

SHUNNED SPACE THEORY AS A HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING
CHARACTERS AND COMMUNITIES IN SELECTED WRITINGS OF
JESMYN WARD, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND WILLIAM FAULKNER

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ABSTRACT

This project details how to apply a new framework I term *Shunned Space Theory* for exploring the literary and cultural accomplishments of marginalized communities. Specifically, I explore the pivotal role of shunned space in selected writings by three Mississippi authors: Jesmyn Ward, Richard Wright, and William Faulkner. By definition, a *shunned space* consists of land and resources considered unfit or undesirable by the larger, mostly White society, and therefore reserved for marginalized communities. Such venues are subject to periodic invasion by the dominant society, higher crime rates, increased poverty, scarcity, and political exclusion. Nevertheless, shunned spaces are also portals of cultural productivity enacted by residents to stave off both individual and collective fragmentation by creating enduring communities. I argue that Shunned Space Theory offers a comprehensive lens for understanding African American literature by linking individual characters to their communities, the enfolding landscape, and the racialized systems surrounding them. My analysis of shunned spaces spreads across race, gender, and environment. Although Ward and Wright spent much of their childhood in shunned spaces, their interpretation of this experience differs dramatically. On the other hand, Faulkner deploys careful observation and strong empathy in his presentation of shunned space despite living his entire life in a privileged arena.

DEDICATION

For my mother, Lillie Ann Nichols Cole, who left a hole the exact size and shape of my heart when breast cancer pulled her out of this world in 2013. Her healing wit, boundless grace, unwavering devotion, and piercing hazel eyes have touched me too deeply to ever vanish from memory.

For Dad, Stanley Webster Cole, whose fighting spirit, love of land and family, and hard work have empowered his entire family with an unquenchable desire to persist. Although now in his eighties, he continues to triumph over limitations that would flatten lesser men.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I thank the Creator, who provides daily lessons on the value of diversity, both in the human world and beyond. I must also thank Darrell Fielder, whose vision, compassion, insight, and piercing analysis have challenged many of my most enduring assumptions. The ideas presented here have been distilled through him to purge my unfortunate tendency to ramble outside of this paper's intended orbit. Then there is Trudier Harris, my dissertation committee chair, who stands at the pinnacle of African American literary analysis. Thanks for your quick wit and uncompromising demand for excellence. Between you and Darrell, I had no choice but to stay the course. I am truly blessed to have a scholar of your pedigree as a mentor. Also, many thanks to the rest of my extremely talented committee, including Cajetan Iheka, Yolanda Manora, Cassander Smith, and Ellen Spears. Your feedback has been fundamental to ensure that the final product is worthy of a larger audience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Definition of Shunned Space Theory

African American literature emphasizes the importance of community in resisting oppression from the larger, mostly White society. I argue that Shunned Space Theory offers a new, holistic lens into African American literature that highlights identify formation of individual characters within communities marked by scarcity, political exclusion, and periodic invasion. By definition, shunned spaces consist of land and resources the larger society deems undesirable or unfit for its direct occupation, thereby setting the difficult stage for identity formation for any marginalized group forced to live within them. Shunned Space Theory is an actionable¹ term with ongoing significance that can be applied to virtually any venue within which marginalized communities take root, flourish, and/or collectively perish. Although Shunned Space Theory is portable to the experience of almost any marginalized group, the focus of this research is on African American literature's placement of environment, characters, and community in context with each other and the larger, predominantly White society. My research centers on three Mississippi authors: Jesmyn Ward, Richard Wright, and William Faulkner. By

¹ I define shunned spaces as *actionable* in that they evidence creation by the larger society and force marginalized residents to innovate cultural responses to produce enduring communities.

narrowing the scope to writers from a single region and state within that region, a common reference is provided for examining shunned spaces across race, gender, and historical moment. For instance, Ward writes about shunned space during the early 21st century and Wright primarily focuses on the Jim Crow era. As occupants of existing and former shunned spaces, Ward and Wright offer surprisingly unique perspectives about the ongoing role and effect of shunned space in their writings. Faulkner, a lifelong inhabitant of privileged space, illustrates a perspective of shunned space that originates from someone who has not actually lived in one but whose characters intersect directly with the residents of such venues.

Shunned Space Theory provides literary analysts with an integrative way to understand many aspects of African American literature. For example, when using the shunned space concept, character development is not treated in a standalone manner. Instead, the major variables that comprise shunned space (individual characters, race, gender, culture, community, and landscape) must enter the literary conversation. Hence, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) depicts a protagonist whose maverick character evolves within a shunned space ironically called The Bottom, although it rests on top of a hill. Additionally, DeLisle becomes the epicenter of Jesmyn Ward's grief over the loss of five young men. Furthermore, communities in and around Natchez, Jackson, and Memphis harden young Wright's resolve to exit the South forever, but not without causing him to grieve for the loss of its verdant landscapes. On the other hand, Faulkner depicts shunned space less concretely, from a lens of privilege, but with sincere compassion. However, Faulkner cannot harness the power of personal experience like Ward and Wright to adequately frame life within such venues.

Consequently, Shunned Space Theory offers an ever-widening lens for analyzing literature. Though the human individual is the initial focus, the aperture always increases until

both history and the full nexus of both intra-racial and interracial relationships come into view, at least at the narrative's periphery. Therefore, it is not possible to examine shunned spaces without presenting context. I must define shunned spaces in more precise terms before illustrating their importance within the works of each writer.

Criteria for Determining Shunned Space

Despite limitations imposed by scarcity, political exclusion, and violence, shunned spaces are deployed in African American literature to allow marginalized individuals to maintain personal and communal identity. I argue that shunned spaces must meet most, if not all, of the following criteria:

1. Exist either historically or in the present and are found within either a fictional landscape or an actual place. Shunned spaces can be adjacent to the dominant society or entirely separated from it.
2. Are overwhelmingly populated by a marginalized group (at least 75%).²
3. Endure violence, both external and internal, out of proportion to the general population.
4. Are sufficiently populated to permit communal identification framed by religious practice, oral and written narratives, a common sense of history, and community purpose.³

² I choose 75% to emphasize that shunned spaces are not simply racially integrated, but overwhelmingly populated by historically marginalized individuals.

³ In *The Negro's Church* (1969), Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson argue that the church serves as the primary venue "through which the masses of the Negro race [received] adult education" throughout Jim Crow (58).

5. Possess third-space venues⁴ in which individuals codify and rehearse a distinctive cultural perspective unique to each shunned space. In African American shunned spaces, churches typically fill a third-space role by converting the symbolic aspects of religion and place into a stage within which freedom from persecution is rehearsed and enacted.
6. Generate original, ingenious responses to scarcity, including oral and written narratives that convey a sense of communal identity.
7. Facilitate the formation of internal hierarchies that permit some degree of self-government.
8. Are intermittently stripped of land and other resources by the dominant culture, thereby ensuring scarcity.^{5 6}

⁴ Yu-sien Lin interprets Bhabha's original definition of third space in a manner that fits my discussion. Lin describes third space as "a new productive space in which the historical dimensions and identities of cultures are challenged when two cultures meet" (Lin 45). When white Christianity is joined with marginalized spaces, the result is a rejection of oppression and a call for freedom.

⁵ NPR's Steve Inskeep explores an excellent example. The Osage Native American tribe in Oklahoma suffered the appropriation of their oil wealth to white "guardians," who confiscated much of the treasure in 1921, converting a community marked by enormous wealth into an impoverished enclave (Benston 480-482).

⁶ Dr. Azita Amiri addresses the healthcare scarcity of Uniontown's residents by revealing that the town has only one doctor and the nearest hospital is over thirty miles away (Benston 480-482). A toxic waste dump almost certainly contributes to the town's inability to access basic medical services.

9. Sometimes harbor their own internally persecuted communities—a shunned space within a shunned space.⁷ As holistic entities, shunned spaces offer several layers of protection for the marginalized individuals who inhabit them.⁸

Generic Diagram for Displaying the Relationship between a Character and a Shunned Space

The following graph illustrates the relationship between individual characters and their environment:

⁷ In Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), a gay teenager represents a marginalized individual within a shunned space. A shunned space within a shunned space is therefore plausible.

⁸ Cradled in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt region, Uniontown, Alabama fits the profile of a living, contemporary shunned space. As of 2017, almost 90% of the town's population is African American, nearly half of its residents live in poverty, the crime rate rises to 70% above the national average, and the local environment is compromised by a nearby coal ash dump (<https://www.areavibes.com/uniontown-al/demographics/>). Despite these problems, Uniontown has given birth to great writers such as Julia Fields, poet-in-residence at several universities. DeLisle, Mississippi is another example of real-world shunned space frequently referenced in the writings of Jesmyn Ward (Williams 155-6). Shunned spaces vary in form and size. The small town of DeLisle, Mississippi is split by a railroad track into a shunned space occupied by Jesmyn Ward's community and a wealthier enclave of whites. Other historically shunned spaces, such as slave quarters, are usually adjacent to the white master's house. In Toni Morrison's *Home*, Lotus is a small town set apart from nearby white towns.

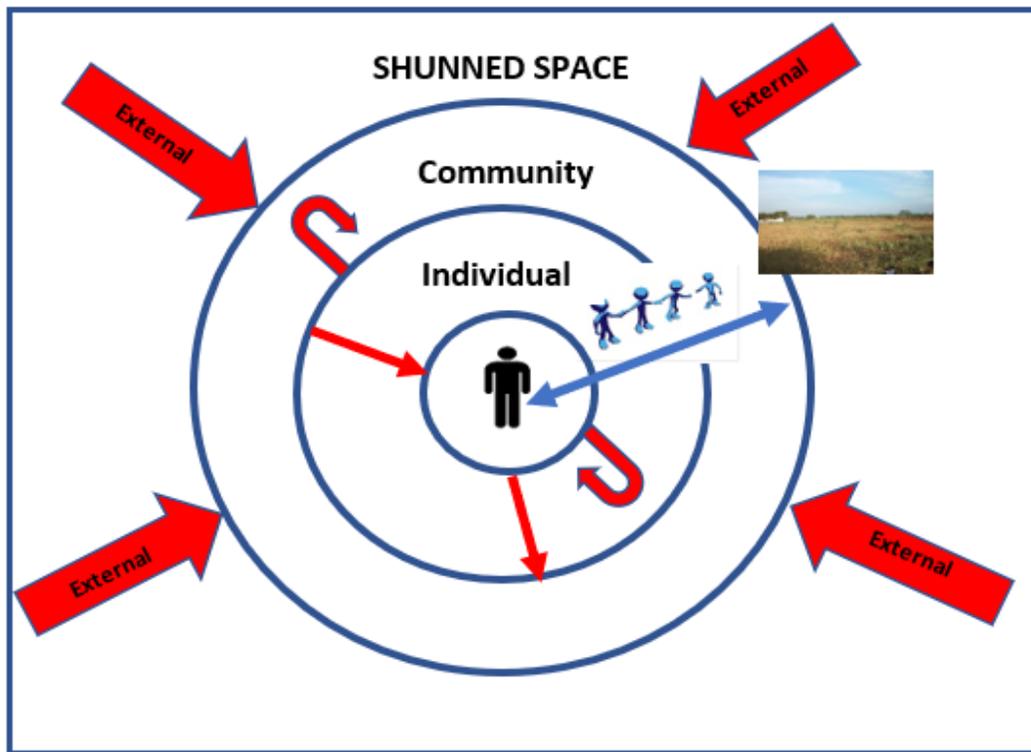


Figure 1 Shunned Space – Generic Diagram

The visual components of shunned spaces are imperative for understanding such venues. I have therefore developed the generic diagram (Figure 1) for representing relationships between individuals, communities, and external forces at-a-glance. The individual is the innermost circle and is contained within community, which is surrounded by the landscape of the shunned space. External force from the larger, predominantly White society is at least partly repelled by the shunned space, offering a relatively safe zone within which community and individual identity take root. (However, shunned spaces are not immunized from external invasion and aggression.) Additionally, the interrelationships between the individual, community, and the landscape are indicated by the two-pointed blue arrow. Three red, interior arrows directed from the individual to the community and vice versa indicate conflict between and among citizens of shunned space.

Curved arrows reflect self-directed violence.⁹ At a glance, the above diagram depicts the primary agents in a shunned space and how they interact within a holistic framework. However, it is a generic model for visually depicting shunned space(s), which varies considerably based on the work currently analyzed. These diagrams are not comprehensive, and are instead designed to present a basic, visual outline of shunned space within a novel or memoir to prompt greater conversation.

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I argue that Jesmyn Ward’s writings open a unique window into how shunned space operates in the post-Jim Crow South. I focus on two of her novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), as well as on her memoir titled *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (2013) to demonstrate how Ward exposes not only the problems, but also the promise of shunned space. Her novels and memoir center primarily on the Black district of DeLisle, her hometown and its fictional counterpart, Bois Sauvage. I show how shunned space shapes both Jesmyn Ward and her approach to writing.

For example, the link between individual identity and shunned space is poignantly documented in Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. She writes:

I ached so badly for my family and DeLisle that I cried. *How do I get back?* I’d worked hard in high school, spending weekend nights during my junior and senior years studying for standardized tests and navigating the unfamiliar lingo of college alone. Going to an elite college far from home hadn’t molded me into an

⁹ Drug abuse is an example of individual self-directed violence depicted in works such as Ward’s *Men We Reaped*, as shown in Figure 3. “National Suicide Day” represents self-directed violence from the community of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* against itself, or Richard Wright’s depiction of his community’s dysfunctional acceptance of fundamentalist Christianity as shown in Figure 5.

adult, made me confident and self-assured; instead, it had confused me, made me timid and unsure of myself. I yearned for the familiar. (213-4)

Ward’s longing for the shunned space of her youth reveals the homing instinct such places instill within many of their residents.

The following diagram shows key relationships between Ward and shunned space:

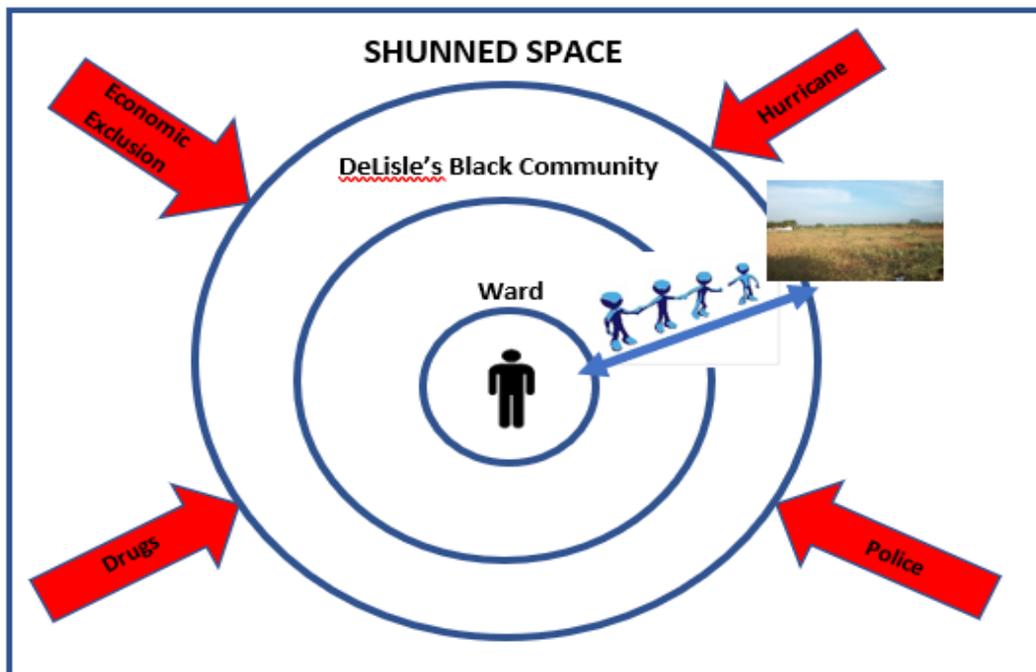


Figure 2 Shunned Space – Diagram for Ward in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*¹⁰

In Figure 2, Ward witnesses all the forces arrayed against her family and neighbors: economic exclusion, police raids, natural disasters, and an influx of illicit drugs. These forces eventually claim the lives of five young Black men close to Ward. Since the victims and the

¹⁰ Ward addresses the drug epidemic in DeLisle: “It was a necessity for most young Black men I knew in the community to do so, at one time or another, to sell some kinds of drugs in a sluggish economy where their labor was easy to come by and totally and completely expendable” (218).

author share the bonds of community within the same shunned space, any of them can be placed in the center of the diagram currently occupied by Ward.

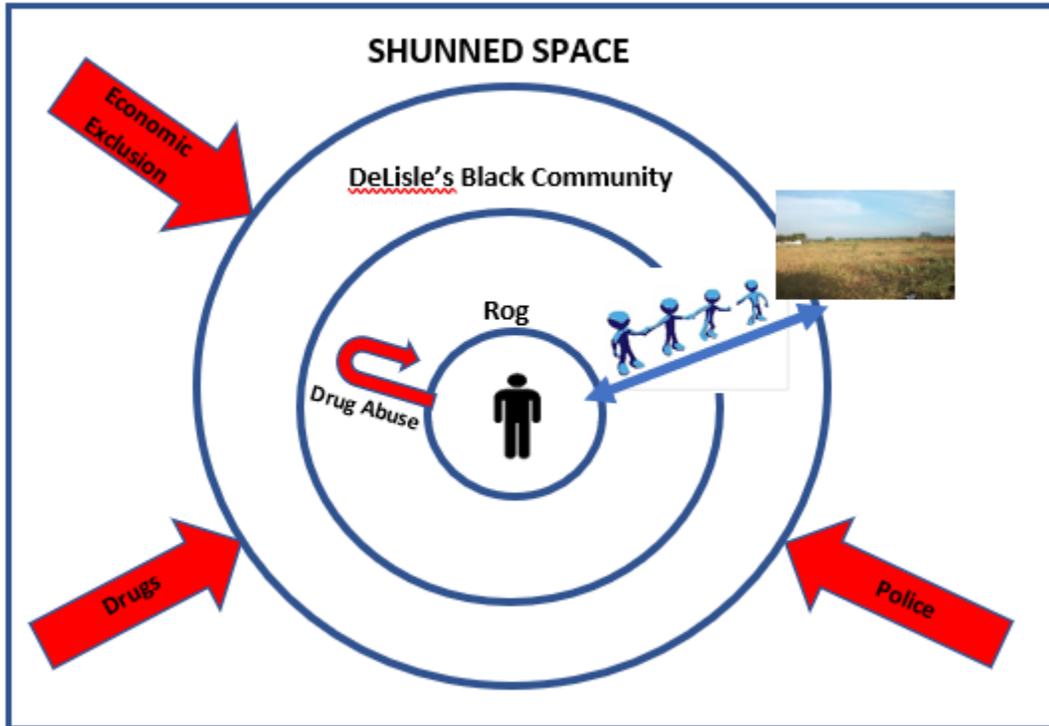


Figure 3 Shunned Space – Diagram for Rog in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*

In Figure 3, individuals such as Jesmyn’s brother Rog are far more likely to become addicted to illicit drugs due to these factors: (1) the larger society provides access to drugs, and (2) the larger society does not respond in a meaningful way to correct the problem of drug addiction within shunned spaces. This is yet another example of how the external world imposes itself on the residents of shunned space, and Ward insists that Rog is one of the victims. *Salvage the Bones* microscopically displays the advent of Hurricane Katrina from the perspective of a poor African American family who lives in Bois Sauvage, a shunned space along the Mississippi coast. A fifteen-year-old Black girl named Esch is the protagonist who learns to harness a limited form of feminine empowerment in a sexually abusive environment. Similar graphs can be easily

extrapolated from this model to represent other characters and their relationship to the fictional town of Bois Sauvage throughout Ward’s novels. Figure 4 exhibits the shunned space found in *Salvage the Bones* with the protagonist at the center:

