not because of imagined future technologies or massive anthropogenic changes to the Earth as we know it but because her particular time and place include Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* for public high school summer reading. She creates something or finds her voice out of literary leftovers of both male and female writers, from the U.S. and elsewhere, and those considered traditionally "Southern" and otherwise, mirroring in literary reuse the resourcefulness and productivity of the labor of women and people of the Global South often situated on and utilizing the wastes that capital defines as valueless. Of course Esch is not reworking valueless literary material, but the synthetic process of her narration that brings wide-ranging source material to bear on her particular embodied situation takes a form that Goldstein, Gidwani, and many others recognize as often utilized by and associated with women and people of color, making her narrative both an example of this kind of "feminine" work and an attempt at transcending it.

Salvage the Bones proffers the same possibilities for myth-making or re-making that Yaeger sees in *Beasts* through Esch's insistent allusions and through its formal similarities to everything from the *Odyssey* to *As I Lay Dying*, but the circumstances of those references matter too. To borrow from Yeager's earlier work, the novel's dirt and desire and the complicated space these things inhabit in the political present can actually contribute to the novel's import in the Anthropocene. Esch is close to the earth, but not exactly, or not only archetypally so since there is little mystery about the details of her unglamorous and at times not entirely consensual sexual encounters in swimming holes and bathroom stalls. Her fertility seems a kind of miracle in the waste land of the Pit, and her pregnancy promises a kind of renewal after the hurricane, but reading at the level of metaphor and allegory at the expense of engaging with the narrated world

of the text makes for nice provocative criticism but it cannot account for how these texts might actually move real readers to consider their place in nature, to think time in the big ways required in the Anthropocene. Extrapolating or abstracting to the symbolic or even allegorical, taking Esch not as a particular desiring body but as an Earth Mother or Madonna changes or distracts from the political valence of the fact of this award-winning novel featuring a poor, black, pregnant teenager at its center. As a young poor pregnant black woman, Esch is a part of the national imaginary that is what Greeson calls "our South," while as a florid, allusive narrator, she is a part of the imaginary Kraus identifies with women's confessional. Does attending to the particulars of her physical experience and the particulars of the deep and detailed play of her language help resolve these questions the novel raises, or does taking refuge in tiny details just evade cultural politics in a different manner, by looking too closely instead of abstracting too far?

Just as Binx Bolling surrenders or succumbs to desire in *The Moviegoer* in the face of the collapse of scientific humanism and religion alike, it is desire that connects the individual living breathing girl to seemingly far off mythological narratives in *Salvage the Bones* and to the natural world as well. Esch's heartache moves outward toward mythological narratives to help make sense of her condition in the world, and it also moves down and out to the zoological and ecosystemic details that her situation as a secretly pregnant teenager living in poverty makes her particularly suited to notice and interpret in this way:

> Before a hurricane, the animals that can, leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible. The air has been clear these past couple of days. Bright, every day almost unbearably bright and hot and close, the way that I feel when Manny is sweating over me: golden, burning. Insects root

> under our feet, squirrels leap from tree to tree, crows glide between the tops of the pines, cawing. (45)

Here I hear echoes of Faulkner's Dewey Dell in *As I Lay Dying* and of Janie and the pear tree in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Esch makes thematic connections to her summer reading, but she also seems to take formal inspiration, whether knowingly or not, from her predecessors. The potential Hurston connection is particularly interesting here as an example of linguistic or literary recycling since it is not just Janie's youthful desire but Hurston's famous free indirect discourse that might be echoing here as Esch's narrative idiom occasionally resembles works she does not mention. Or, when her words resemble Dewey Dell's or any other voices or styles she has encountered in school or elsewhere, we might even say she performs a kind of free indirect discourse even as a first person narrator. However we describe the narrative relationship between them, these works all reflect female characters' sexuality in nature, which brings these works into conversations about nature and ecocriticism and opens them to engaging with humanity's place in the universe. With the force of this literary inheritance — this reuse or recycling of leftover impressions from the past — Ward's work calls up the long history of female confessional and of the close association of women and Nature and is able to participate in this representation and reframing of environmental awareness.

Ward's novel bridges the scatology – environmentalism gap that I mentioned earlier. The "cheap confessional" of a young, poor, black, sexualized female narrator must be part of the appeal here. Esch might exaggerate her woes to the point that her allusions seem far out of proportion to her situation, but Ward utilizes that confessional mode to draw us in and that mismatch to ask what myth is made of. It is not some other higher, more abstract register that allows us conveniently to put aside the muck and mire of Southern poverty and teen pregnancy

as Yaeger would seem to have it; it is not some nonracial, ahistorical stuff given in the neutral voice of the everyman. Narratives like *Salvage the Bones* (and *Swamplandia!* and *Beasts*) remind us that the myths Edith Hamilton gives Esch came from other dark dirty places, from other awkward bodies with slime and fire inside them. Overt allusions to Esch's summer reading and the formal echoes of Faulkner, Hurston, the Fisher King, Flood myths, and more appear as a kind of literary recycling, so waste and reuse sustain this narrative in its form as well as its content, expanding the focus from the dirty details of one lonely girl's plight outward to her family, her community, and the post-Katrina world. The personal is political here because the personal for Esch is pan-historical and mythic.

3.

Katrina is the storm in *Salvage the Bones*, and while the unnamed storm in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* allows the film to engage in mythmaking even more centrally, it too is a Katrina narrative in that the cultural event it created is only possible amidst the post-Katrina interest in storms of the deep dirty South. Even *Swamplandia!*'s very different swampy lowlands and racial and ethnic politics and appropriations reverberate with the undertones or echoes of the social and economic conditions that Katrina laid bare. *Swamplandia!* restages the conquest of the Americas as the Bigtree family (re)colonizes a small island in the Everglades, and that family's adoption of an American Indian-inspired surname and vernacular ("tribe" instead of "family," e.g.) offers a critique of the romanticization of pre-Columbian culture that remains so prominent throughout the U.S., even alongside the white supremacy that sustains it. The Bigtrees succeed in mimicking indigenous cultures, but usually in ways they do not intend. In their attempts to perform or personify a simple, idealized, and whitewashed version of pre-Columbian culture, they instead become examples of the most tragic parts of American Indian culture after colonization,

discrimination, and large-scale mistreatment at the hands of European-Americans, the Bigtree family's actual ancestors.

The ideal of living off the land in some kind of harmony with nature becomes subsisting on the barely edible swamp flora. Deliveries of modern comestibles from the mainland via the local ferryman's boat resemble the lopsided trade with European colonists of so many colonial era depictions of early contact, and the food items he delivers are, much like in *Salvage the Bones*, cheap preservative-filled calorie sources that many contemporary bourgeois readers would never deign to feed their children. Education also comes across the water in the form of the library boat, a strangely abandoned craft full of reading material that the Bigtree children visit to find both entertainment and information about the modern world. Osceola finds *The Spiritists' Telegraph*, a book that teaches her about ghosts and helps her stage seances with her Ouija board. This occultism provides much of the spiritual logic of the novel and is far from the animist or mythological fantasy that Chief Bigtree projects to tourists.

The Bigtree rouse is all about image and all about sales, about capitalizing on the primitivism that pervades or even undergirds postmodern consumer life, but Ava, Ossie, and Kiwi grow up unable to distinguish the fantasy from the consumer-capitalist system that created and sustains it. On a ferry ride back to their island after a visit to their dying Grandpa Sawtooth, who began the whole Indian story, Ava observes some men from the mainland: "They were most likely on their way to play Injun for a weekend at the Red Eagle Key Fishing Camp; they didn't know my father was a Bigtree, and you could see the sneer in their eyes" (66). Much has been made of Ava's peculiar narrative voice, at once precocious in her knowledge of alligator anatomy and her awareness of what her mother's death has done to the family and naively optimistic about her father's plans to save Swamplandia! Here she similarly derides well-off

white men's enjoyment of "playing Injun" at the same time that she upholds her family's version of the same kind of appropriation.