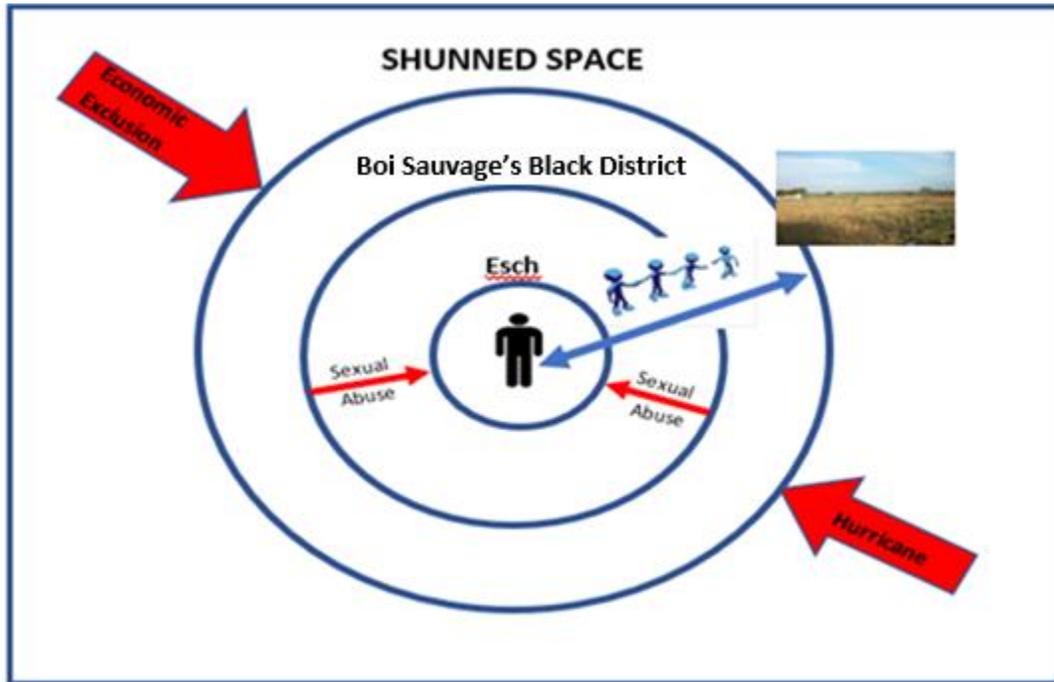


Figure 4 Shunned Space—Diagram for Esch in *Salvage the Bones*

This graph demonstrates that violence does not always originate from outside of the shunned space as Esch is repeatedly subjected to sexual assault from young men within her community. Unlike Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, in which the eponymous protagonist is in conflict with her shunned space community (The Bottom), Esch does not frequently clash with other residents of Bois Sauvage. Hence, the above diagram does not feature an arrow directed from her against the community. Other permutations are possible featuring additional characters within this shunned space. I also analyze *Sing, Unburied, and Sing*, which offers a complex arrangement of binaries: a mixed-race couple, two alternating narrators, and two ghosts who illustrate the rich but disturbing history of shunned spaces that populate the American South.

The interrelationships between characters, community, and the outside, predominantly White communities not only convey the strength of shunned spaces, but also reveal their vulnerability to external forces. Both the occupants of shunned space and the landscape are usually impacted by such invasions. In *Violence in Place, Cultural and Environmental Wounding* (2017), Amanda Kearney illustrates how the bond between people and the land is assaulted by ecological violence. She writes:

If people and place are bound through kinship, whether through necessity and survival, or choice and abiding love, then wounding is co-terminus. The harms done to one will impact upon the other...Commonly considered the context and milieu of life, place is a 'relational co-presence,' envisioned as a vital shaping element in human life...It is within and across such broad-ranging realities of place that human conflict occurs, and it is place, along with people, that bears the scars of violence and becomes the subject of trauma narratives. (1)

As a result, I have depicted the red arrows of external force larger than any others to demonstrate that external, racialized violence is always at the threshold of African American shunned spaces. Nevertheless, as the graph for *Salvage the Bones* indicates, violence emerges from within shunned space as well as externally. Given the immediacy of potential invasion, the longer a shunned space endures, the more likely it will have encountered ecological violence that scars the landscape and fractures the vital link between marginalized individuals and the source of their livelihood. Shunned spaces supply vantages necessary to view the full impact of such violence.

I argue that shunned spaces amplify the unique signifiers of African American literature by projecting community and individual identity against a backdrop holistically framed by

environmental scarcity, violence, and an unwavering cultural resistance to dehumanization and fragmentation. In other words, shunned spaces within African American literature are venues within which Black communities, characters, folklore, history, and the environment collectively counteract dissolution by the larger, White society. All these elements must be considered together to obtain a complete understanding of the role of shunned space.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the shunned spaces found in Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy* (1945), *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and *Native Son* (1940), perhaps his most influential novel. Unlike Jesmyn Ward, Richard Wright finds little that is redeemable about the shunned spaces of his youth. He grew up primarily in Mississippi during the apex of Jim Crow, and his memoir, *Black Boy*, depicts the shunned spaces of the South as venues from which their occupants must flee. *Native Son*, arguably Wright's magnum opus, offers a northern version of shunned space. Wright fails to celebrate shunned spaces' vast array of cultural accomplishment and opts instead to vilify the accomplishments of African American communities on many occasions. For example, Wright views religion with scorn, although he begrudgingly acknowledges its preeminence in the African American community. He describes the aftermath of joining his mother's church: "I felt limp as a rag; I had not felt anything except sullen anger and a crushing sense of shame. Yet I was somehow glad that I had got it over with; no barriers now stood between me and the community" (155). Despite Wright's diminutive commentary about his childhood homes, I argue that his literary oeuvre evolves from his experiences in shunned space. His resistance to the powerful agencies of community, religion, and culture in the Southern Black community only serve to amplify their prominence. For example, his memoir *Black Boy* is replete with references to shunned space. Consider the following passage's exquisite balancing act between pastoral imagery and the horror of Jim Crow:

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky.

There was the tantalizing melancholy in the tingling scent of burning hickory wood.

There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the pretty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads.

There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey. (8)

The poetic structure of these passages is irresistibly nostalgic, with a series of images ranging from flight to groveling like ants in the dirt. Wright's "yearning for identification" echoes with chattel signifiers as it depicts unending labor. These signifiers appear in novels such as *Native Son*, forming a direct link between the author's personal experience within shunned space and his writings.

Wright's troubled relationship with the shunned spaces of his youth is quickly apparent in his memoir. Consider the following shunned space diagram in Figure 5 for *Black Boy*:

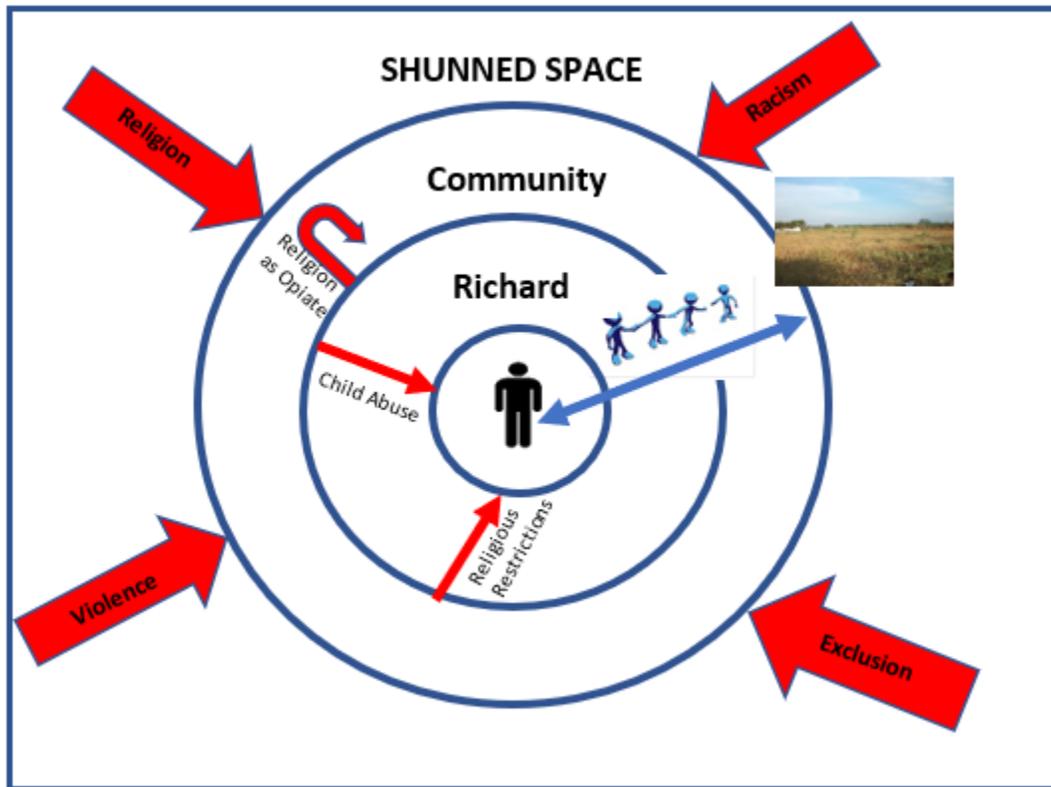


Figure 5 Shunned Space Diagram for Richard Wright in *Black Boy*

For Wright, shunned space is dystopic. Jim Crow produces an unending stream of violence exercised against the inhabitants of shunned space, especially Black men. Community is simultaneously assaulted by the South's racialized politics, scarcity imposed by exclusion, and a religion that anesthetizes any resistance to oppression.¹¹ Wright insists that the marginalized community participates in its own destruction by internalizing religious practices that serve only to limit the capacity of adherents to respond. Family is the core of this dysfunctional community that transmits brutality from the larger society against its own children, including young

¹¹ Nevertheless, I argue in Chapter 3 that Wright is heavily influenced by the shunned spaces of his childhood.

Richard.¹² The above diagram resembles a cauldron where pressure builds without dissipation. Young Richard finds release only in the natural world and by innovating a determination to leave the South.¹³

Despite such limitations, I argue that the shunned spaces of the American South remain within Wright throughout his literary career and continue to flavor his perspective even after he reaches Paris. In fact, he admits as much after fleeing the South for Chicago: “Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, Black though I was, the culture of the South” (227-8).¹⁴ Wright laments this fact throughout his life as he seeks to reinvent himself at several junctions. From joining the American Communist Party to relocate from the South to Chicago, then to New York and later to Paris, Wright finds no substitute for the energizing influence of his youthful shunned spaces. For many writers, the path to transcendent meaning is circuitous. First, there is escape from the wrenching poverty and racism of the South. Later, the pull homeward grows irresistible and seems to confirm T.S. Eliot’s assertion in “Little Gidding” that “the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time” (v. 27-9). Apparently, for Wright, one time was enough to know the bloody Jim Crow South as home.

¹² In turn, young Richard lashes out by setting the curtains on fire and torturing animals. His mother responds to the fire by viciously beating him. “Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well,” Wright states, “But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me” (5).

¹³ Insight from young Richard’s diagram contrasts dramatically with Ward’s memoir, which, despite the violence that results in the deaths of young men she loves, does not eviscerate her strong bonds with an enabling community.

¹⁴ Trudier Harris uses this quote and adds her own sentiment in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South* (2009): “The American South, therefore, becomes a rite of passage for African American writers. Not one of them considers himself or herself truly an African American writer without having confronted the South in some way.”

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, comprised of five novellas that not only illustrate the dangers of shunned space, but also reveal the determination of marginalized residents to resist oppression and exclusion, a group of teenagers quickly encounters the full force of Jim Crow when a White woman sees them swimming at a nearby pond in "Big Boy Leaves Home." The resulting carnage illustrates the vulnerability of shunned space residents who venture too close to intersectional spaces where they are likely to encounter Whites. "Down by the Riverside" presents Mann as the protagonist who is desperate to save his family from the violence of Jim Crow, which escalates into a series of bloody scenes by the end of the story. "Long Black Song" features Silas, a strong, independent Black man whose wife has sexual relations with a White salesman. He kills the salesman and decides to stay and fight the approaching White mob, resulting in the fiery destruction of his home and hearth.

Native Son (1940) depicts Bigger Thomas within the context of a poor, Black community in Chicago's South Side during Jim Crow. His growing disconnection from community, other than his gang, results in escalating violence and capital punishment. Despite attempts by other members of the African American community, Bigger is unable to unilaterally resist the racism that surrounds him without self-destructing. Although James Baldwin once stated in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull" (42), individual responses to racism are mitigated by communities that occupy shunned space, thereby enacting a more potent, collective approach to oppression.¹⁵

¹⁵ A diagram of Bigger's shunned space in *Native Son* appears in Chapter 3 and illustrates a similar buildup of pressure that is ultimately fatal for the protagonist.

In Chapter 4, I argue that William Faulkner’s depiction of shunned space was limited by his membership in a White, privileged class. I focus on *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *The Reivers* (1962) to illustrate Faulkner’s presentation of shunned space. As a member of the privileged, White community of Oxford, Faulkner views shunned spaces from the outside-in. His lack of personal association with the scarcity and limitations imposed by most racialized shunned spaces clearly sets his perspective apart from that of Ward and Wright. Nevertheless, in a 2012 *New York Times* article titled “How William Faulkner Tackled Race – and Freed the South From Itself,” John Jeremiah Sullivan describes how *Go Down, Moses* provides insight into America’s racialized contradictions. Sullivan insists that “The South escaped itself in this book and became universal.”¹⁶ Although Faulkner’s pedigree as a writer is beyond dispute, I argue that he could not establish a “universal” or cosmopolitan South without more thoroughly describing its shunned spaces. I agree with Sullivan that *Go Down, Moses* brilliantly removes the veneer of racialized gentility and deconstructs its most sacred assumptions about pure blood, but it does not fully explore the power of shunned space.

Despite Faulkner’s depiction of racial barriers in the American South, his own lingering vestiges of racism disrupted his ability to fully display the promise and problems associated with shunned space.¹⁷ *Intruder in the Dust* is arguably the best Faulkner novel for examining shunned

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/magazine/how-william-faulkner-tackled-race-and-freed-the-south-from-itself.html>.

¹⁷ Despite his impressive record for exposing racial injustice, Faulkner parades the gauntlet of white patriarchy. The following excerpt is taken from his 1958 speech at The University of Virginia: “We, the white man, must take (the Negro) hand in hand and teach him...responsibility...He must learn to cease forever more thinking like a Negro and acting like a Negro” (Aiken 207). I argue that such condescension precludes Faulkner’s ability to capture the nuanced relationship between African Americans and the shunned spaces that whites have allocated for them.

spaces during Jim Crow. The following shunned space diagram in Figure 6 illustrates Lucas Beauchamp at the center:

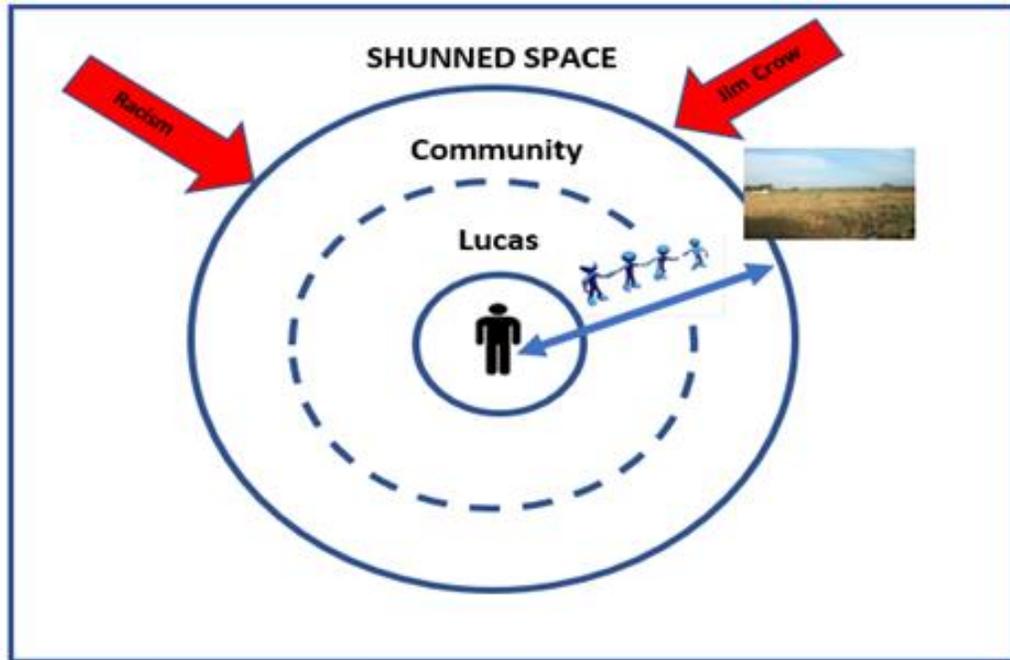


Figure 6 Shunned Space Diagram for Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust*¹⁸

Lucas is a mixed-race individual who is accused of killing a White man and is presumed guilty by a majority of the town's White population. In the diagram, the Black community is represented by a dotted line because I argue that Faulkner does not capture a fully-vested snapshot of this vital component of shunned space. The narrative explores only bits and pieces of the shunned space. Nevertheless, Faulkner offers phenomenal insights into the racialized mechanisms of American slavery and Jim Crow.¹⁹

¹⁸ The shunned space for Lucas Beauchamp is perhaps the most complex we will see in this paper. I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁹ In another display of Faulkner's complexity as a man, Erskine Peters records that Faulkner offers praise for *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Peters insists, "These are the words of Faulkner's middle years. That he could give such implicit praise to highly forceful and racially indicting *Native Son* suggests a great deal of maturation on his part" (208).

In *The Reivers*, Faulkner's last novel, he deploys humor as Ned McCaslin, an African American man, turns the tables on racial bigotry. Although the novel has since received strongly negative reviews from literary analysts, I feel that its storyline intersects shunned spaces in surprising ways that promote the rights of marginalized Blacks from Ned's shunned space and beyond. Through the eyes of children, who at first view the world through a color-free lens, Faulkner reveals that racial separation is not natural. Hence, shunned spaces are, by their very nature, artificially created based on arbitrary criteria (in the American South, such criteria are almost always racial). With *The Reivers*, Faulkner completes the triangle of three great Mississippi authors and provides an additional dimension to my research into shunned spaces by depicting them through the lens of a White resident of the larger society.

CHAPTER 2: JESMYN WARD

Overview of Jesmyn Ward's conflicted Relationship with Shunned Space

In this chapter, I argue that Ward illustrates the endemic racism, feminine empowerment, and environmental degradation of shunned space in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to varying degrees. As a holistic endeavor, examining these writings from the perspective of shunned space involves a great deal of interplay among all these categories. They blend together such that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. For example, the impact of Hurricane Katrina presented in *Salvage the Bones* underscores how scarcity and political exclusion leave shunned spaces especially vulnerable to the environmentally destructive forces of natural disasters. Furthermore, the role of feminist empowerment in the novel is complicated by the fact that Esch, its female protagonist, although young and susceptible to male dominance, eventually rises to bring a modicum of healing to her family. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* documents Ward's journey through the personal loss of five young Black men from her hometown of DeLisle, Mississippi. Having grown up in a shunned space, Ward is intrinsically aware of the challenges facing its inhabitants, and how those problems sometimes claim the lives of young people. I will therefore emphasize her memoir as a personal reflection on shunned space.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward's fiction adds a supernatural flare as she interrogates a family's journey to pick up their father from Mississippi's notorious Parchman Prison. In the process, they encounter the ghost of a teenager who brings them to a deeper understanding of their own family's history with shunned space. Ward's writings therefore center on shunned space in a manner that not only highlights the limitations imposed on its marginalized inhabitants, but also the creative responses these residents must innovate to survive as both individuals and communities.

Shunned spaces are visceral, perennial reminders of the historical trauma visited on millions of Americans. Ward anchors her memoir to the spaces in and around DeLisle to expose her contrapuntal relationship with them. She therefore intimately portrays the ability of shunned space both to create and destroy the livelihood of its marginalized residents. Subsequently, Ward weaves Bois Sauvage, the fictional equivalent of DeLisle, into her novels. African Americans comprise the largest segment of the population in each town's shunned space, while Whites are usually found in more privileged communities that either border each shunned space or are located nearby. Scholars such as Henrichsen argue that the South's racial mix has grown far too complex to find significance in such binary arrangements of racial groups.

Unlike spaces such as DeLisle, Lisa Henrichsen's *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in Post-Plantation Southern Literature* (2015) asserts that the American South is a space where the binary nature of race is overwhelmed by migration and economic shifts. Given the fact that Whites and Blacks comprise the overwhelming majority of DeLisle's residents, I argue that shunned spaces reflect the opposite trend. Henrichsen writes, "As borders, both real and imaginary, erode and as diverse cultures come into contact in southern

space through capital flows, trade shifts, migration, and immigration, the imagined community of the region has significantly altered” (159). At first glance, almost any sizable city in the South seems to reinforce Henrichsen’s vision of an increasingly pluralistic society, while shunned spaces, including DeLisle and Bois Sauvage, are notable exceptions.

Although the tide of demographic shift is set squarely against a continuation of binary trends as immigrants enter the United States from all corners of the world, the South possesses many counterexamples such as DeLisle, Mississippi and Uniontown, Alabama. I resist the notion that such a shift away from a binary population is universal. Instead, I insist that shunned spaces remain outliers to the prevailing theme of multicultural transformation and retain populations that are overwhelmingly minority, marginalized, and culturally innovative. The writings of Jesmyn Ward therefore address the lingering significance of shunned space through the lenses of race, gender, and ecology. Although each of these subjects opens windows into an extraordinary variety of analyses that would easily fill a volume, I explore each subject to introduce the analytical possibilities for referencing shunned space in African American literature. Ward politically invests shunned spaces with a multitude of visual reminders that America’s flirtation with racial apartheid has not yet ended.

The imagination of a writer depends on her environment and draws its referents from both historical and present fact. In his 2017 book titled *The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead’s Presents*, Daniel Grausam addresses the link between literature, historical truth, and current events. Concerning Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prizewinning novel titled *The Underground Railroad*, Grausam writes, “Whitehead’s more conventionally set novels might be said to provide the figurative prehistory of the discordant now of his speculative works, and they

do so by returning to the ruptures engendered by neoliberalism” (125). Ward features shunned space as a failure of neoliberalism’s efforts to fuse America’s racial fractures via economic opportunity. Both the economic scarcity and political exclusion experienced by residents of DeLisle and Bois Sauvage clearly demonstrate that the nation has a long way to go in granting equal access to its extraordinary abundance.

As of this writing, one hundred and fifty years removed from the Emancipation Proclamation, the forces of American slavery and Jim Crow still entangle our national narrative. This complexity is revealed in the land and resources available to shunned space inhabitants, who must perpetually negotiate with the larger society for the essentials of life (food, shelter, and safety). In turn, community organically grows within such spaces to accommodate the human need for love, companionship, and a measure of safety. For Ward, the characters of *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* branch from the family and friends of her personal experience and are rooted in the soil in and around DeLisle. For most individuals, the ability to shape personal destiny in such a world of exclusion, periodic invasion, scarcity, and violence is impossible to achieve. Only a collective struggle against injustice is enough to prevail against fragmentation.

As Ward’s depiction of a wolf demonstrates, space itself can take on the properties of a non-human character, reflected both in her novels and in her memoir. Given the impact of history, shunned space is layered, just as human characters are layered. It experiences upheavals in the form of storms and human-induced catastrophe. A resonance therefore exists between human characters and the surrounding spaces in which they live, flourish, suffer, die, and forge the bonds of community. Kate Soper writes in “Feminism and Ecology: Realism and Rhetoric in

the Discourses of Nature (1995)” that “representations of nature and the concepts and symbolisms we bring to it have very definite political effects” (312). Nature symbolically infuses the music and narratives of shunned space residents, echoing their demands for equality and liberation from external invasion and marginalization.

Men We Reaped: A Memoir emphasizes the historical and prevailing role of racism in shaping the experience of shunned space residents. Ward’s memoir also mentions several examples of the unexpected spiritual role of automobiles in providing sanctuary for young people. However, I contend that the sanctuary offered by the community that evolves within shunned space is the most important incubator of identity for the inhabitants of DeLisle and Bois Sauvage. I also explore how feminist empowerment is illustrated most strongly in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* as Ward relates her struggle with racialized systems that cause the deaths of so many young Black men in and around DeLisle, Mississippi.²⁰ Perhaps the binary nature of shunned space reinforces the notion of “us vs. them” implicit within racist assumptions by placing two segregated population groups in such close proximity. Individuals from shunned spaces who cross into the more privileged White enclaves therefore invite all of the racialized assumptions that have accumulated over generations. Young Ward is therefore greeted with suspicion and racialized assumptions when she attends a predominantly White private school (2).

Shunned spaces are often binary, combining otherwise opposite characteristics. For instance, DeLisle, Mississippi and its surrounding, predominantly Black districts are both

²⁰ On the other hand, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* manifests the psychological and spiritual scars of historical racism embedded in the land and communities of shunned spaces. Environmental degradation and feminism are not emphasized as strongly as we will see in Ward’s memoir or *Salvage the Bones*. However, they do significantly influence the novel’s shunned space and provide insight into distinguishing Bois Sauvage from similar venues such as prisons disproportionately allocated for marginalized groups.

sanctuary and predator for Ward, offering comfort, family, and community on one hand while simultaneously fostering mortal danger on the other. The residents of her shunned space provide a home that both nurtures and predated. However, as illustrated earlier on Figure 1, the external, largely White society that has created shunned space bears significant responsibility for many of its lingering challenges. Ward experiences the small, mostly Black community of her childhood as a place violated by systemic oppression extending back centuries; but she simultaneously finds the strength to grieve the immense loss within or near its borders. Her loss is achingly apparent in *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* as she mourns what seems to be an endless succession of young men vanishing from her life.

Ward's memoir also illustrates the vital role of women in her family given the absence of men. She states, "I have always thought of my family as something of a matriarchy, since the women of my mother's side have held my nuclear family and my immediate family and my extended family together through so much" (83). Women in shunned spaces are often simultaneously forced to occupy the roles of caregivers and breadwinners. Ward summarizes the role of women in her family as follows:

Like the women in my family before her, my mother knew the family was her burden to bear. She could not leave. So she did what her mother did before her, what her sisters did, what her aunts did: she worked and set about the business of raising her children. She did not know it then, but she would be the sole financial provider for us until we reached adulthood. (131)

Ward's mother refuses to send the children to live permanently with other relatives and instead opts to battle the financial burden and raise them herself (131). Her steadfast determination

illustrates feminine empowerment that evolves from a condition of necessity and survival. I argue that Ward seizes her mother's tenacity, pursues education, and pushes forward as a political writer.

Ward weaves political intent into her memoir as an intergenerational fact that does not implicate the absent men of her father's generation. She declares that the women in her family "worked like men" because "former husbands had relationships with other women and married them and then left them also, perhaps searching for a sense of freedom or a sense of power that being a Black man in the South denied them" (83). Asymmetrical responsibility fell to women and forced them "to be inhumanly strong" and shoulder the burden of family by themselves (83). Feminism is therefore more a necessity than a choice for the women of DeLisle. Nevertheless, the agency available to women has many layers of complexity.

Nerissa, Ward's sister, uses her physical appearance to negotiate a space for herself in a patriarchal society. At birth, she launches her first attack against masculine privilege by refusing to enter the world peacefully. Ward writes:

[Mother] carried Nerissa to term, and my sister had been a hard birth. She'd been the heaviest of us all, and had refused to descend down the birth canal, so the doctors and nurses had to drive her out of my mother by taking their forearms and sweeping down my mother's stomach from rib cage to hip, and then grabbing Nerissa's head with forceps. She didn't want to leave me, my mother says. (55)

Forced from her mother's womb, Nerissa reluctantly entered a world of powerful masculine privilege and innovated a clever response that capitalized on her appearance and graceful personality. Ward writes: "[Rob's male friends] told [Nerissa] their secrets, and she kept them.

Nerissa embodied femininity in the way she sat, legs crossed, toes painted and polished, a bundle of curves, and then sullied it with the way she cussed easily and made them laugh” (63). She is therefore a moving target for hetero-male attraction, confounding any easy interpretation of her intentions by responding to them in unexpected ways. Ward’s description of her sister’s sexual allure demonstrates an interpretation of sensuality as a political instrument, swaying like tree moss between lasciviousness and obscene language, depending on her whim.

Ward’s memoir demonstrates that the South’s racialized systems continue to kill young Black men in shunned spaces. The chapter headings read like tombstones. For example, the death of her dear friend Roger opens a view into a virtual cemetery cataloging the author’s accumulating grief:

Roger Eric Daniels III

Born: March 5, 1981

Died: June 3, 2004

Ward’s memoir is therefore a cross between a cemetery and a living memorial for the young men swept away from her life. Table 1 seems to anesthetize their deaths as presented below:

Table 1 Ward's List of Loss

Victim	Born	Died	Relationship to Jesmyn	Cause of Death
Roger Eric Daniels III	Mar. 5, 1981	June 3, 2004	Friend	Drug overdose
Demond Cook	May 15, 1972	Feb. 26, 2004	Friend	Murder
Charles Joseph Martin	May 5, 1983	Jan. 5, 2004	Friend	Auto accident
Ronald Wayne Lizana	Sept. 20, 1983	Dec. 16, 2002	Friend	Suicide
Joshua Adam Dedeaux	Oct. 27, 1980	Oct. 2, 2000	Brother	Killed by white, drunk driver

Source: *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*

A quick glance at this list reveals an existential crisis for the inhabitants of DeLisle, especially young, Black men. Five young men living in close proximity in the span of only four years have died of preventable causes ranging from drunk driving to murder. Hence, DeLisle serves as a superb example of a shunned space in which violence, both internal and external, are experienced far out of proportion to the general population.

Figure 7 below demonstrates an array of obstacles faced by young, Black men in DeLisle:

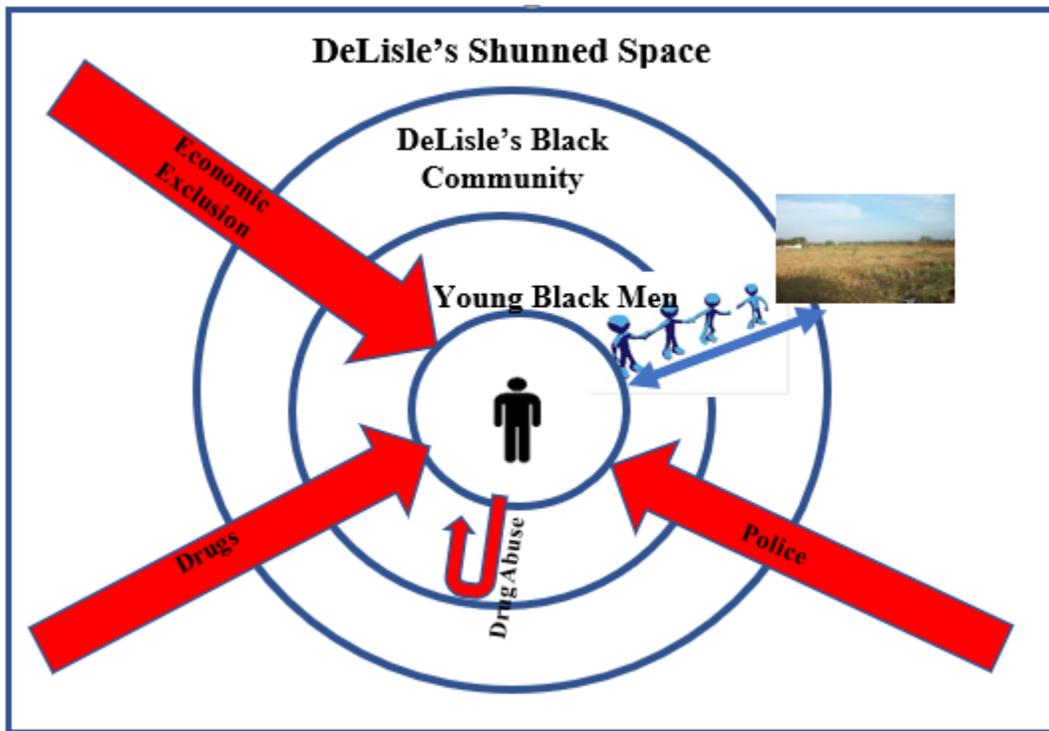


Figure 7 Young Black men of DeLisle

Almost all shunned spaces are pockmarked by the graves of marginalized individuals who die from sweltering oppression. Nevertheless, Ward's memoir is more than a series of lamentations: it is also a cry for her readers to confront the racialized system that has infected venues such as DeLisle. Each young man's story ripples outward in ways that not only engulf their shunned space, but also the white community that surrounds it. At times, Ward's rage overwhelms her grief. She writes:

But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that. I cannot forget that when I am walking the streets of DeLisle, streets that seem even barer since Katrina...the only sound I hear is a tortured parrot that one of my cousins owns, a parrot that screams so loudly it sounds through the neighborhood, a scream like a

wounded child, from a cage so small the parrot's crest barely clears the top of the cage while its tail brushes the bottom...I wonder why silence is the sound of our subsumed rage, our accumulated grief. I decide this is not right, that I must give voice to this story. (8)

The voice Ward supplies to her rage is a scream—nothing less than a cry for political reform²¹—so that DeLisle and all other shunned spaces can eventually escape the cycle of senseless death.²² Before she can accomplish this task, citing each lost life that ripples outward through the entire community, she must name the source of all that grief. She must find her bearings as a writer and as a feminist. I argue that Ward's father is one of the unlikely sources for her capacity to face the grief and social injustice afflicting DeLisle and other shunned spaces like it. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* is primarily a story about young people, told by a young woman, in a shunned space that bears the marks of racialized poverty. Historically, young, marginalized African Americans have been closely tethered to the shunned spaces they call home—until the arrival of automobiles.

Men We Reaped: A Memoir reveals a unique twist concerning the role of automobiles as agents of sanctuary, adding an extra level of protection from civil authorities when outside the shunned space. However, I show that the emergent subculture of automobiles among young

²¹ In *Toni Morrison and the New Black: Reading God Help the Child*, Jaleel Akhtar highlights the abundant inconsistencies of any notion that America has achieved a “post-racial” consciousness. He writes, “The emergence of [a] new movement in view of persistent racism and police brutality shatters the illusion of a color-blind, post-racial United States...The nationwide protests, such as those in Ferguson, Missouri, have given added strength to the demands for justice and dealt a further blow to post-racial new black demands” (5).

²² In *Black Girl Dangerous* (2014), Mia McKenzie writes, “People who care about freedom, really care about it, more than their own comfort, more than their own ego, people who are ready to hear you, will hear you, even in your rage. Especially then” (163).

African Americans does not replace the need for shunned space, or its spiritual houses of worship. Consider the following passage:

In summer 2003, we piled into my car, Charine and Nerissa and C.J. and me, and met up with Nerissa's friend at a hotel on a beach near Illusions... Once there, we sat in my car and got high. The Gulf water, black in the night, rolled inexorably in. We felt good. We watched the parking lot of the nightclub, the cars moving like a current past one another, people swarming, preening. The bass from the club called out, and the bass from the cars answered. (113)

The scene depicts a Pentecostal fervor as cars jostle in the parking lot, and deep-base radios respond to tunes echoing out from the nearby clubs as though performing a two-part spiritual number for their car-locked congregation. Despite the scene's comradery and communal focus, cars simultaneously shield their occupants from danger and expose them to other risks. For example, police frequently profile areas visited by young African Americans—especially when they are more than a few miles removed from their homes.

Young, marginalized, predominantly male residents of shunned space are subjected to the risk of deadly profiling when they venture far from home. I contend that shunned spaces, including DeLisle, are designed by the larger society to quarantine young, Black men. However, they also partly shield marginalized, young people from incursions by the dominant culture. With cars, it is possible for young men to inadvertently cross invisible lines of acceptance in which the protections of shunned communities are absent, thereby increasing the likelihood that

systemic racism will respond with lethal force.²³ This argument is supported by scholars such as Noel A. Cazenave, author of *Killing African Americans: Police and Vigilante Violence as a Racial Control Mechanism* (2018). He writes:

As I pondered the reasons for the disproportionate and common killings of African Americans and vigilante types it became clear that a lethal mix of racist stereotypes and emotions, hypermasculinity, and entitlement fueled their actions. For example, because the victims were usually, but not always, boys or men, and the killers were almost always men, I suspected that what was going on was in part a highly racialized macho issue, an assertion of white male dominance. I also realized that, because they are normative, such actions are not only justified but protected by police and vigilante attitudes and culture. (xiii)

For Ward, similar violence against the young, Black men of DeLisle echoes in suicide, drug addiction, poor infrastructure, and even murder. Shunned space offers fragile sanctuary for these young Black men, who seek to escape the scarcity and violence of towns such as DeLisle only to find themselves in other venues that offer little or no protection.

Ward illustrates one example when she and her father are walking in New Orleans. They encounter an unnamed woman who illustrates the scarcity of her urban shunned space:

²³ A personal example illustrates the risks when young Black men inadvertently cross into dangerous areas. A small group of young, African American men were recently walking through my community in Alabaster, Alabama one evening and were confronted by a middle-aged white male resident with a gun, who forced them to stay put until the police arrived. Since no laws were violated by the young men, the police officer released them. The neighborhood website brimmed with caustic messages from white homeowners who were enraged that the police did not arrest the group of young men—or worse, execute them.

She smiled at my father, and I saw that she was missing teeth, and those that were left were black at the gum line. And she was not alone. I looked at most of the people walking the street and saw that half the neighborhood looked as if they were starving. (198)

Although her father tacitly dismissed the woman, Ward later developed a larger view of the situation by reflecting on the source of social issues such as drug abuse in shunned space. However, she writes, “He had to show a strength he may not have felt, had to evince a ruthlessness in his swagger that was not in him” (200). Masculinity is rendered simultaneously performative and defensive for many men, especially those in shunned spaces who must shield themselves from becoming easy victims of violence or abuse. However, Ward’s father chose a different path when dealing with rowdy children who attacked his son. She was surprised to find that he did not whip the boys who attacked her brother and, instead, merely spoke with them at length (199). As an adult, Ward demonstrates agency through her writing, and echoes her father’s restraint by avoiding a call to violence. Although undeniably political in their opposition to racialized injustice, Ward’s writings humanize the residents of shunned space to diffuse the oppressive forces wielded by the larger society against them.

Ward’s relationship with her father is complicated in that he is both present and absent during her childhood. While present, he offers a model of masculine empowerment that Ward applies to her own agency as a female writer. When he leaves, his absence reflects a collective reality in shunned space. Ward insinuates that the absence of father figures is intrinsic to her brother’s inability to convert scarcity into productivity. She writes:

My mother had found a way to create opportunity for me, to give me the kinds of educational and social advantages that both Joshua and I might have had access to if we weren't marked by poverty or race, so I was bent on college. Joshua had lesser models and lesser choices, and like many young men his age, he felt that school was not feasible for him. (211)

Ward's absent father could not provide the mentorship and guidance for Josh that she received from her mother—advice that promoted within her the desire to excel and resist the racialized systems arrayed against her. Feminine empowerment therefore blooms by necessity in shunned spaces that have experienced the reduction of their Black male population due to the residual effects of Jim Crow and the inability of many African American men to gain access to employment with livable wages. However, the men who live in shunned space are subject to periodic invasion from external forces—a fact that compels many shunned space males to feel emasculated.