In his detailed exploration of slumming in nineteenth century English, Seth Koven explains the practice of visiting the homes and institutions of the urban poor as holding a "queer romance" for philanthropic women who found unlikely kinship with each other and with the women they sought to serve through the forms of dirt and filth they both despised and desired (183-4). *Swamplandia!* allows for a kind of literary or readerly slumming that *Salvage the Bones* also invites, giving readers a sense of the turpentine taste of the pond apples that only Chief Bigtree and Grandpa Sawtooth before him could stomach, of the simple foods like breakfast cereal and canned meat that the kids are left on their own to prepare. As with *Salvage the Bones*, the details about food origins and preparations can work as metonyms for poverty to contemporary readers from a culture of increasing interest in health and nutrition, and more specifically amidst increasing scrutiny of the nutritional and gastronomic choices of others, especially of the nation's poor. It is not so much slumming but an invitation to moralizing judgment, to moral superiority or satisfaction at one's better decisions. It is not much better on the mainland, where Kiwi survives on 25 cent Burger Burgers (173) and "Jumbo Magma sodas that only left you thirsty and the eye-watering Hellspawn Hoagies" (123) from the World of Darkness snack bar. His diet has all the low-cost calories of the food preparations on the Bigtrees' island but none of the faux-indigenous authenticity of foraged swamp flora. These objectively similar yet subjectively different gastronomies are an example of the unlikely binary that *Swamplandia!* sets up. The World of Darkness is a soulless corporate-feeling tourist attraction that exploits its visitors and staff alike, but the novel hardly hides or apologizes for how Swamplandia! peddles a whitewashed fantasy version of indigenous life that is much more

carnivalesque appropriation than authentic potlatch, more "playing Injun" than authentic immersion experience. Yet we invest in the Bigtrees and want them to thrive despite all this, in part because young narrator Ava is innocent of the fantasy she perpetuates and that her father perpetuates for her, and in part because of the usual workings of narrative sympathy, but I propose that part of our investment — a financial metaphor I use deliberately — in Swamplandia! is an investment in the fantasy of indigenousness despite our better judgment. Burger Burger is easy to dismiss. The tongue of the Leviathan and the blood red swimming pool probably hold no appeal, but pond apples and homeschool and machetes to invasive melaleuca plants hold some intrigue for this reader, and so I assume for others. Today's political climate is full of reminders of the dangers of nostalgia for idealized pasts, and indeed Tara McPherson examined this idea in Southern culture long before Donald Trump's red baseball caps. There is indeed a long history of nostalgia via appropriation of American Indian culture, or popular perceptions of it, and Russell's novel may be at once an instance of such appropriation and a very clever critique of it.

Zora Neale Hurston claimed to be "the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief" and we might extend this characterization, if for different reasons, to most white Southerners as well ("How it Feels"). Growing up in Georgia with straight dark hair, dark brown eyes, and olive skin, I grew accustomed to people asking if I was American Indian, or as they were more likely to put it, if "you got some Cherokee blood in you," calling up so much history of painful racial categorization with seeming oblivion, as though blood carries and bestows ethnic heritage and a legible, decidable American authenticity. The Bigtree "tribe" is indicative of this fetishizing of the American Indian and of the myth and romance of indigenousness in the U.S. South especially

as the South modernizes and globalizes. Philip Deloria sees the association with and adoption of (perceived) Indian customs as a form of carnival, and he points out that Americans have been playing Indian at times of social and political change since long before the American Revolution (12-14). Following Deloria's logic here, Russell's representation of a long and perhaps particularly Southern history of carnivalesque Indianness reveals a revolutionary aspect of her text. The seemingly recent situation of one commercialized tourist trap outdone by its bigger, richer, more outrageous tourist trap competitor is yet another restaging of conquest as the leviathan of an *Inferno* theme park runs the older, smaller "indigenous" theme park and its smaller staff out of business and, eventually, off the land of their (recent) ancestors. European-American culture threatens and eventually conquers the European-American appropriation of indigenous American culture. Deloria claims, "the practice of playing Indian has clustered around two paradigmatic moments — the Revolution, which rested on the creation of a national identity, and modernity, which has used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life" (7). *Swamplandia!* unites both these occasions for Indian play. The modernity and authenticity struggle appears as Swamplandia! looks authentic in comparison and competition with the World of Darkness, and it is the revolutionary struggle that connects this strange world of fake Indians and apocryphal family lore to Ava's individual struggle with identity in the chaos of her mother's death and Swamplandia!'s swift decline. Like the narrow, historically amnesiac European-American or Anglophone-American sense of U.S. identity that is very much on display today, Swamplandia! has become the "native" that is threatened by invading outsiders. The World of Darkness is at turns the gentrifier, the foreign corporation, and even the undocumented immigrant come to take land and homes and jobs, but siding with the Bigtrees does not exactly leave us on the moral or historical high ground.