Whites frequently invaded DeLisle and its surrounding Black districts in stealthy and unexpected ways. Ward relates the death of her great-great-grandfather, Jeremy, who had acquired enough wealth from illegal liquor stills to provide a one-room school and teacher for his children. When white authorities found him, the results were tragic: “The Revenues left his dead body to grow cold in the green reaching woods among his ruined stills, and once Harry [Ward's maternal great-grandfather] told them what had happened, his family trekked into the forest to retrieve his body” (12). Such stories of blatant injustice are common throughout the South and demonstrate the vulnerability of shunned space residents to outside intrusion. Although shunned

spaces permit some degree of autonomy, as illustrated by the financial success of Jeremy's stills, they also illustrate the fragility of any sense of lasting security within their borders.

Ward's grief opens every wound in DeLisle, its landscape laden with the rot of three hundred years of scarcity. As she describes impoverished enclaves in New Orleans, she seems to harken back to DeLisle, exposing the raw nerve of a common denominator between them. The dead and dying are presented in sharp relief in the following passage:

My father's revelation about addicts and dealers made me see the neighborhood clearly, see the way the narrow streets were all pothole-ridden and mostly empty, where families seemed empty of everyone but the very old and the very young, the old driven to infirmity by crack, the young either ignorant or profiting from it. The air was redolent with the scent of marsh mud, burnt coffee, and something that smelled like raw sewage. (209)

Ward must continually confront the fact that DeLisle, exhausted by scarcity, violence, and environmental catastrophe that invade her beloved home, cannot shield those she loves from the horrors she fears most.

Nevertheless, Ward rejects any notion of moving on from the voices of her past, from the young men killed by forces within and beyond shunned space. However, her desire to stay in DeLisle does not equate to inertia. She writes, "I decide [silence] is not right, that I must give voice to this story" (7). Ward's memoir therefore pivots on a manifesto attached firmly to the notion that ending any conversation about the vanished young men is tantamount to moral heresy. Her personal connection with the dead is conflated with the full spectrum of her ancestry. Ward writes: "Because this is my story just as it is the story of those lost young men, and

because this is my family's story just as it is my community's story, it is not straightforward" (7). In turn, her community takes root in the shunned space of DeLisle, which stages the racialized elements of its residents' experience. Ward therefore insists, "To tell [my family's story], I must tell the story of my town, and the history of my community" (7). In other words, Ward reaches outward from a rapidly vanishing circle of loved ones to make sense of their eternal loss. She literally feels "called" to relate her grief to a larger audience, and DeLisle is the stage on which she presents it. Ward wants to pass the cup and questions why she is "saddled with this rotten fucking story" (8).²⁴ Her writing becomes far more than a passion or a vocation. Instead, Ward views her narratives as a vital part of her effort to grant meaning to her extraordinary loss. I argue that her success hinges on her brilliant deployment of shunned space to holistically explain the tragic deaths of these young men, and to call out the lingering racism that continues to claim the lives of young, African American men.²⁵

Ward insists that rage is a natural product of racism that should be expressed by all who suffer both presently and ancestrally under its soul crushing influence. She battles the impulse to remain silent with a yearning to understand her personal loss in terms that transcend the young men's limited time on earth. Ward summarizes her efforts:

²⁴ In a 2017 interview with National Public Radio, Ward confessed that she not only seeks to interpret her brother's death in terms of historical, racialized exclusion, but to confront the challenges faced by her children. She asks, "Am I gonna be able to raise my children to adulthood? Are they gonna live to be adults, to be as old as I am now, in this climate, in this country?" For Ward, the social inequality that took her brother's life is predicated on racialized structures that have not yet been removed from America's political landscape. Even DeLisle, clarified at least partly by her writings, might not offer adequate protection for her children.

²⁵ In *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line* (2009), Trudier Harris states: "Complete identity as an African American writer seems to come only after a confrontation with black history and American history as represented by and in the South" (16).

My hope is that learning something about our lives and the lives of the people in my community will mean that when I get to the heart, when my marches forward through the past and backward from the present meet in the middle with my brother's death, I'll understand a bit better why this epidemic happened, about how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread here. (8)

The way this lapse of responsibility took place seems coded in the very landscape in and around DeLisle and is emblematic of many shunned spaces.

I propose that even Ward's description of the natural environment mirrors her belief that the young men died because of historical forces that converged long before they were born.

Consider the cacophonous way flora flourish in the nearby ecosphere: "Pine and oak and sweetgum grow in tangles from the north down to the south of the town as the Wolf River 'snakes its way' through the shunned space (9).²⁶ This untamed quality of the landscape echoes in the human world as well, where population groups blend in wild, uncontrollable ways.

According to Ward:

[DeLisle's residents] are conscious of the way bloodlines are so entangled in our community, so much that back in the early 1900's, adults in DeLisle would arrange visits with other communities of mixed-race people in Alabama or Louisiana to match children with marriageable mates to vary the gene pool. (10)

²⁶ In *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), Camille T. Dungy writes: "Recognition of the connectivity with worlds beyond the human is revealed as a necessity of spiritual and physical survival" (xxiv) As African Americans endured the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, they often found sanctuary in the natural world where they could escape from white oppression.

The South is replete with contradictory attitudes toward sex between Blacks and Whites. Despite multitudes of laws and social customs engineered to keep the races separate, they mingle and collide in secrecy. Even during Jim Crow and slavery, children of mixed ancestry were a common site in shunned spaces. However, the existence of these blended children rarely surfaces in conversations between whites and Blacks, even when White and Black children share the same last name (10). The injunction of racial separation is still considered sacred in places such as Mississippi, and the children of the South's shunned spaces bear witness to the contradictions.

Racial separation was predicated on the desire to separate Black men from white women, to protect the mythologized purity of southern Caucasians. Contradictions often prompted violent responses from whites, and both the landscape and inhabitants of shunned spaces bear the marks of bloody invasions. Ward insists that the deaths of her beloved young men are part of a historical tapestry of violence. She writes:

Men's bodies litter my family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from the beyond, makes them appear as ghosts. In death, they transcend the circumstances of this place that I love and hate all at once and become supernatural. Sometimes, when I think of all the men who've died early in my family over the generations, I think DeLisle is the wolf. (14)

This passage illustrates that shunned space, although frequently incubating and protective, cannot immunize its inhabitants from racialized violence. Ward insists that even the nature scape surrounding shunned space bears the mark of such violence when she writes that "The landscape echoed with loss and grief" (23). As the container of human stories, shunned space amplifies the impact of racialized exclusion visited on its inhabitants.

The layered nature of shunned space is most obviously manifested in the human history of such places as DeLisle. On an external, empirical level, all anthropomorphic space is littered with human influence: human habitations, both living and decayed, are surrounded by cemeteries, fields, roads, and all the trappings of human endeavor. Ward makes multiple mentions of the symbolic association between the wolf and her hometown. Over time, spaces such as DeLisle and Bois Sauvage gather a unique identity informed both by human culture and the landscape itself. Shunned spaces—even those no longer considered “shunned”—still bear the marks of segregation and scarcity. Although the shadow of Jim Crow has passed from many such spaces, the legacy remains coded into the landscape itself. One has only to peruse a “slave cemetery” to witness the dehumanizing edifice of American slavery: when stones are placed, they are often devoid of names. It is therefore easy to agree with Kimberly K. Smith, author of *African American Environmental Thought*, who suggests that the American landscape has been marred by the racialized systems set in motion within it. She states that one school of thought among Black intellectuals declares that America is a “land cursed by injustice and a need for redemption” (8). The fact that the landscape in and around DeLisle is both beautiful and treacherous is a theme that echoes in both Ward’s love of the town and her rage at the racialized systems that convert it into a killing field for so many young, Black men.

Ward is intrinsically aware of the resonance between racialized systems and the shunned space of DeLisle. Given the fact that shunned spaces are encoded within human history and vice versa, the landscape carries intergenerational evidence of the existence and nature of marginalization. Thus, shunned space frequently thwarts efforts to purge history of unsavory facts, and racialized mythologists must perennially seek to change the actual narrative to fit an

idealized interpretation of their own history. Although spaces such as Toni Morrison's "the Bottom" in *Sula* can be thoroughly commodified and eviscerated, it is nevertheless difficult if not impossible to sponge away all layering left by the human community that occupied it for generations. In other words, the land itself is marked by evidence of the human atrocities committed on it. Archaeologists, historians, and novelists therefore inherit a treasure trove of items and topics from which to reconstruct the actual historical narrative of the occupants of many shunned spaces.

The women and children of shunned space must cope with the violence, both internal and external, that forces African American men from their homes. Ward states that "children moved from family to family in DeLisle and nearby Pass Christian through the decades: women in my great-grandmother's generation would sometimes give newborn children to childless couples after having five or ten or fourteen..." (109-10). For African American children in shunned space, home is not a fixed place. By necessity, home includes an entire community who must respond to the vacuum imposed by the absence of fathers.²⁷ In other words, the children of shunned spaces rarely reside in a single household their entire lives, but instead move between and among residences within their community. Sharing the burden of raising children ensures the maximum possibility of success in helping them transition to productive adulthood, while minimizing the horrors of potential homelessness and violence outside the community.

Ward insists that young Black men are targeted disproportionately. The following passage illustrates such marginalization visited against them from an early age:

²⁷ Ward offers this clarification: "[The] tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty" (131).

Rog dropped out of school in the tenth grade; it's not uncommon for young Black men to drop out here. Sometimes they are passively forced out by school authorities, branded as misfits or accused of serious offenses like selling drugs or harassing other students: sometimes they are pushed to the back of classrooms and ignored. (26)

As indicated, violence is sometimes indirect in its impact on shunned space inhabitants.

Marginalization is blatantly obvious in the passage and young African American males are “pushed to the back of classrooms” when they attend interracial schools outside the boundaries of their shunned space. Fragmentation then leads to disillusionment and crime, deepening the cycle of violence.

Ward traverses the stories of each young man's life and death but finds healing only near the end of her memoir. She states: “I write these words to find Joshua, to assert that what happened happened, in a vain attempt to find meaning” (249). I contend that the meaning Ward finds is internal—an interlaced network of memories rippling through the Mississippi countryside, crossing over racialized divides, and colliding with her heart in crisp images of lost faces. After all is said and done, it is not a journey toward Joshua or any of the other men, but an inward leviathan of churning rage that seeks to lash outward, beyond the boundaries of her shunned space, to the larger society that has architected her grief. Ward's frustration blazes in the following observation: “By the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing” (236). All of Ward's anguish seems to be deposited in this passage. After all the statistics and research findings, her analysis for why the young men died seems to decompose to nothing at all.

In other words, the larger society has deemed Joshua and the others unworthy of concern and committed the perennial error of assuming that the marginalized residents of shunned space have not noticed. Ward's memoir proves otherwise and so does her first novel.

Furthermore, Ward's personal experience with Hurricane Katrina drives her depiction of environmental catastrophe in the shunned space of her youth. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* documents the hurricane's violence against the local economy in and around DeLisle:

There was an older Black man who set up shop with a card table and a folding chair outside the doors of the local supermarket in Pass Christian, a supermarket that would disappear after Hurricane Katrina, its steel beams bent to look like twisted, spindly trees. The man fashioned crosses from plastic and string, wove intricate designs into the crucifixes, and sold them. (244)

The scene is devastating as even steel beams are twisted like small twigs, and the old man's fragile business site almost certainly shredded to bits. Nevertheless, even in the face of environmental disaster, shunned space residents are resilient. The old man gathers scrap materials and creates works of art celebrating his faith: a clear demonstration of the ability of shunned spaces to spawn cultural creativity in the face of astonishing scarcity in an environmentally affirming manner.

Death and Resurrection of Shunned Space in *Salvage the Bones*

I argue that *Salvage the Bones* presents a version of shunned space that intensifies scarcity, environmental fragility, and the struggle for a collective response to pending destruction

in a society where racism retains its foothold.²⁸ After Ward writes *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*, painful memories settle on the actual names and faces of the young Black men from DeLisle who died untimely deaths. In effect, *Salvage the Bones* grants Ward the reprieve she needs to assemble all those memories into a novel powerful enough to thunder against the racialized institutions that not only cost the lives of those beloved men, but continue to afflict the shunned space of her youth. In other words, the novel is the scaffolding on which Ward discovers her feminist voice in an ocean of grief and environmental catastrophe.²⁹

Hurricane Katrina completes the cycle started by the human inhabitants of Bois Sauvage (whose experience with scarcity compels them to hoard unsafe materials) as toxins spread throughout the area in and around Esch's yard. The Pit is rife with environmental degradation: a labyrinth of wasted cars, hollowed out earth sold by the truckload, and rusted refuse her grandfather, Papa Joseph, and her father have collected over many years. The boys (and Esch) would often sleep in the rotting husks of cars, as though their rusted shells were a second home.

²⁸ Lee Rozelle, author of *Zombiescapes & Phantom Zones* (2016), offers an analog to *Salvage the Bones* by referencing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Rozelle writes: "The Invisible Man's aggrieved interpretations of landscape, as reframed by Norton's scientific racism, illustrate larger problems of dispossession, poverty, and unjust land distribution that prove key benchmarks for what would become the environmental justice movement. Ellison's novel of identity confusion and outsiderhood, in its defense of liminal people, provides an argument for rethinking invisible lands misappropriated and rendered infertile by the ideological machinations of plantation slavery, segregation, and environmental determinism" (65). Rozelle's interpretation of liminal space offers intriguing possibilities for affirming the usefulness of shunned spaces (which are liminal) in protecting the formation of selfhood within the context of evolved communities.

²⁹ In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins outlines a similar principle found in the political writings of Nikki Giovanni. Collins writes: "Nikki Giovanni illuminates these connections among self, change, and personal empowerment. She admonishes that people are rarely powerless, no matter how stringent the restriction on our lives: 'We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it'" (129). Shunned space offers a holistic lens that allows Ward not only to express her grief, but to feel empowered to propose solutions to the racialized systems plaguing DeLisle.

Esch and the boys gleefully plunged into the wet cesspool that gathered in the bowels of the Pit whenever enough rain would fall, seeking relief from the relentless Mississippi heat.

Salvage the Bones celebrates a shared empowerment for both males and females within shunned space. Ward's memoir describes a childhood spent in the shadow of young men, a fact that echoes in the novel as Esch develops lasting bonds with the boys who linger in and around the Pit. She relates her desire to follow the young men on their adventures:

I wanted to be my own heroine. Behind the houses in a row along Route 357, a forest stretched. I'd followed my older cousin Eddie back through those woods once to a barbed wire fence with signs posted intermittently along its length that read; DELISLE FOREST, PROPERTY OF DUPONT, NO TRESPASSING.

(86)³⁰

This passage not only illustrates Ward's desire to explore on equal footing with the boys, but her talent for mocking the way the larger society periodically invades the spaces inhabited by shunned residents.³¹ Hence, from an early age, Ward rejects the double consciousness of being Black and female in a shunned space. At times, the boys would follow her to a mythical place she named Kidsland where the notion of scarcity vanished, at least for the length of a play period (87). At such moments, the boys readily consented to allow Ward to lead. She said, "In real life, I looked at my father and mother and understood dimly that it was harder to be a girl, that boys had it easier" (87). Ward's statement appears contradictory when considering that the five young

³⁰ This marker could also serve to keep residents inside their shunned space.

³¹ Ward therefore reflects the same sense of freedom and comradery with boys expressed by Scout in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

people whose lives and deaths she highlights were all young men. However, if we acknowledge that shunned space contains stressors caused both by internal and external forces, then the dilemma has a solution. Ward's argument could support the belief that stressors originating *within* shunned space focus primarily on female behavior, whereas external pressure from the larger society focuses disproportionately on men.

Like other communities throughout America, Bois Sauvage is a collection of shunned and privileged space, where rich and poor, White and Black inhabit the same town with remarkably differing experiences. Death festers throughout the novel as China's puppies die off and Hurricane Katrina approaches from the Gulf of Mexico. Shunned space residents are often frustrated when they attempt to obtain the same assistance that arrives for privileged communities around them in the aftermath of natural disaster. The shunned space occupied by Esch and her family is especially vulnerable not only to the storm's impact, but to the unequal access to public funds that jeopardize a healthy, systematic response before and after Katrina lands. Ward's novel is therefore an indictment of the neglect and racism of the outside world to either accommodate or simply permit Bois Sauvage to face the natural disaster alone.

Despite its racialized undertones, *Salvage the Bones* mentions white people only a handful of times with only one overt example of violence. Nevertheless, Ward provides abundant evidence to draw the reader to the conclusion that an invisible white hand³² is everywhere in

³² In *Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men From Blue-Collar Jobs* (2003), author Deirdre A. Royster states: "I needed to understand first-hand how working-class whites dominate skilled blue-collar opportunities that make possible a modest but sound version of the good life without attending colleges, inheriting substantial family wealth, or hitting the lottery" (1). My use of the "invisible white hand" extends Royster's racialized exclusion to involve the formation of shunned spaces and the economic and political exclusion that characterizes them.

DeLisle's shunned space reserved for her and her family. The larger society frames shunned space according to its own self-interest, invades the homes of its marginalized residents, unevenly distributes access to public resources, and disproportionately profiles young African Americans (especially males). Subsequently, incarceration robs young Black men of the right to vote, further isolating them from exercising a voice in determining the flow of public resources to their individual communities. Even worse, young Black men are targeted with police violence far out of proportion to whites, with highly publicized cases of murdering the people they are charged to protect without legal consequence. The unseen white hand therefore dangles a Sword of Damocles over the heads of shunned space residents in Bois Sauvage and elsewhere, further reinforcing insecurity and violence within them. In *Salvage the Bones*, the sword is accompanied by a pending natural disaster that amplifies the effect.³³

At first, *Salvage the Bones* seems an unlikely candidate for demonstrating feminine empowerment. Nevertheless, I argue that Esch evolves into a character whose confidence and ability, even as a teenager, illustrate her emerging agency to resist the patriarchal forces arrayed against her in Bois Sauvage. She proves equal to the task of not only surviving Hurricane Katrina, but in assisting her family's difficult recovery in an environment compromised not only by scarcity, but natural disaster.

³³ In "Figuring Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' in the Post-Katrina works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker (2017)," Holly Brown identifies *Salvage the Bones* as remarkably significant: "Globally resonant events such as Katrina, which bring into lurid detail the sheer power that contemporary states have in determining which of its citizens should live or die, have sustained the popularity of Giorgio Agamben's engagement with biopolitics." Brown continues: "Agamben's oeuvre can be seen as part of a wider 'political turn' within the humanities, the flourishing of an academic discourse which seeks to engage with the enduring significance of our corporeality to global political situations in spite of our increasing reliance on technologies that dematerialize our experience of the world around us" (1).

Initially, Ward reserves feminine agency for China, the pregnant dog who shuns almost all human beings and confounds Esch's brother Skeetah's attempts to control which of her puppies live or die. Her agency is expressed almost as human will: "Now China is giving like she once took away, bestowing where she once stole. She is birthing puppies" (1). I argue that China demonstrates that Esch's shunned space is an incubator for feminine empowerment, both human and animal. However, shunned space does not offer absolute protection for feminine agency to take root as illustrated by the death of Esch's mother. Ward presses the strength of China's resolve even further by invoking Esch's dead mother's fatal experience in giving birth to Esch's younger brother: "What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior" (1). After Esch becomes pregnant, she finds comradeship with China that confirms her own feminine agency. Although Esch and the dog are separate species, they are united in motherhood as a single expression of feminine identity. Eventually, this comradeship supplies Esch with the power to harness her agency and offer some degree of restoration for her family. In *Bois Sauvage*, healing is primarily gendered female.