Ossie's belief in her Ouija board and her ability to contact ghosts serves as a metonym for the kind of faith required to maintain the family lore in the face of crumbling family bonds, crumbling infrastructure, and crumbling psychological states. Credulous Ava trusts her older sister's claims about *The Spiritist's Telegraph* and about her nighttime dates with ghosts, and she also believes in the family's made-up history and increasingly unlikely projected future in the face of much evidence that it really is all falling apart after their mother's death. It is this credulity, this belief in myths to enchant her swampy world, that lands Ava alone on a boat with the Bird Man, a mysterious character who promises to take her to the Underworld to find Ossie after she runs away to elope with a ghost. The strangeness and mystery of the Bird Man owes much to Ava's peculiar narrative perspective. We are with her on this journey to find Ossie, unsure, as she is, where he comes from, if he has the power and knowledge he promises, and if he is a friend or a villain. Ava's credulity eventually leads to disaster, to the trauma of her rape and the trauma of being lost without any supplies in the swamp that is both their home and a symbol of what is destroying it. In her traumatized and dehydrated delirium, Ava explains, "I fixed my eyes on two palm trees…I was going to use them as goal posts," in her attempt to make sense of the swamp and to try to make her way home (357). Ava's connection to the hot humid wetlands all around her emerges in myriad ways throughout the novel, so by the time she has escaped the Bird Man it actually feels plausible that she might somehow navigate the swamp to find her way home. But soon something changes:

> Now I didn't always recognize the cries of the animals; whatever adhesion in my brain connected sounds and light to the names of species was breaking down. The leaves that I had easily identified as bay or gumbo-limbo or pop ash gave way to a muted palette of foliage, a glowing russet and gray, much of it alien to me. Fewer and fewer of the plants

> that I tripped over or pushed through in curling curtains of vines uprooted a name in my mind. I was seeing new geometries of petals and trees, white saplings that pushed through the peat like fantailing spires of coral, big oaky trunks that went wide-arming into the woods. (357)

Ava's cognition is fading with dehydration, exhaustion, and trauma, but her narration also suggests that the ecosystem in which she finds herself has changed as well. Not only does she lack the words for these plants and animals, but she may have never seen them before at all. It is of course difficult to trust a narrator who admits her own cognitive limitations, and that aspect of the narration here highlights the workings of this particular lonely girl's phenomenology. The youngest of the Bigtree children, Ava hangs onto her faith in the family myth long after her brother runs away to the mainland and her sister replaces her faith in the family with faith in ghosts, a switch that we can see as pointing to the implausibility of Ava's faith but with which Ava follows along precisely because she believes in her family, including her sister. This faith contributes to Ava's predicament at this moment, but here, as her natural knowledge breaks down, the strange and wildly Other natural world emerges as a dangerous force and a force beyond Ava's scientific or narrative grasp. These plants that fantail and display new geometries are beyond Ava's linguistic and conceptual capacity but not beyond her phenomenal experience, and this failure of nomenclature suggests the need for new language and new narratives to account for Ava's experience of sexual trauma, for the Bigtree family's very real financial and emotional predicaments (including Ossie's schizophrenia, a word and concept Ava certainly lacks), and by extension, humanity's relationship to the nonhuman and nonliving worlds.

A conflict lurking steadily in the background throughout *Swamplandia!* is the melaleuca plant's invasion of the wetlands the Bigtree family calls home, an issue that certainly works in

literary tandem with the World of Darkness's capitalist invasion, but which also engages the novel with questions of the Anthropocene. This family of plants was imported to south Florida in the early twentieth century in order to do exactly what it has been doing, which is to remove native species and destroy their habitats by draining swampy areas, all so these areas might be more lucratively developed (Mazzotti et al. 2). With this human intervention into an ecosystem underlying the plant's current status as an unwanted invader, the melaleuca problem thus parallels both the process of enclosure that defines the waste lands as such and the conquest, re-conquest, and convenient forgetting or reframing of the history of colonization that Swamplandia! and the World of Darkness restage. I do not so much read human emotion or a human narrative into a natural process here as note that the threatening "natural" processes are very much effects of human activity. The melaleuca threatens the south Florida swamps by reducing the region's "natural" buffer against coastal erosion and storm damage, by making the region more vulnerable to disaster, by making disaster more likely. And the melaleuca threatens Ava's sense of identity and her personal safety by transforming the swamp into a place that she cannot fully comprehend or predict, showing distinct limits to her "indigenous" knowledge of the flora and fauna that thrive in this waste land that is evading capital even as it is capital's enclosure and accumulation that has allowed it such evasive vitality. But Ava does manage to describe these nameless plants and animals in her stupor via comparison to things she knows, and the experience is profound: "For some reason all the life gurgling in the anonymous hammock made me want to cry" (357).