I argue that pushing the boundaries of social acceptance is also a feminine enterprise in *Salvage the Bones*. As Maria Davidson states in *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* (2017), "Black feminist theory is at its best when it is being transgressive, destabilizing, and unsafe" (107). Esch freely transgresses social norms by having sex when she chooses and destabilizes the masculine assumptions in her household that advocate for female sexual purity. The fact that she is a teenager renders the act all the more transgressive, and illustrates that Ward intends for Esch to harness whatever resources are available, including her own body, to negotiate a space among males. In so doing, Ward implies that freedom within

Bois Sauvage, especially female freedom, is achieved only by breaking the social rules and customs set in motion by men in her house and in the Pit. She pays a price for seeking equal comradery with the men and boys around her.

Throughout most of *Salvage the Bones*, an embedded patriarchy appears to overwhelm Esch. As the only girl in a house frequented by her brothers' many friends, Esch must negotiate with their privilege to prevent her own commodification. She is partly successful throughout the novel, but her pregnancy threatens to topple her emerging sense of self. Esch fears childbirth as a mortal enemy: "Sometime I think that (childbirth) is what killed Mama. I can see her, chin to chest, straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try to stay inside her, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born" (3). The shunned space of Bois Sauvage, marked by endemic scarcity, simultaneously enables women to give life and to lose their own in the process. Hence, Junior's birth came at the brutal cost of his mother's life, which eliminated Esch's access to the empowering agency she might have received from her mother. In lieu of her mother's absence, Esch turns to the Greek goddess Medea for a blueprint of feminine empowerment.

Esch's interest in Greek mythology permits an imagined turning of the tables on masculine prerogative in Bois Sauvage. Unlike much of her own experience using her body as a means of negotiating a space among the young males, Esch explores two versions of the same story involving Medea's willingness to either betray or murder her own brother:

One [version] says she lies to her brother and invites him onto the ship with the Argonauts as they were fleeing, and that Jason ambushes him. That she watched her brother die, her own face on his being sliced open like a chicken: pink skin cut

to bloody meat. The other version says that she kills her brother herself, that her brother runs away with her and the Argonauts, assuming that he is safe, and that she chops him into bits: liver, gizzard, breast, and thigh, and throws each part overboard so that her father, who is chasing them, slows down to pick up each part of his son. (154)³⁴

The passage belies Esch's contrapuntal relationship with the males around her, and a need to reverse the fact that she as a female must endure the primary consequences of their shortcomings.³⁵ By reducing her brother to pieces of meat, Medea demonstrates that violence converts men into body parts, fish bait for the larger world, just as Esch feels commodified by the young men around her, especially by Manny, the self-absorbed father of her unborn child.

Esch is a young female in a shunned space dominated by patriarchal assumption. Space itself seems to bend to male will as her father collects junk cars and sells the clay soil. Her brothers orbit around her, and she is sexually active with boys in the neighborhood, whose company she craves. The space of her own body seems to orbit male presumption in *Salvage the Bones*. Her resistance to male authority must therefore transform from a battle involving actual

³⁴ In Edith Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1969), Medea persuades her nieces to dissect their sleeping father. They agree to do so with the understanding that Medea will restore him to youthful life. Her treachery, however, renders them guilty of murder and displays the fact that Medea's psychological tactics extend to other females as well as men, thereby multiplying her complicity (132-3). Ultimately, the goddess pursues no allegiance other than to herself.

³⁵ Euripides echoes Esch's frustration at shaking off the masculine edifices around her in *Bois Sauvage*. In "The Medea," Euripides writes: "You sailed away from your father's home,/ With a heart on fire you passed/ The double rocks of the sea. /And now in a foreign country/ You have lost your rest in a widowed bed,/ And are driven forth, a refugee/ In dishonor from the land" (73). Within a patriarchy, women can achieve freedom only at enormous personal cost.

landscape to one centered on mindscape and imagination. Esch therefore augments her agency with that of Medea in a figurative way intended to cancel out the identity crushing elements of her own environment. In Bois Sauvage, feminism must be acted out on the mind's stage before it can manifest in the world around her. She therefore finds the agency to express her empowerment only after that landscape has been largely eviscerated by the hurricane. Esch's internal victories against the male-dominated world eventually enable her to bear the joint mantles of motherhood and adulthood. In other words, Esch eventually rises to the challenge of facing her own double consciousness as both a female in a male-dominated shunned environment and as a Black resident of a shunned space that is subject to racialized prerogative. Soon, the entire edifice of racism, masculine assumption, Esch's struggle to negotiate her own space, and the entire shunned space are overwhelmed by a far greater force.

Feminism in *Salvage the Bones* manifests when it is least obvious. Esch is the only surviving female in her family, and her status as a young, pregnant teenager exempts her from exercising authority in the patriarchal structures of her shunned space. She is ultimately unsuccessful in persuading Skeetah from leaving the nominally protective confines of the attic, and he ventures headlong in the rushing waters in a failed attempt to find his dog and puppies. His obsession with China and her puppies has defined his life almost to the exclusion of all other priorities. Hence, although Bois Sauvage offers a modicum of protection for its inhabitants who manage to survive the storm, it offers no promises for lasting security. Even after the flood

waters recede, Esch and her family must innovate a new strategy to survive together and individually.³⁶

Ellen Spears identifies how African Americans who live in such spaces have responded politically:

As the nonviolent Black freedom struggle made the personal violence that sustained segregation visible, so, too, have opponents of pollution used creative tactics to make the impact of slow violence visible—using coffins to block Monsanto’s bulldozers, staging die-ins to protest chemical weapons burning...

(16-7)

The Pit, savaged by bull dozers and the placement of chemicals and rusting machinery, is primed for producing a toxic stew when Hurricane Katrina devastates the community.

In *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American City* (2014), Spears traces the placement of toxic waste dumps near impoverished communities in Anniston, Alabama. She details the disruption that ripples through the community as news about PCB contamination spreads:

All the more unsettling, the new toxic knowledge redefined the past, rendered personal histories, re-conceptualized relationships between people and place...

For those mobilizing against PCBs, fears of the past emerged as well. Baptisms (undergoing ritual purification in contaminated water), childhood haunts. The

³⁶ As the storm rages, Esch appears to abandon her interest in Medea. Shortly after reading the line, “Life’s little day ended,” Esch decides to shut the book and sit on it (225).

revelations of pollution renegotiated residents' perceptions of places important to them, undermining any sense of control, one of the effects of "slow violence."

(221)

The lack of control is magnified in shunned spaces since residents usually lack the resources to legally fight back when the larger society places toxic waste dumps nearby.

In Ward's writings, the environment delivers both elixirs and catastrophe to the residents of shunned space. By necessity, residents are intimately aware of every facet of their surroundings since scarcity imposes the need to use every scrap of resources available. As a result, a phenomenal array of folk remedies and natural cures have been identified in or near shunned space. However, scarcity can also lead to further environmental degradation as illustrated by the Pit in *Salvage the Bones* in which the land itself is commodified and sold by the truckload to glean money from whites. Guided by scarcity, shunned space residents hoard material that can poison the landscape. Natural disasters further complicate the toxic mix as illustrated by this passage detailing the impact of Hurricane Katrina:

It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and bids them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides, brown with an undercurrent of red to it, the clay of the Pit like a cut that won't stop leaking. It is the remains of the yard, the refrigerators and lawnmowers and the RV and mattresses, floating like a fleet. (230)

I argue that shunned spaces in Ward's writings offer excellent examples for discussing ecological resistance and "slow violence" committed against their marginalized inhabitants by the placement of toxic waste both within and outside their communities.

When toxicity is multiplied across all the yards in Bois Sauvage, tenuously holding rusted machinery and chemicals, the environment is poisoned for humans and all other living things in the area. As inhabitants of shunned space, Esch and her family are especially vulnerable since they lack the resources to escape the poisonous deluge. However, Esch's pregnancy makes her doubly susceptible to the poisons. Esch's family must trudge through the contaminated water, often with their bare feet.

Despite the fact that *Salvage the Bones* primarily highlights the agency of male characters, I argue that Ward's feminist lens manifests as she describes her relationship with each of the men throughout her memoir and novels. In *Men We Reaped*, she laments their abrupt deaths as the product of social and historical forces at play long before they were born. Bois Sauvage, Ward's fictional equivalent of DeLisle, is the main setting for *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Ward's feminism is quickly evident. Although she follows the lives and deaths of young men with excruciating detail, the motif of feminine empowerment is often evidenced by its absence. For example, Esch's mother posthumously surfaces in *Salvage the Bones* many times. Even China, a dog and the novel's only other female, embodies Ward's grief and anger. China eventually loses her puppies in the same manner that Ward loses young Black men in her hometown—one at a time. China, Ward, and even her brother Skeetah are powerless to prevent the unfolding tragedy. Although Ward does not address long-term effects within *Salvage the Bones*, the pathological consequences are amplified for the shunned citizens of Bois

Sauvage, who do not possess the financial wherewithal to start again away from the toxic water.³⁷

Only when ecological disaster threatens to expand the resulting pool and swallow the remainder of his property does Esch's father stop selling clay to the white men (14). He attempts to reverse the damage to its aesthetics by adding fake coral and rocks, which reminds her of a dry fish tank. Hurricane Katrina multiplies the destruction, and her father realizes that his efforts to stem the hurricane's violence have been for naught. Ward writes that Esch is the only family member with the fortitude to survey the carnage in the storm's immediate aftermath:

I scooted past Daddy, whose eyes were closed as he mumbled against his maimed hand and his good hand, which were folded like he was praying, past Randall, who still held Junior, who still had his hands over his eyes, to Skeetah...He looked like he wanted to jump. (237)

The storm inflicts another casualty by assaulting the masculine agency of Esch's father. For him, masculine prerogative centers on a man's hands, on his ability to shape the world around him to fit his will. With only one good hand, Esch's father is unable to give birth to anything new in the world. From the perspective of a controlling masculinity, he is therefore rendered barren.³⁸

Every male around Esch is paralyzed by the inability to reestablish dominion over his

³⁷ Ward's memoir offers an exception when her father is offered the opportunity to move to Oakland, California in the wake of Hurricane Camille. However, he eventually returned to DeLisle in response to homesickness described by Ward: "For all of us, the pull home is an inexorable thing" (17).

³⁸ Nigel Edley identifies the role of hands and work for men whose masculinity is measured as a function of physical labor. He writes: "When I think of the word 'work,' for example, the images that immediately spring to mind are of manual labor: the physical practices of digging, lifting and carrying" (55-6). Without the ability to perform such labor, men such as Esch's father feel inept, as though they are failures as men.

surroundings in the aftermath of Katrina. For a moment, as illustrated by the above passage, Esch recovers more quickly and is the only active agent in the family.

During the storm, shunned space contracts for Esch's family, pressing on them with the force of the wind, rain, and memories. Feminism and emotions swirl in the mix as the battered inhabitants try to brace. Esch sees flashbacks of her mother, and Ward conveys these moments as a stream of consciousness. Skeetah observes that Esch resembles her mother, summoning the girl's grief in full force: "I don't know what to say, so I half grimace, and I shake my head. But Mama, mama always here. See? I miss her so badly I have to swallow salt, imagine it running like lemon juice into the fresh cut that is my chest, feel it sting" (222). Esch's reference to lemon juice as medicine invokes the healing agency her dead mother provided.

A few lines later, Ward balances elixir with tragedy by revealing the violent manner in which life was wretched away from Esch's mother: "The dog barks loudly, fast as a drum, and something about the way the bark rises at the end reminds me of Mama's moans, of those bowing pines, of a body that can no longer hold itself together, of something on the verge of breaking" (222). The storm compresses the elements together such that dog barks, wind tearing through trees, and a woman's body broken during childbirth merge into a single paragraph. Like Esch's mother, Bois Sauvage is wounded too greatly to provide overt healing for its surviving residents. Instead, shunned space is broken to bits, each piece a human mind that lived long enough within it to recognize the tremendous loss. Outside of Esch's mind, which possesses just enough strength to summon its own agency, Bois Sauvage can only echo memories of Mama's healing power.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, only Esch possesses the agency to heal herself or others. With Skeetah's efforts centering only on China and Pop coming to terms with his failure to match the storm with effective planning, Esch's thoughts return to mythology to convey her isolation in the face of overwhelming loss. "Jason has remarried, and Medea is wailing. An exile, oh God, oh God, alone. And then: by death, oh, by death, shall the conflict be decided. Life's little day ended." Mama returns ethereally after the storm settles, as though helping her family reassemble the pieces of home. Ward writes:

Daddy is rubbing his pocket with his good hand. I hear the crinkle of plastic. For a moment, Mama is there next to him on the sofa, her arm laid across his lap while she palms his knee, which is how she sat with him when they watched TV together. I wonder if that is phantom pain, and if Daddy will feel Mama, present in the absence. (247)

The feminine power to heal manifests in Mama's absence. She surfaces in the thoughts of her beleaguered family to remind them that healing, in some form, is still available. Whether Mama, Medea, or Katrina, Esch finds power in feminine expression.

As a shunned space, Bois Sauvage offered only limited resources to shield Esch's family from the natural disaster awaiting them. If Skeetah's father and brother fully respected the magnitude of the danger, and their inability to control its effects on their shunned space, they might have responded in a manner that exposed the family (both human and canine) to far less peril. Despite ecological violence, political exclusion, and feminine disempowerment, Esch and her family manage to move forward with a renewed determination to rebuild their fractured community.

Mystical Implications for Shunned Space in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

In many ways, Parchman Prison epitomizes the mitochondrial nexus of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by showcasing the supernatural rupture that occurs as a result of brutal racism. I argue that racism walks hand-in-hand with environmental devastation in the novel as African American men and boys are forced into Parchman Prison over a period of generations. Violence against inmates, especially during Jim Crow, is unmitigated and the oppressive forces arrayed against prisoners is too powerful for a meaningful community to take root. Instead, the brotherhood that develops among inmates often involves bloodletting battles with other marginalized groups of men to establish primacy and easier access to extremely limited resources. Limited resources translate into limited legal protections as residents find it difficult to afford legal representation. Their needs, both collective and individual, are far more easily ignored. Ward insists that the stress of life and death forced into close proximity by racialized injustice opens the portal for supernatural events to unfold, which she chronicles in greater detail in the novel.

Parchman inmates lack the ability to fight injustice—a fact that sets in motion many of the brutal events of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The larger society disrupts any sense of privacy, imposes relentless scarcity, and forces inmates to conform to prison rules based on a regimen of brutal, even lethal force. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that Parchman does not fulfill the criteria of a shunned space. In Figure 8, note that the circle around the individual Prisoner does not close, indicating that fragmentation is inevitable. External social pressure from the prison system, incorporated by the dominant culture, is simply too strong to permit the circle to close and indicate a fully vested sense of self. Internal violence in the form of inmates attacking each other is also extreme, while laws, guards and scarcity keep any sense of rational community in check.

The larger society allows too little agency for community to take root in Parchman Prison. Also, no line joins the prisoner to the external landscape since leaving the prison involves a high risk of being shot either by guards or trustees.

As Figure 8 illustrates, Parchman does not offer the necessary protection found in shunned spaces to ward off fragmentation:

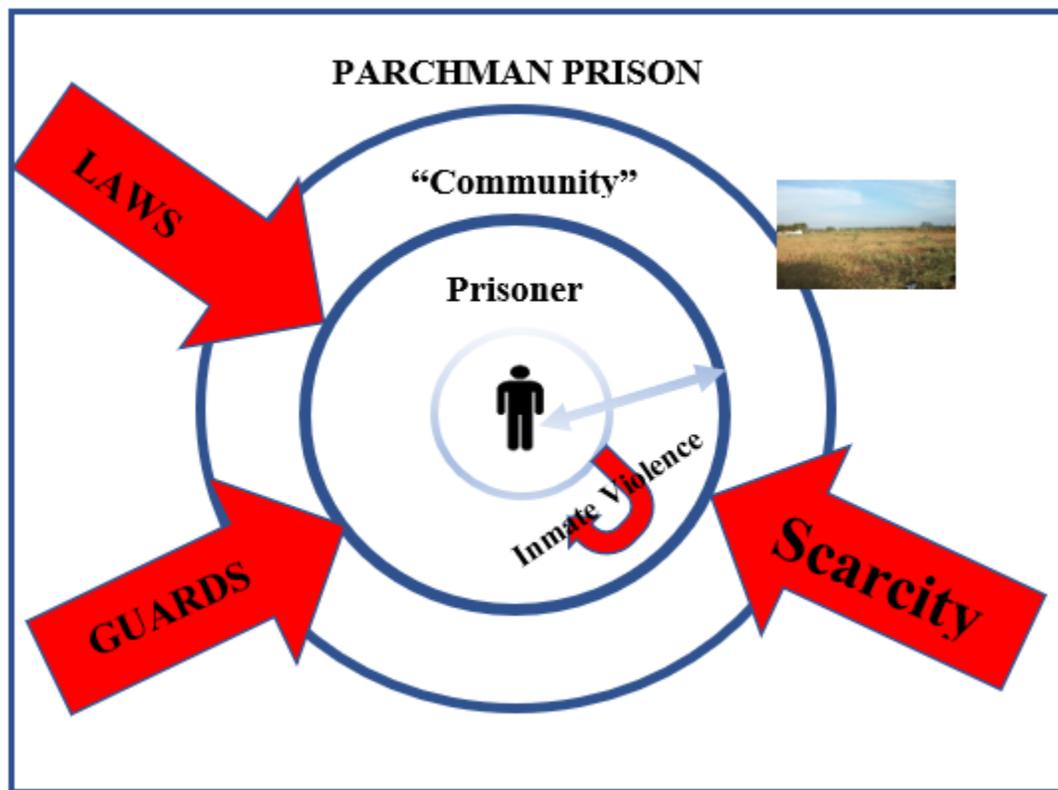


Figure 8 Parchman Prison

Despite the fact that Parchman is not a shunned space, former inmates occasionally display evidence of cultural achievement.³⁹ However, no viable community is present to shield residents from the soul-crushing forces of external intervention. Creative expression for inmates

³⁹ See <http://msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/parchman-farm>.

is restricted according to prison rules. Additionally, although hierarchies take root in the form of racialized gangs and even religious organizations, these power structures are disrupted by Parchman's civil authorities. Except for forced work excursions, such as chain gangs and related activities, the relationship between Parchman inmates and the natural environment is absent. Incarceration takes an especially harsh toll on young, African American males, even in contemporary settings. João Helion Costa Vargas writes in *The Denial of Antiracism: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering* (2018):

While these patterns of punishment affect Black and Latin@⁴⁰ kids, antiracism—the overarching logic organizing punishment and related processes—makes it so that Blacks are quantitatively more intensely and qualitatively distinctly penalized. Black students, in a process that mirrors patterns in the juvenile justice system, are appreciably overrepresented in school discretionary disciplinary referrals; Latin@ students are also over-represented in disciplinary referrals, but to a lesser extent than Blacks. Importantly, Black overrepresentation in disciplinary referrals reveals patterns of punishment that are unique in their nature, duration, and long-term effects. (52)

Consequently, the asymmetrical exercise of discipline and incarceration results in stress that compromises the ability of targeted groups to forge a sense of home within the larger society. As primary targets, young Black men form an especially vulnerable group. Frequent incarceration, police profiling, and other racialized actions also result in greater risk of injury or death. Ward's

⁴⁰ Vargas inserts “@” to designate either Latino or Latina.

memoir and, by extension, her novels such as *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, capture the essence of such risk.

I argue that outside of shunned space, many residents lose their identity and wander. Whole novels, including *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, are counted among those works that depict souls that roam the earth with a message not only for the living but for themselves as well. As a shunned space, Bois Sauvage offers elixirs that promote the human development of its residents and sanctuary for their legacy. Hence, folklore imprints names across generations and serves as moral guidance. Unlike Parchman, spaces such as Bois Sauvage offer some degree of freedom that allows residents to pursue their individuality through unrestrained cultural activities. The oral and written narratives originating within shunned spaces like Bois Sauvage offer cautionary tales (often folklore) that empower a sense of community. In turn, community provides a collective response to external aggression, thereby canceling at least part of its most harmful influences. Nevertheless, community does not always resist the racialized forces arrayed against it, resulting in violence, death, and grief that lingers like ghosts.