Unlike *Salvage the Bones*, *Swamplandia!* is narrated from a distance, decades later, yet it limits its perspective to this youthful innocence until the very end. "Magical realism" is frequently mentioned in discussions of Russell's work, and while a novel that disenchants us so

thoroughly by the end may not quite belong in this literary category, an important theme is nevertheless one of the attraction and even the need for reenchantment even despite its dangers. Ava narrates from her naïve and credulous perspective, returning magic to a landscape and a narrative from which she could quite understandably find it all drained away, and in doing so she both shows the dangers of a problematic and appropriative mythology and suggests that we still need narratives to sustain us. Yaeger looks to *Beasts* to "advance the project of reshaping a planetary epistemology" ("Beasts"). For Baucom, the historical novel offers "countercodes for reading the temporal and ontological plurality of Anthropocene time and, in doing so, for opening possibilities for thinking the noninevitability of this apparently inevitable future" (138). Ava's experience of disorientation and beauty borders on some kind of Anthropocene sublime in which the unnaratable terror comes not from the radical otherness and power of Nature and not from the technological intervention with Nature as in the technological or postmodern sublime, but from the extension of these: Ava is brought to tears by a beauty she can only experience once language (and all the human concepts and instruments for which it stands in here) fails her in a situation where she fully expects that it will not. Ava is taken aback by her inability, by language's inability to render the "anonymous" legible to thought.

It is perhaps odd to end on silence or on the limits of language, but this limitation on thought might suggest a way to encounter and intuit the Anthropocene world and Anthropocene time affectively, outside of logic or reason or language. Baucom concludes:

> Experiencing our compound ways of being human in the aesthetic experience of a relation to such a character, we are also then given an image of a third form of justice that begins not with the urge to protect oneself (individually or collectively) but with an experience of being undone, decomposed, and recomposed through an entangling set of

> relationships to the biological, and the zoological, and the geological, and the theological orders and times of planetary life. This new, planetary form of experience reorients the demands of justice from a desire for immunity from these orders and forces them toward a determination to refashion the biographical and nomological orders of our lives (our habits of dwelling, consuming, legislating) in relation to these other forces and forcings of planetary life — at this time and for times to come. ("Moving Centers" 156)

Ava's own narration is undone, decomposed, and recomposed, and in both her insistence on enchantment and the dangerous failure of a form of such enchantment, *Swamplandia!* conveys or calls into being a humble and loving relationship with the natural world that might also help us think about refashioning the historical and temporal orders of our lives.

In Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, the unnamed woman's childbirth and Charlotte's abortion suggest connection but maintain asymmetry, the separate endings at Parchman Penitentiary suggest narrative synthesis but do not deliver it, and the final line puzzles and evades understanding as much as it concludes. Walker Percy's *the Moviegoer* follows Charlotte and Harry's travel to Chicago, the one perhaps obliquely mirroring the Great Migration that the 1927 flood amplified, and the other situating Binx's malaise not in a bounded geographic region but in an imaginary South vital to National identity and exceptionalism. Percy's novel transforms the othering of Faulknerian menstrual excesses into scatological language and bodily self-awareness, with Binx performing a kind of mind-body synthesis that *the Wild Palms* suggests might only be possible, paradoxically, in the living memory of the dead. Binx's descending bowel, his almost fart, and his awareness of the dung beetle in front of him in the ditch all keep waste nearby or even inside, refusing the abjection that pervades Charlotte and Harry's and the Tall Convict and the unnamed woman's experiences. Jesmyn Ward and Karen Russell work with Southern

stereotypes to critique and transform them, exploring relationships to the natural world that we associate with Southernness. The South might be imagined as a wilder and vaster region, and it is also a region more vulnerable to environmental changes and thus more dependent on national and global cooperation on such issues. As Greeson's work describes "our South" as America's other within, it is also an American abject within both geographically and conceptually. As the wetlands of *Swamplandia!* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* dry out, the U.S. coastline is physically, geographically altered by forces much larger than these imagined regional boundaries. *Swamplandia!* offers a vision of a relationship with a "natural" world that remains other despite human involvement at so many levels, and through Esch's facility and creativity with the literature and language she finds and that she and her community create out of the abject spaces they inhabit and the abject positions in which a persistent national imaginary would keep them, *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates the sustainable innovations characteristic of Global Southern culture

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