Richie, a ghost, is one of the most enigmatic characters in the novel, and I argue that he embodies far more than a supernatural insertion into the story, but evidence of the embedded nature of Jim Crow on the Southern landscape. For example, Richie loses all sense of place and identity immediately after his death and drifts without any direction. Although his consciousness lingers, the world offers no signifiers to root him. He declares:

I paced in circles. I don't know why I stayed in that place, why every time I got to the edge of the young stand, to the place where the pines reached taller, rounded and darkened, draped with a web of green thorny vines, I turned and walked back.

In that day that never ended, I watched the tops of the trees toss, and I tried to remember how I got there. Who I was before this place, before this quiet haunt? But I couldn't. So when I saw a white snake, thick and long as my arm, slither out of the shadows beneath the trees, I knelt before it. (134)

The imagery is dreamlike, rippling with religious and racial significance. When the white snake⁴¹ offers to convey Richie away from the place, he readily accepts the offer. The creature morphs like a dragon and rises above him. In the same manner the Adam and Eve of Genesis accept the serpent's forbidden fruit with the false promise that they will become divine, Richie takes one of the dragon's scales, responding to its pledge that doing so will grant him the ability to fly. This new ability comes with a price. Adam and Eve become morally conscious beings but fall into disgrace before God, the forbidden bites having revealed to them the weight of sin and death. In the same manner, Richie loses the ability to fly and is forced to confront the memory of his death. His ability to fly is replaced by remembering Pop (River) as he carries the boy away in an ill-fated attempt to nurse him back to health.

Even as a living boy prior to his incarceration, Richie's circle of community is perforated, indicating that the forces of scarcity have overwhelmed its capacity to shield residents from the existential dangers of starvation and external aggression (see Figure 9). Given the strong gradient of forces from brutal poverty, starvation, and Jim Crow, Richie is forced to exit whatever semblance of protection his weathered shunned space can offer in a vain attempt to grant his

⁴¹ A biblical interpretation of the snake equates to the one who brings temptation to prelapsarian humanity in Genesis Chapter 3. The "white" snake may signify Ward's assessment that many of the primary temptations that bring ruin to the lives of young people within DeLisle originate in the larger, predominantly white society.

family the most fundamental of needs—food. The red line that connects Richie to food is therefore the culmination of forces far outside a child’s ability to control.

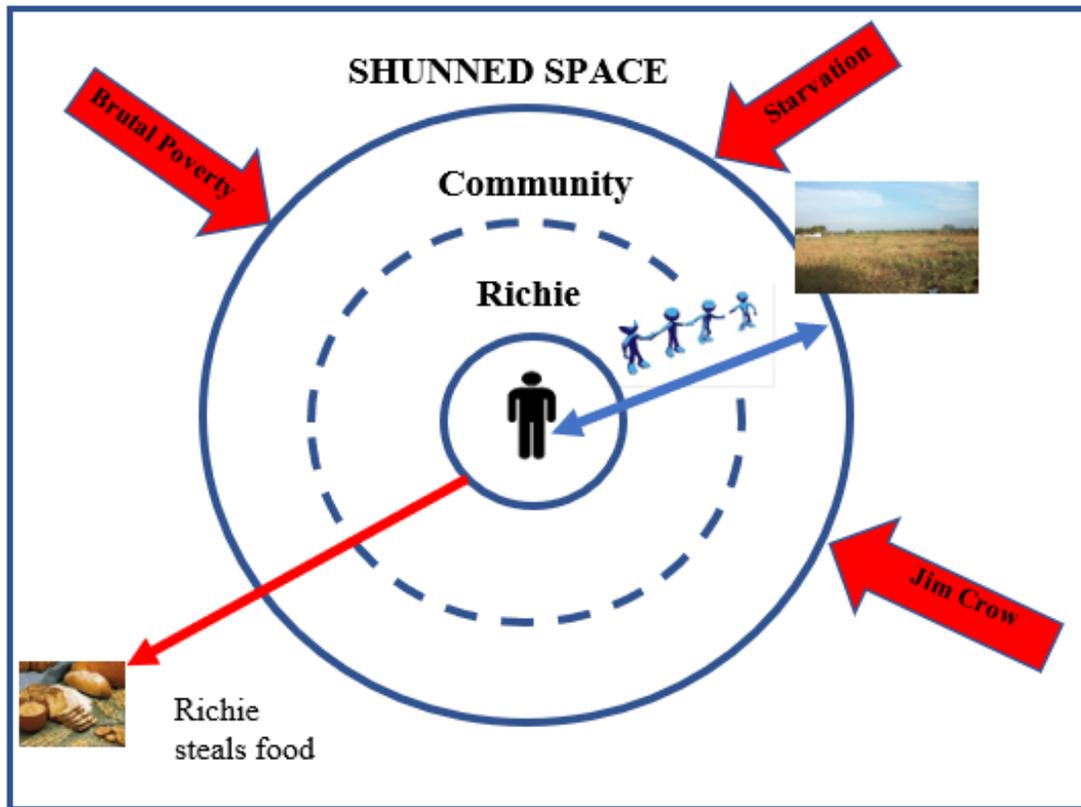


Figure 9 Richie’s Crisis Point

The shunned space in which Richie grows up indirectly converts him into more than a ghost, but also a representation of the way space is imprinted with the horrors of Jim Crow and slavery. Its inherent scarcity is too severe and strains his family’s few resources, thereby causing Richie to seek resources elsewhere by stealing. Hence, shunned space is at least indirectly linked to Richie’s death by imposing scarcity and failing to offer protection from white intrusion.

Shunned space therefore illustrates the culpability of its white founders and bears witness to spiritual, historical, and psychological disruption. For example, consider Pop's description of spirit that he inherits from his great grandfather:

Said there's spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. Said the sun is most important, gave it a name: Aba.⁴² But you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance. So the crops will grow, the animals breed and get fat for food. (73)

Any sense of balance in the landscape is therefore disrupted by the senseless death of a young boy who merely seeks to help his family survive. Richie's ability as a spirit to see a multitude of shallow graves⁴³ is only one example of how landscape encodes racialized memory. Given the extreme poverty of Richie's home, it is possible that the shunned space of his childhood no longer exists, and his spiritual journey cannot stop. Richie's transformation into a ghost demonstrates the apocalyptic failure of shunned space as an incubator of security for him and his family.

Richie was mortally wounded by the sergeant at Parchman Prison as punishment for accidentally breaking a hoe. The visual imagery of the horror bleeds through the following passage as Pop describes the scene:

⁴² "Aba" is possibly a variant of "Abba" from Jewish religious history that is transmitted to early Christians. According to the Orthodox Research Institute, "Jesus Christ's use of the Aramaic 'Abba' made such an impression on His disciples that it was a unique instance in 1st Century Jewish piety; this explains why it is stamped in the apostle's memory." Although Pop's great grandfather deploys the word outside the realm of orthodox religious tradition, its usage nevertheless conveys a paternal kinship with nature's providence.

⁴³ Poet Galway Kinnell relates a similar scene in "When the Towers Fell": "many dusted to a golden whiteness/ with eyes rubbed red as the eyes of a zahori/ who can see the dead under the ground..." As a spirit with intrinsic clairvoyance, Richie possesses the same ability as a zahori, not only to discern human thoughts, but to identify the imprint of human history in the land itself.

Sun went down, and after supper, sergeant tied him to some posts set at the edge of the camp. So hot the sun still felt like it was up, and [Richie] laid there spread-eagle on the ground in the dirt with his hands and legs tied to them posts. When that whip cracked in the air and came down on his back, he sounded like a puppy. Yelped so loud. And that's what he kept doing, over and over. Just yelping for every one of them lashes, arching up off the ground, turning his head like he wanted to look at the sky. Yelling like a drowning dog. When they untied him, his back was full of blood, them seven gashes laid open like filleted fish, and the sergeant told me to doctor on him. (120)

Chattel signifiers blaze through the passage as Richie's life is forfeited for breaking a hoe. The dehumanization continues as he is compared to a drowning dog and a yelping puppy. Pop's efforts to save Richie are unsuccessful, but his influence on the boy extends to the afterlife.

The visual diagram of his spectral character is displayed in Figure 10 below:

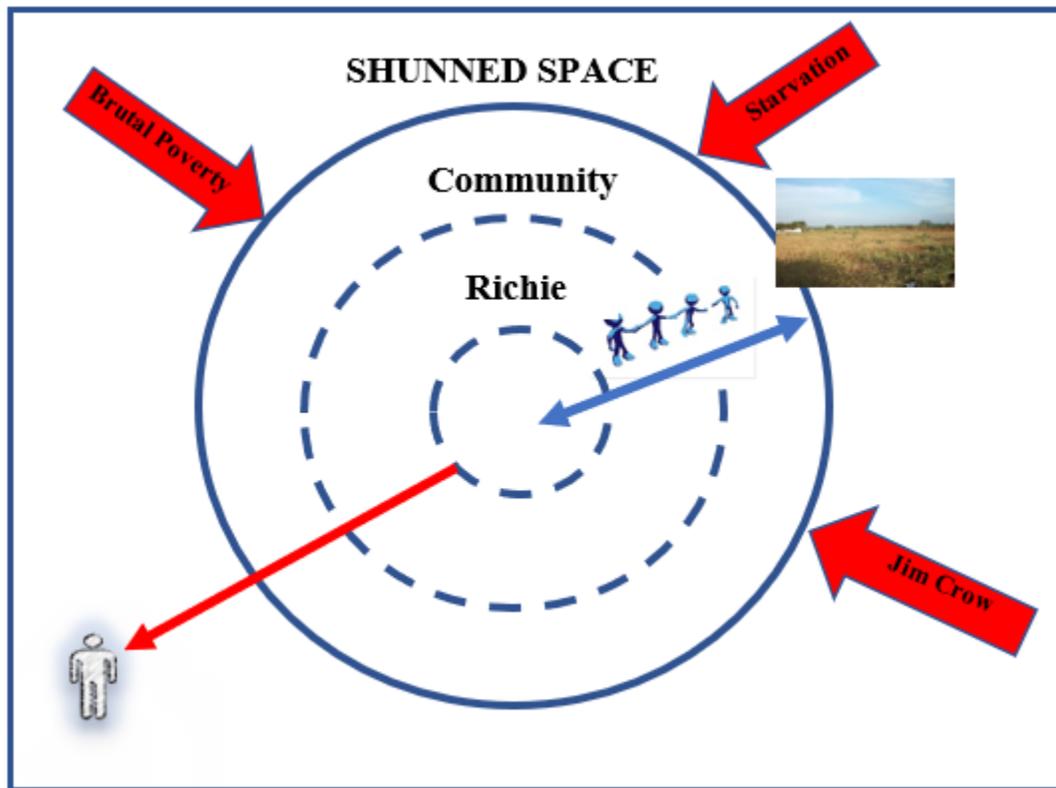


Figure 10 Richie as a Ghost

Richie's murder at Parchman is so brutal, it ruptures not only his connection to bodily space here on earth, but also his personal ties to his own shunned space community. The perforated lines in the above diagram illustrate that Richie's home is no longer the container of his identity. The blue arrow linking Richie's former self to the surrounding environment is the only remaining connection between what he was and what he has become post mortem. The red arrow points to Richie as a disembodied soul who has been forced from his original shunned space. Brutal poverty, starvation, and Jim Crow continue to vex his earthly home, and possibly destroy it in lieu of Richie's exodus from it.

Sing, Unburied, Sing deploys primary characters with names that embody spatial significance, which I argue underscores the importance of shunned space to maintain identity. In

the same manner that a river cannot be fully controlled, but eventually overflows all barriers, River (Pop) moves from place to place, and his essential nature flows to his grandchildren. Richie searches for River to discover the way home to his own shunned space, which no longer exists. With no home and community, Richie's life force is intimately connected both with River's and with his descendants. Richie states: "This is part of the reason he (Jojo) can see me while the others, excepting the little girl, can't. I am subject to that pulse, helpless as a fisherman in a boat with no engine, no oars, while the tide bears him onward" (141). The ghost senses something that distinguishes Jojo from his grandfather, and he feels a mercurial attraction for the child. Richie says:

I want to tell the boy (Jojo) in the car this. Want to tell him how his pop tried to save me again and again, but he couldn't. Jojo cuddles the golden girl to his chest and whispers to her as she plays with his ear, and as he murmurs, his voice like the waves of a calm bay lapping against a boat, I realize there is another scent in his blood. This is where he differs from River. This scent blooms stronger than the dark rich mud of the Bottom; it is the salt of the sea, burning with brine. It pulses in the current of his veins. (140)

The ghosts of *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* are evidence of violence and untimely death. As such, they are ethereal incarnations of family history. They linger in search of home and wander until they find a shunned space suitable enough to frame their experience as living beings and to enact some modicum of healing. Hence, Richie follows the trail of River's bloodline, as though it were a literal river leading him toward his goal. At the end of the novel, Jojo awakens to the presence of a multitude of ghosts in a tree near his grandfather's house. Ward writes:

And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people. (282)

Although the ghosts never lived in Bois Sauvage, they nevertheless find sanctuary there, a place suited for them to sound out their unending lamentation about earthly loss. Jojo's sister Kayla understands their singing and mimics it, as though carrying its painful tune into the living world as validation. She insists on looking up into the tree and tells them to "go home" (284). It is a commandment they cannot fulfill, although it comes from a clairvoyant child whose bloodline is touched with the power to speak their sadness. As Kayla sings, the novel converges to her mother's womb, as though summoning the power of rebirth. The little girl sings in a manner evoking incantation, and the multitude of ghosts responds: "Home, they say. Home" (285).

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, shunned space is the intersection of home, life, memory, and rebirth. It is a fitting venue for the cries of centuries of oppression to gain a voice and speak their collective anguish, the stage on which to perform their painful history and seek refuge in the lives of the living. The novel frames the lens through which the ghosts view the human world. Consider the following passage from near the end of the book, where Richie tries to explain why he wanders around Bois Sauvage near Jojo's home: "I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could—become something else. Maybe, I could. Become. The song." After Jojo protests remaining outside in the cold, Richie continues in greater detail:

I hear it. Sometimes. When the sun. Sets. When the sun. Rises. The song. In
snatches. The stars. A record. The sky. A great record. The lives. Of the living. Of
those beyond. See it in flashes. The sound. Beyond the waters. (281)

The broken speech reveals the perforated manner in which Richie must view the world, forever incomplete. Each word comes with considerable effort, as though he were conjuring the residual power of his vanquished identity prior to death to reflect on his surroundings. Richie's speech resembles a broken record, which is appropriate given the resemblance to 'the song' Richie attempts to access.

I argue that the song is a collective voice of grieving, an audio patchwork of all those souls murdered before their time, loitering in the trees, watching the living scurry beneath them, blind to their hovering presence. Ward places these souls in the natural world on tree branches, as though they were as integral to the landscape as DNA. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, ghosts are sages of shunned space history with all its blood and racism. They also herald hope by confirming that the legacy of African Americans enslaved on the land, oppressed and shunned on the land, cannot be forgotten by the land. The novel centers on Jojo, Richie, and Kayla as the powerbrokers of spiritual understanding. Curiously, Leonie's second sight is activated only when she is high on drugs. Despite Leonie's apparent link to her dead brother, Given, her addiction escalates and effectively neutralizes her agency as a purveyor of feminist empowerment throughout the novel. Marie-Therese's supernatural power and uncanny insight skip a generation to achieve their full effect through Jojo and Kayla, who demonstrate a keen awareness of the spiritual powers around them.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, both human and otherworldly power is wielded as a relationship between characters and racialized space; but feminine power is largely relegated to an undercurrent. Marie-Therese's supernatural abilities illustrate one of the few exceptions in which a woman enacts extraordinary agency in the book.⁴⁴ She is the family matriarch, always ready to offer sage wisdom or healing. Ward lists Marie-Therese's extraordinary talents:

Marie-Therese herself could hear. Could look at a woman and hear singing: If she was pregnant, could tell her when she was going to have a baby, what sex the baby going to be. Could tell her if she going to see trouble and how she could avoid it. Could look at a man and tell him if the 'shine done ate up his liver, done cured his insides like sausage, could read it in the yellow of his eyes, the shake of his hands...How she might hear a multitude of voices ringing from any living thing, and how she followed the loudest voices.... (41)

The strong bond between healer and "voices ringing from any living thing" is passed to Jojo and his sister and, to a more limited extent, their mother. Voices emanate from the natural world and facilitate a two-way communication that joins the hearer to both the natural and supernatural realms. Hence, Jojo not only hears the thoughts of animals approaching slaughter, but also the ghost of Richie, whose restless search finds answers encoded in Jojo's bloodline, leading him back to Pop. I argue that such otherworldly rapport hinges on the scarcity of the shunned space whose residents must use these talents to negotiate for the resources necessary to preserve body and soul. A healer from Bois Sauvage therefore stands in place of doctors in more privileged,

⁴⁴ Marie-Therese is Leonie's mother.

predominantly white areas.⁴⁵ These supernatural abilities therefore rest on an intergenerational bond with the natural world found within shunned space.

Motherhood is prominent throughout Ward's books as an expression of feminine empowerment or lack thereof. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie—an irresponsible mother—reflects on her own mother's healing power after asking whether she had ever delivered a child:

[Marie-Therese] blinked and smiled and shook her head, all of which meant one thing: yes. In that moment, Mama became more than my mother, more than the woman who made me say my rosary before I went to bed with the words Make sure you pray to the Mothers. She'd been doing more than mothering when she put homemade ointments on me when I broke out in rashes or gave me special teas when I was sick. That half smile hinted at the secrets of her life, all those things she'd learned and said and seen and lived, the saints and spirits she spoke to when I was too young to understand her prayers. (42)

In this passage, femininity is a force linking the art of healing to the surrounding landscape, and heaven to earth. Leonie's mother is deeply aware of the natural world in and around her shunned space, and she converts the scarcity into an assortment of medications to heal her family.

⁴⁵ In his postscript to *The End of Patriarchy* (2017), Gerhard Falk describes the complex tapestry contributing to the rise of American women in public life. He writes, "The changes which brought about women's ascendancy in the United States are related to a great number of movements in American society which were not seen as having anything to do with women's liberation." An extraordinary wellspring of feminist literature such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) across many genres, including African American letters, has also given rise to a new frontier of expression, as illustrated by writers such as Jesmyn Ward.

Chapter Reflection

When the storm abates, Esch finds the determination to press forward and, at least to some extent, to take the mantle of moral leadership and offer a degree of healing to her family. In so doing, Esch echoes the tremulous beginnings of feminist response within *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* and *Salvage the Bones*. I argue that Ward is seeking deeper significance than ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by also summoning the ponderous weight of confronting the full impact of memory. The political force of Ward's writings reflects an emerging sense of empowerment in the face of extraordinary racial, environmental, and gender-based inequality. The loss of five young men in the span of a few years is a personal holocaust—an incalculable wound in Ward's social fabric. Nevertheless, she harnesses grief as a platform from which to project her rage and, in the process, faces the trauma and promise of shunned space.

CHAPTER 3: RICHARD WRIGHT

Overview of Wright and Shunned Space

In considering the writings of Richard Wright, I argue that racism's role in the formation of shunned space is overtly presented throughout *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, and *Uncle Tom's Children*. However, female empowerment, cultural accomplishment, and the identity-affirming properties of shunned space are strongly implied but lack similar visibility in the author's treatment of these subjects. In fact, Wright frequently derides the role of women, the Black Church, and the cultural accomplishment of African Americans forced to endure Jim Crow in the Deep South. Within *Uncle Tom's Children*, I will explore three of its five novellas: "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," and "Long Black Song." Additionally, the impact of environmental degradation on shunned spaces illustrates yet another level of complexity within these venues.

Whenever Wright expresses a fondness for the South or its cultural pastiche, he always tempers his enthusiasm with a strong dose of historical fact. He professes the reasons for writing his memoir:

I wrote [*Black Boy*] to tell a series of incidents strung together through my childhood, but the main desire was...to render a judgment on my environment. I wanted to render that judgment because I felt the necessity to...That judgment

was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings. (*Conversations with Richard Wright* 78)

With this perspective, Wright seems to embark on a holistic interpretation of the spaces within which his stories take root but falls short in the end through exclusivity. Namely, he fails to recognize the mitochondrial agents at work in shunned space because he rigorously parses marginalized human beings from the landscape and communities that sustain them. Successful shunned spaces, which endure for several generations, involve a cooperation and a symbiosis between landscape and human-scape such that the survival of one automatically implies continuity for the other. Wright also hints at the origins of shunned space by insisting that the white powerbrokers of the South created it, which further indicates his intimacy with such spaces.

The shunned spaces of Wright's youth and fiction are astonishingly varied. Some are pastoral, inviting his most poetic language. Other spaces, such as the Memphis ghetto, provide a lens into the environmental violence exercised against marginalized communities in an urban setting. Wright details Chicago's Southside as a shunned space that fails to protect Bigger Thomas from the crushing weight of racialized oppression. Each space provides fertile ground in which Wright's imagination takes root to challenge Jim Crow. Table 2 below lists shunned spaces I have selected for discussion later in this chapter.

Table 2 Selected Shunned Spaces of Richard Wright’s Youth and Fiction⁴⁶

Number	Timeline	Shunned Space	Location	Notes
1	1908	Sharecropper shanties near Rucker’s Plantation	Outside Roxie, MS	This shunned space no longer exists and has been replaced by a correctional facility.
2	1913-14	Tenement complex (Ghetto)	Memphis, TN	“Bleak and hostile,” unnatural terrain.
3	1917	Slum neighborhood	West Helena, ARK	Ecologically compromised space.
4	1927	Southside	Chicago, IL	Run-down communities.
5	1927	Flood Plain	Mississippi River, MS	Shanties located in flood-prone areas.

Black Boy details Wright’s unlikely endearment to the South. I will explore his memoir in greater detail than his fiction because Wright is relatively forthcoming and thorough about his disdain for the shunned spaces of his youth. Ironically, over the years, he also illustrates an appreciation for the South and carries its influence within him. Passages such as this one belie a hunger to bond with the landscape of his childhood: “There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez” (5). The pastoral imagery is soon accompanied by the bloodier side of life in a

⁴⁶ Source: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/r_wright/chronology.htm

shunned space: “There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father’s wrist” (6). Almost any child growing up on a farm has witnessed the cycle of life and death. For shunned space inhabitants locked inside Jim Crow politics, the distance between life and death equals the distance between eating and starving. Wright understands at an early age that death is the antecedent to any meal. Such lessons follow Wright for the remainder of his life and imbue his writings with an unmistakable regard for the fragility of life—especially Black life.⁴⁷

Wright’s writings confirm that he is one of the 20th century’s most influential writers, whose novels, social commentary, and memoir are mainstays in the canon of African American literature. Nevertheless, Wright’s exclusion of a holistic perspective for viewing shunned space reflects his inability to acknowledge the accomplishment and cultural production of such spaces, especially those of its female residents. As Becca Gercken states in “Visions of Tribulation: White Gaze and Black Spectacle in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and *The Outsider*” (2011), “Wright overtly constructs women’s bodies in terms of the gaze,” and the tables are turned as Black men are subjected to the gaze of whites and similarly commodified (633). Gercken continues with the notion of gaze as a commodifying agent in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* in the following passage: “The desires, and thus the agency of Bigger and Damon are limited by a gaze

⁴⁷ Fragility necessitates the healing agency of shunned space which, unsurprisingly, is often implemented by women. Toni Morrison fully comprehends the power of community to offer physical and spiritual remedy in *Home* (2012). She writes: “The final stage of Cee’s healing had been, for her, the worst. She was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness” (124). Cee had been the object of eugenics experiments in Dr. Beau’s office that left her weak and infertile (64-6).

that keeps them subjectified; the panopticism of the dominant culture situates them as objects, not agents; observed, not observers; passive, not active” (633). Hence, Wright’s deployment of gaze aimed at the shunned spaces of his childhood amount to the seizure of a similar agency that, even as a child, allows him to subjectify those around him. Women are therefore cast in subservient roles, whose influence on men is often negative and castrating.

In “The Rhetoric of Masculinity: Origins, Institutions, and the Myth of the Self-Made Man,” James Catano addresses the contradictory forces at work in forging male personality.

Catano writes:

In the case of the myth of the self-made man, these basic needs and fears can be stated in terms of two psychological appeals and their oppositions. The appeals focus on 1) a desire for personal growth and 2) a need to form an acceptable social, in this case masculine, identity. Each appeal is countered by an opposing force: 1) the desire for self-growth must address the power of institutional determination; 2) the pursuit of masculinity must face the possibility of failure. (2)

Black Boy, *Native Son*, and *Uncle Tom’s Children* confirm Catano’s observations as Wright actively seeks to advance his own agency and personal growth. However, his advancement is counterbalanced by an inability to forge strong ties with shunned space communities.

Feminine Disempowerment and Wright’s Rejection of Shunned Space in *Black Boy*

As a child, Wright lived in shunned spaces such as a sharecropper village near Roxie, Mississippi, a putrid slum in West Haven, Arkansas, and a Memphis ghetto. Figure 11 below depicts Wright’s early childhood near Roxie, Mississippi. Even as an infant, the forces of Jim Crow are arrayed against him:

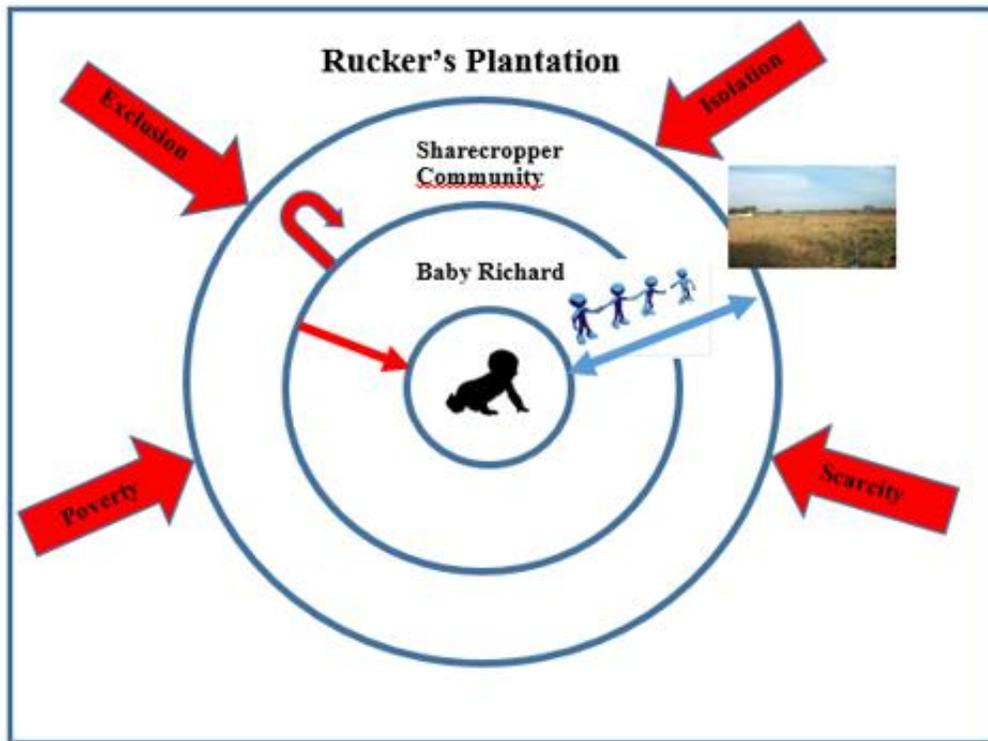


Figure 11 Richard Wright as a Young Child at Rucker's Plantation

Despite the powerful influence of these places on his personal development and his writing, Wright sometimes rejects any association with the shunned spaces of his youth, and instead chooses to view himself as an impartial observer, intellectually untouched by the religious practices and white dominance he identifies as rampant in these spaces.

Shunned space becomes a vortex wrought with existential challenges he must flee to live as a free agent. He views the shunned spaces of his youth as too corrupted by generations of systemic racism to permit the formation of functioning communities that affirm individual identity. Shunned space therefore becomes a vacuum in which creativity is either suppressed or nonexistent, and the cultural vitality necessary to resist racialized aggression has no agency to take root. Wright insinuates that spaces—especially the shunned spaces of his childhood in

Mississippi—are too replete with ignorance, religious fanaticism, and Jim Crow to provide meaningful sanctuary for his personal development. In turn, these observations compel Wright to leave the South in search of venues that he hopes will affirm his identity.

I explore how Wright's dismissal of the oral and written narratives, religious practices, and ingenious negotiation with an entrenched and ubiquitous white authority rejects the extraordinary accomplishment of the inhabitants of these marginalized communities. I also show that his categorical dismissal of the Black Church originates from bias forged early in his life and reinforced by the dialectical materialism of his tenure within the American Communist Party. However, his connection with the Mississippi landscape endures throughout his life and manifests as a fundamental element of his writing for the remainder of his career. Therefore, shunned space offers a holistic view into Wright's life and writings that brings his contradictory attitude toward feminine agency, masculinity, landscape, and the cultural power of his childhood into focus as cardinal influences on his evolution as a man and as a writer. Overall, the extraordinary repertoire of cultural accomplishment in shunned space, including oral and written narratives, is perpetually unrecognized by one of its most prominent offspring, Richard Wright himself.

Wright confirms his vision of having experienced rapid personal development while accompanying Brother Mance on insurance sales trips to impoverished, sharecropper communities flanking plantations. "I had all but forgotten that I had been born on a plantation [Rucker's] and I was astonished at the ignorance of the children I met," he wrote (135). The children he saw were equally the objects of his pity and derision. Wright states: "Many of the naïve Black families bought their insurance from us because they felt they were connecting

themselves with something that would make their children ‘write ‘n speak lake data pretty boy from Jackson’” (136). Wright appears isolated from the full spectrum of humanity appearing before him in such shunned spaces. He views each venue as “a bare, bleak pool of Black life and [he] hated it; the people were alike, and their farms were alike” (136). Wright further describes Brother Mance’s practice of performing charismatically before “walleyed yokels” in churches who would eagerly sign up for new policies (136). Although he was only in the sixth grade at the time, Wright’s memoir repeatedly attempts to demonstrate his disconnection from communities rooted within the shunned spaces.

I argue that Wright’s anxiety about shunned space manifests clearly in the harmony between his description of the poor families he sees while traveling with Brother Mance and the natural imagery he deploys early in *Black Boy* to describe his brutal, personal experiences as a child.⁴⁸ *Black Boy* therefore draws the reader into a liminal space in which Richard is never fully at home and, instead, satisfied to cast himself as an outsider, even at an early age.

⁴⁸ In *Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition* (1981), Ladell Payne insists that Wright’s description of the natural world in and around the shunned spaces of his childhood closely follows the description Thomas Wolfe offers in *Look, Homeward, Angel* (1929). However, the parallels evaporate when closely reading passages from each work (56-60). Even in those spaces marked by pastoral description, Wright punctuates his narrative with references to the thin line dividing life and death in shunned spaces. However, Wolfe’s pastoral language consistently proclaims natural beauty—an option reserved for those who have not endured the scarcity of shunned space.

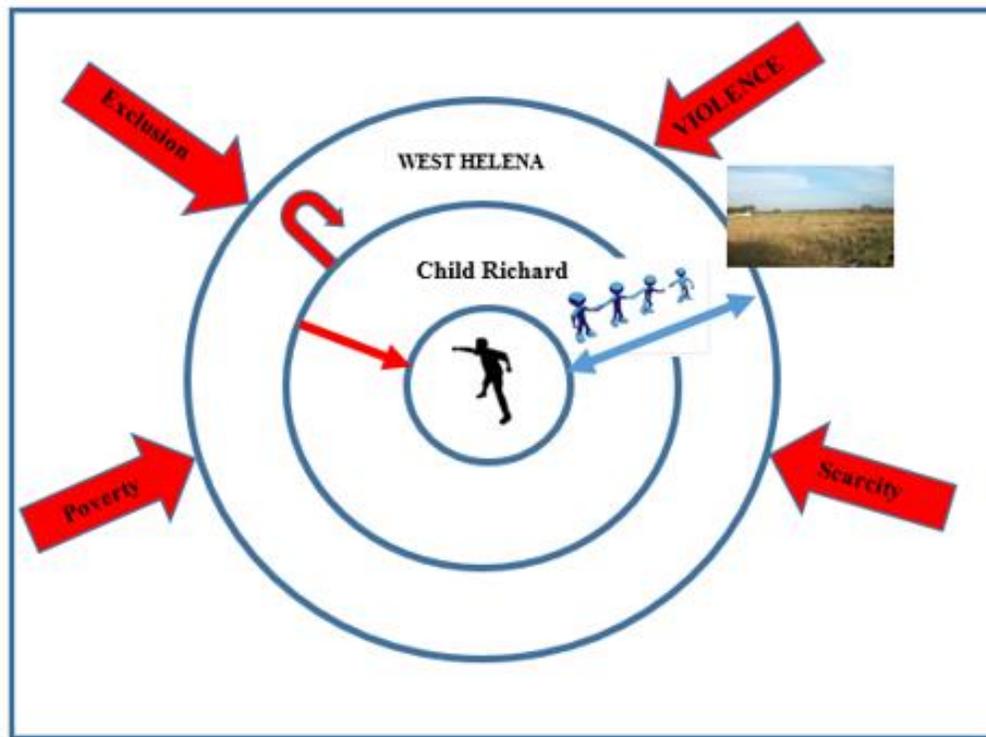


Figure 12 Wright's Childhood in West Helena, Arkansas

The above diagram reflects the essential characteristics of Wright's home both in West Helena and in Memphis. Both are marked by extreme violence (internal and external), and both are ecologically compromised. Some of Wright's most pessimistic descriptions of landscape and cityscape center on West Helena and confirm many of Quarles' descriptions of similar shunned spaces in the North:

We rented one half of a double corner house in front of which ran a stagnant ditch carrying sewage. The neighborhood swarmed with rats, cats, dogs, fortune-tellers, cripples, blind men, whores, salesmen, rent collectors, and children. In front of our flat was a huge roundhouse where locomotives were cleaned and repaired.

There was an eternal hissing of steam, the deep grunting of steel engines, and the

tolling of bells. Smoke obscured the vision and cinders drifted into the house, into our beds, into our kitchen, into our food, and a tarlike smell was always in the air.

(57)

Unlike verdant, pastoral spaces, West Helena is little more than a cesspool with a shunned neighborhood placed on top. Yet even in such compromised areas, Wright relates the power of cultural rejuvenation as neighborhood children gather in and near the filthy water to assemble the refuse into toy sailboats (57-8). The raw experience of coming face-to-face with scarcity and death within the sewer does not completely obliterate the children's joy. Instead, they convert scarcity into products that not only demonstrate reuse, but also provide a common venue within which community takes shape and innovative ideas flourish.

From sweeping vistas to bloodletting, Wright accomplishes more than a reiteration of the works of nature writers who describe the natural world using only pastoral terms. Instead, his description implies his origin as a child of shunned space, who witnesses both the bounty and price of living close to nature. According to Scott Hicks in "W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright: Toward an Ecocriticism of Color" (2006), "Wright unsettles and upends the pastoral. He rejects its simplistic appreciation for nature unreflected on in favor of one in which danger and disorder are imminent and endemic, one in which terror and fear are always but a few steps away" (213). Wright also deploys the ever-present menace of scarcity in describing the natural world around shunned space because the production of food and shelter is always at the precipice. At any time, even food and shelter are subject to devastation by flood, drought, or invasion by white hands.

Young Wright becomes quickly aware of different types of shunned space reserved for his family, including the urban centers of the South. His memoir records his response to the stark images of living in a city slum:

In Memphis we lived in a one-story brick tenement. The stone buildings and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead. Living space for the four of us—my mother, my brother, my father, and me—was a kitchen and a bedroom. In the front and rear were paved areas in which my brother and I could play, but for days I was afraid to go into the strange city streets alone. (7-8)

Wright's description of the shunned space in Memphis he occupied as a child differs greatly from the privileged space he occupied as an adult. However, his acquisition of privilege does not result in the same explosive creativity he experienced while living in the racialized, poverty-ridden enclaves of the South or urban ghettos of the North.

In *Richard Wright Daemoniac Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work*, Margaret Walker confirms the role of Southern space, though compromised by Jim Crow, and even the Black Church, in Wright's evolution as a writer. She states:

In these transitional years from twelve to seventeen, Wright was malleable and most impressionable. He did not understand this, but these religious influences made him both a rebel and a puritan...All his days, he would remain a puritan, and he would often sit in judgment of his fellow Black man, men and women, declaring they had no morals, ethics, or spiritual values. (34-5)

Despite Wright's insistence to the contrary, many of his moral foundations were wrought in the sweltering heat of Mississippi's shunned spaces. In time, the shadow of these ideas shaped by his experiences in shunned space permeate his writings. Walker reinforces this belief by stating that the influence of shunned space would remain with Wright for the rest of his life. She wrote, "His birthplace in those Mississippi woods was like a big black hole that followed him in his memory all the days of his life, and it reappears in his fiction, his nonfiction, and his poetry" (13-4).

Walker declares that the obstacles imposed by Slavery and Jim Crow only harden the resolve of Mississippi's Black authors to succeed (18).

Although Wright partially escaped the stampede of Jim Crow racism's direct effects by fleeing the South, the invasive forces surrounding his shunned space⁴⁹ still followed him, even to Paris. In an amusing episode, Wright turns the tables on J. Edgar Hoover's FBI by writing a poem titled "The FBI Blues" (1949). The first stanza reveals the famous author's take on the agency's infatuation with the bedroom habits of those it observes:

That old FB eye

Tied a bell to my bed stall

Said old FB eye

Tied a bell to my bed stall

Each time I love my baby, gover'ment knows it all. (II. 1-5)

Despite its obvious humor, the poem reveals the extent to which the FBI invaded Wright's privacy. Perhaps Wright was aware of Hoover's predilection for voyeurism, and the poem

⁴⁹ Signified by red arrows pointing inward on the character diagrams.

represents a turning of the tables by suggesting that the bureau's motives in watching him were as craven as they were misguided. The Bluesy tone of the poem suggests the broad scope of the FBI's efforts to undermine the entire edifice of African American protest literature. Additionally, the poem underscores the lifelong influence of shunned space on Wright's life.

For Wright, living in Chicago and Paris provided distance from the shunned spaces of his youth and a sanctuary for reflection, but the environmental triggers that prompted his most brilliant works were long gone. I purport that Young Richard wrote because he *had* to, but Richard Wright wrote because he desperately *wanted* to do so. Hence, the endless wellspring of creative energy flowing through his Southern experience was extinguished bit-by-bit the further Wright ventured from it. I contend that shunned space is a cruel necessity for writers such as Wright, who cannot purge the innate influences of their originating spaces.

For example, Wright fails to capture the energizing potential of many Black Church services to orient shunned communities toward a common goal of achieving liberation from Jim Crow laws. After describing soulful hymns as little more than instruments proselytizing propaganda (153), Wright relates his comradery with other young men compelled to join the congregation:

We young men had been trapped by the community, the tribe in which we lived and of which we were a part. The tribe, for its own safety, was asking us to be at one with it. Our mothers were kneeling in public and praying for us to give the sign of allegiance. The hymn ended and the preacher launched into a highly emotional and symbolic sermon, recounting how our mothers had given birth to us... (154)

For Wright, religion is akin to the enslavement of body and mind.⁵⁰ He fails to see that the “tribe” transcends the congregation seated before a pastor and, instead, includes most, if not all members of the shunned community. The preacher’s “symbolic sermon” celebrates the liberation of the spirit as a prequel to the liberation of the body.⁵¹ Religion is one of many variables at play in this passage that includes cultural elements stretching back centuries, and intended to unite the community in common purpose against the fragmenting forces of an outside world dominated by whites. Therefore, when Young Wright’s mother seeks salvation for his soul, she is also pleading with him to embrace the sanctuary of community. He subjects religion to a literal interpretation, as illustrated by his stated willingness to wholeheartedly embrace Christianity if he could only see an angel. He declared, “I needed proof before I could believe” (113). However, Wright easily accepts empirical verification of the natural world extrapolated into symbolic qualities. In other words, he refuses to see the symbolic vitality of religion as equally important to the natural world in framing common purpose for the inhabitants of shunned space.

Wright’s diminutive view of Southern Black culture extends beyond the centrality of religion. Whereas shunned spaces, by definition, are framed by scarcity and react in culturally productive ways, Wright offers a counterpoint:

⁵⁰ In *From Strength to Strength: Shaping a Black Practical Theology for the 21st Century* (2007), Robert London Smith, Jr. challenges Wright’s view of religion as pariah: “Fellowship continues to be a very important part of church life in the African American faith community. Culturally, it is a direct hold-over from times in history when black folks were made pariahs in American society and the church was the only place where they could gather with those who were like themselves in a setting that involved respect and mutual admiration” (148).

⁵¹ Dr. Martin Luther King employs themes of religious liberation to promote a united front against racialized injustice.

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of Black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of Black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another. (35)

Wright is mistaken.⁵² Shunned spaces have produced music, folklore, literature, agriculture and a distinctive bond with the land that have contributed immeasurably to the cultural milieu of the more privileged spaces. Furthermore, the influence of Black culture has made an indelible mark on Wright as a writer and as a man.

Young Richard is intimidated by women, as evidenced by his ongoing need to frame them as inferior to himself. I argue that the racialized power structures of Jim Crow radiate throughout Wright's life, and that his negative view of women casts doubt on his absolute hold on masculine agency. In other words, Wright deploys some of the same otherizing strictures against women that are exercised by the larger society against him. The following passage from his memoir is replete with condescension:

After tramping the streets and pounding on doors to collect premiums, I was dry, strained, too tired to read or write. I hungered for relief and, as a salesman of

⁵² Margaret Walker addresses this apparent blind spot in Wright's assessment of the black communities of the South and beyond when she writes: "But like his white and Jewish teachers, Wright underestimated the strength of the black mind, his own black mind, creative, critical, political, and analytical, the constructs of his own imagination, the richness and fecundity of his own intellect, the power of his own creativity.... A thinking black world was whirling into revolutionary action (304-5).

insurance to many young Black girls, I found it. There were many comely Black housewives who, trying desperately to keep up their insurance payments, were willing to make bargains to escape paying a ten-cent premium each week. She was an illiterate Black child with a baby whose father she did not know. During the entire period of my relationship with her, she had but one demand to make of me: She wanted me to take her to a circus. Just what significance circuses had for her, I was never able to learn. (259)

Wright and the women he derides share a lot in common. The circus represented a temporary escape from the drudgery and despair of her shunned space. The circus was a portal into a larger world she would otherwise never experience. Wright barter premium payments for sex, and his ongoing description of the young woman demonstrates his rejection of her agency as a fully-vested human being. He flexes a godlike judgment against her: "I stared at her and wondered just what a life like hers meant in the scheme of things, and I came to the conclusion that it meant absolutely nothing" (259). For Wright, the woman is reduced to chattel, her very personhood hollowed out to a husk. He expresses no interest in her as a human being, beyond absorbing just enough information to fuel a cascade of insults. Instead, he goes on to blame her for his loneliness and for her affairs with other men. "I could kill you," he said (259). Of course, he fails to confess any moral scruples of his own libertine attitude toward sex.⁵³ She is therefore reduced

⁵³ Wright obviously possesses the ability to compartmentalize his own intentions such that the woman bears blame for any sexual escapades he chooses to practice.

to his property, an unthinking and unfeeling vessel whose worth is measured by her exclusive availability to ease Wright's sexual stress.⁵⁴

I contend that Wright's negative assessment of women—especially Black women—erupts from his inability to see the value of the shunned spaces within which his identity has evolved. This results from an ambiguity that Wright never fully resolves regarding how to relate to other human beings in close quarters. Paul Gilroy writes about Wright's intuition regarding the psychological trauma caused by racism:

The idea of closeness, of proximity to others, is also fundamental to Wright's thinking in *Eight Men*. For, in a world that has been split along the color line, people can be physically close while remaining separated by 'a vast psychological distance.' Blacks and whites enjoy radically different forms of consciousness and are sundered from each other even when they occupy the same spaces. The stress this creates are powerful enough to drive people on both sides of the color line out of their minds. (xv)

That is, Wright observes the deleterious impact of racism on human interaction and human consciousness, especially when Blacks and whites must interact. However, he fails to discuss the harmful effects of misogyny on Black families and communities within shunned space.

Wright discusses the fragmentation of Black families as an independent phenomenon to external, racialized violence imposed on the shunned space. However, within the boundaries of church, family, and community, Wright witnesses the durable institutions of communities mostly

⁵⁴ Wright's view of Bigger and Bessie, his former girlfriend, is framed by similar condescension (227).

destined to outlast both slavery and Jim Crow. Within shunned spaces, African American residents find the collective power to resist fragmentation. In turn, Wright has benefited immeasurably from the cultural ingenuity of its residents in converting scarcity into a means of warding off starvation and social disintegration.

I propose that Wright faces a double consciousness in relating his youth. On one hand, he is firmly rooted within the shunned community. On the other hand, Wright insists that his identity is evolved, even at a young age, such that he can objectify his sense of self in terms of his environment. Such double consciousness can be represented pictographically as follows:

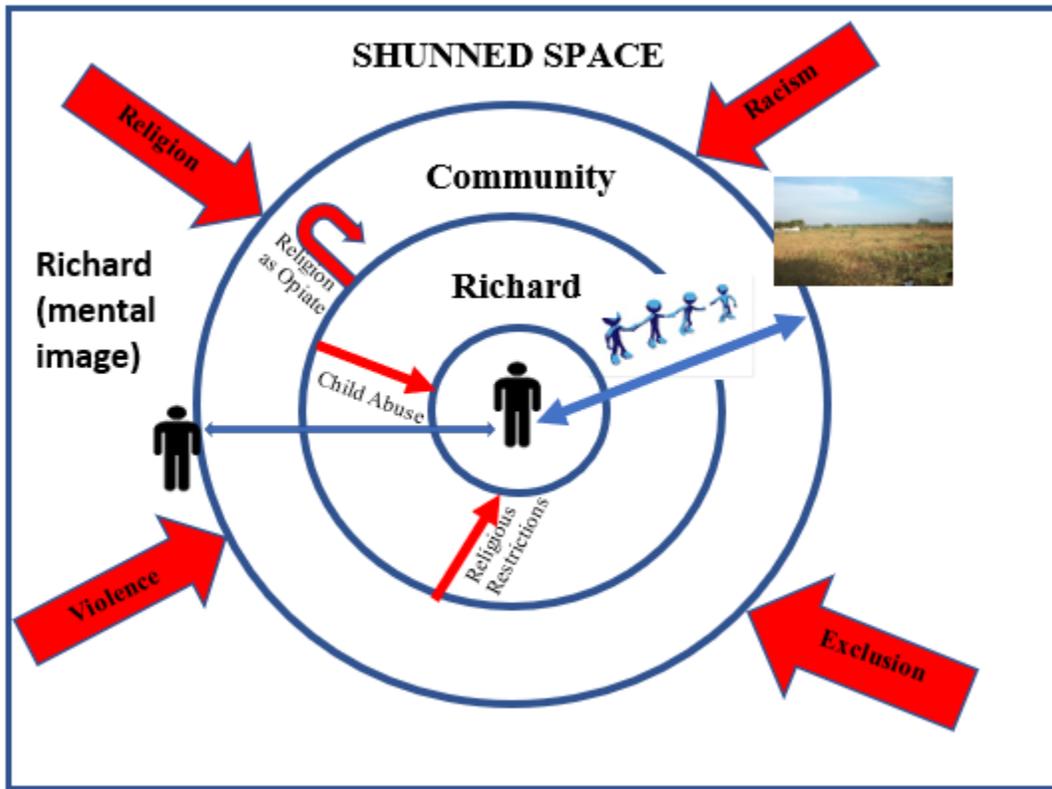


Figure 13 Richard's Double Consciousness

The above diagram illustrates Young Wright's response to establishing a direct link to his environment, bypassing the portals made available by his community. This double consciousness

arises from a feeling that he is simultaneously trapped within his shunned space and yet rendered mentally separate from its more dangerous threats simply by exercising his free will.

Wright's family, including his mother and grandmother, are far more than malicious agents hell-bent on Young Wright's destruction. In his introduction to Wright's novel *Eight Men* (1996), Gilroy states: "[Wright] spotlights the ambivalent role of the Black family. That beleaguered space of intimacy affords protection and support to its occupants, but the emotional and psychological price of nurturance is a high one. Family life can easily become restricting, disabling, and destructive" (xvi). Despite Gilroy's assessment of Black families, I contend that Wright fails to grasp that all the elements comprising shunned space form a distinctive milieu within which his characters emerge. In other words, Wright's memoir indicates that he has convinced himself that no sanctuary exists for him within the South.

Shunned space requires a holistic examination of literature and is therefore not reductive. Contradictions are admissible and sometimes preferable when examining how an author claims to view himself or herself. Hence, the image of a four-year-old extracting transcendence from the verdant spaces in and around Natchez serves to underscore a vital point. Although Wright is almost certainly far more than four years-old when he realizes the identity affirming power of landscape, the perspective offers a valid counterpoint to the Jim Crow assertion that Black men lack a highly textured inner life. Therefore, if Wright had not fundamentally transformed his original approach to autobiography, it would have lacked the signifying and political power to motivate the reader to resist the racialized system of Jim Crow.

In "Aesthetics, Abjection, and White Privilege in Suburban New York" (2006), James Duncan and Sandy Duncan describe the ambivalent relationship between landscape and identity,

especially among marginalized groups. They write: “The landscape of home often is a commonly recognized landscape that plays an active role in articulating identity, differentiating social position, and maintaining both positive and negative emotional attachments to place” (Schein 157). Wright is tortured by his inability to disentangle himself from shunned spaces such as Roxie, Mississippi and a Memphis ghetto, and his efforts to do so result in many of his personal contradictions. As evidenced by his memoir, he views himself as an *ex nihilo* entity, whose intellect collides with and ultimately overwhelms the identity challenging forces of his childhood. Wright gives minimal credit to his forebears for instilling within him the agency to launch resistance against the racialized systems of the South. He states that the religious institutions at the center of most African American communities serve white interests more than Black freedom; yet, he has no problem appropriating religious symbolism throughout his works. Black women, he surmises, are obsessed with the survival of their children more than the affirmation of their freedom, and hence concede defeat to Jim Crow. Consequently, Wright requires that Black women must rise at least two steps to achieve equality with Black men: one to account for their allegiance to superstition, and the other to compensate for their willingness to crush the political aspirations of their freedom-seeking children. Shunned space is therefore a cauldron for Wright within which sinister forces brew, often directed by the women of his life in their zeal to serve a God he despises. Of course, in the eyes of feminist writers, including myself, Wright misses the mark in his imprudent assessment of women such as his mother and grandmother whose strength and perseverance provide enough stability for him to eventually rise up and escape the South.

Wright's ethos as a writer is firmly rooted in his own experience growing up in shunned spaces, and his command of the language accounts for his astonishing power. As a Black child raised in the Deep South, Wright is a child of Jim Crow and a grandchild of American Slavery. Institutional injustice is an ever-present reality, and his courage to decry it in his writing requires a strength and insight few other writers from oppressive backgrounds possess. Chattel bondage is always in his rear-view mirror, yet the hazards of emasculation or even death at the hands of whites is a daily threat. Although Wright is aware of the chattel signifiers embedded in his surroundings, he has no scruples deploying those same signifiers against Black women. On the other hand, he rarely implicates Black men in the shunned communities with the same degree of moral turpitude as he reserves for females. Wright's attitude toward his derelict father is a notable exception as he labels him a "Black peasant" (Black Boy 33) diminished to insignificance.

As a resident of the South's shunned spaces, young Wright is not only afflicted by Jim Crow, but also abused by the adults in the community, especially women. His childhood fuses into a morass of horror, where any misstep leads to swift and violent retribution by Blacks and whites. Wright extrapolates the significance of such horror not only for himself, but for all African Americans in this passage from *Black Boy*:

A dim notion of what life meant to a Negro in America was coming to consciousness in me, not in terms of external events, lynchings, Jim Crowism, and the endless brutalities, but in terms of crossed-up feeling, of psyche pain. I sensed that Negro life was a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but

few Negroes who knew the meaning of their lives, who could tell their story.

(267)

Wright therefore experiences Jim Crow and shunned space internally as a psychological phenomenon and externally as an overlay of community (which he rejects) and landscape (which he often embraces). His memoir records that the few episodes of peace afforded to him occur when he is alone, away from the whites, whose power extends everywhere, and away from the prying eyes of female relatives, who literally interpret Proverbs 13:24.⁵⁵

Wright graphically describes a beating he received as a child for nearly burning down the house. He writes:

[My mother lashed me] so hard and long I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear... Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me... Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time, I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me.

(7)

For Wright, this scene is the original sin of violence committed against him, delivered by the hands of the woman entrusted with his care. After this, all the women in his memoir seem to take a moral tumble: his mother as a near child-killing brute; and his grandmother as a Bible wielding

⁵⁵ Proverbs 13:24 (KJV) states: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes."

tyrant whose religious zeal was matched only by his aunt's. Later, he reduces the women who exchange sex with him for the cost of their life insurance premium to mere chattel. The women of Wright's childhood home were the harbingers of religion, and he describes their zealotry as the primary reason for his lifelong disaffection toward faith. Nevertheless, Wright's decision to vilify his childhood experience thoroughly exacts a heavy price by setting him adrift, unmoored to any lasting sense of home.

Wright quickly encounters racism on a personal level in each of the shunned spaces he inhabits. He invests great compassion when relating conversations with his grandfather, who fought for the Union during the Civil War and never received appropriate compensation. Such facts continually reveal that, even at a young age, Wright develops a highly personal understanding that America's racial difficulties did not end with Emancipation. Even the pastoral imagery of *Black Boy* is replete with racial signifiers. For example, "There was the incomprehensible secret embodied in a whitish toadstool hiding in the dark shade of a rotting log" (6). Color carries deep significance in Wright's protest literature, and the reference to a white, poisonous mushroom⁵⁶ lurking in the shadows of an otherwise lovely scene illustrates the ubiquitous dangers he encountered during Jim Crow. Robert Felgar insists that racism is the next layer of Wright's interrogation of Southern society, resting on a foundation of mythology and systemic apartheid (1-4). However, I offer that Felgar's stratification of *Black Boy* is incomplete.

⁵⁶ Color is an important metaphor for racialized danger for both Wright and Ward. For example, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward presents a shapeshifting white snake as the harbinger of painful memories and the realization that Richie can never fully bond with Riv or his family (134-5).

Although this analysis promotes an intensely logical interpretation of Wright's memoir from a hermeneutical standpoint, it fails to identify the enormous potential of viewing the book itself as part of a holistic effort to understand the Jim Crow South through the eyes of its primary victims. That is, Felgar parses his analyses of Wright into a series of intensely logical silos that ignores several ponderous themes, such as the subordination of women throughout Wright's works. In other words, Felgar's analysis tapers off in those areas where the lens of shunned space reveals some of the most dramatic themes of *Black Boy*, drawing them into a conversation that carries far greater weight than individual silos. For example, Communism held a utopic allure for Wright for several years and represented a possible antidote to America's infatuation with racism, until he decided that the institution of Communism was ill-suited to the needs of African Americans. Wright's allegiance to the political movement as a standalone solution evaporated and he felt compelled to address the authentic elements of Black experience in America.

Wright spends his writing career unraveling the "incomprehensible secret" of how to invest the African American community languishing under racialized institutions with the vital knowledge and stamina to revolt against them. Consider the following quote from *Black Boy* as a young Richard Wright chats with his Black coworkers:

To our minds, the white folks formed a kind of superworld...But under all our talk floated a latent sense of violence; the whites had drawn a line over which we dared not step and we accepted that line because our bread was at stake...Hence, our daily lives were so bound up with trivial objectives that to capitulate when challenged was tantamount to surrendering the right to life itself. Our anger was

like the anger of children, passing quickly from one petty grievance to another, from the memory of one slight wrong to another. (231)

The definition of shunned space echoes in this quote: its boundaries set by whites whose larger society looms outside the shunned space like a “superworld,” willing to violently strike at any attempt by marginalized residents to trespass these boundaries. Wright’s perspective is therefore framed by the shunned spaces of *Black Boy*, from which he launches his objections to racialized injustice. The emasculating force of Jim Crow is on display as the men discuss their collective frustration.

For Wright, this frustration often manifests as a wander lust that renders Southern spaces null and void of meaning for African Americans. He writes: “The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me” (168). Unmoored to the shunned spaces of his youth, Wright determined “to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive” (169). Despite the overwhelming desire to exit the South, Wright sometimes appears on the cusp of a spatial revolution, linking individual to community outward through the scarcity-laden landscape, into the larger society, before myopically shifting back to a singular, masculine perspective. For example, his early ruminations about the natural world bring both community and landscape into mutual focus. The beauty of the natural world is balanced by the perennial need of community to engage to obtain food. Whether slaughtered hogs, chickens, or other farming activities, Wright witnesses his shunned space in action. Although he does not directly mention the people who slaughter the hogs and harvest the crops, the older Black residents of his shunned spaces must bear these tasks (6). Wright is fully aware that land

occupied by shunned space residents has been allocated by whites for their own purposes, and the scene gathers an extra layer of fragility as Wright becomes aware that neither he, his family, nor the entire community can lay claim to ownership. He concludes the scene by returning to a singular point of view: “There was the cloudy notion of hunger when I breathed the odor of new-cut, bleeding grass” (6). As he grows into a young man in *Black Boy*, Wright attempts to maintain an objective view of the shunned spaces in which he finds himself, yet rarely references any meaningful accomplishment by the Black residents of those spaces.

For example, folklore represents another contribution of the inhabitants of shunned space. However, Wright’s penchant for materialism would almost certainly lead him to deny the efficacy of including characters such as the ghost in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. According to Venetria K. Patton, this ghost “provides readers with the opportunity to grapple with [slavery’s] troublesome past and, like Sethe, find some measure of healing” (122). Instead, Wright interprets any mystical view of the world as an ethereal departure from the capacity of African Americans to achieve enlightenment and freedom. He berates the religious elements of his childhood spaces. Specifically, his grandmother’s obsession with religious ritual eliminated any utility Wright could derive from her faith. Wright’s disdain for religion was matched by an equally negative view of African American folklore.

Patton’s view of the role of ghosts and folklore fits snugly within the arguments of Joseph Campbell concerning myth and its vital function for affirming individual and communal identity. In *The Power of Myth* (1988), Campbell states:

Myth opens the world to the dimension of mystery, to the realization of the mystery that underlies all forms... But there is [another] function for myth, and

this is the one I think everyone must try today to relate to—and that is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances.

Myths can teach you that. (31)

Even in the face of racialized exclusion and dehumanization, the folklore that originates within shunned space therefore offers a symbolic power harnessed to grant identity for its marginalized residents. Such stories are easily repeatable and passed to subsequent generations, thereby supplying cohesion to the entire community. I contend that one of Wright's most egregious mistakes in attempting to understand the cultural productivity of African Americans wrestling with Jim Crow results from his steadfast determination to ignore three of its most potent sources—folklore, feminine empowerment, and religion.

Wright's foray into Communism confirmed his acceptance of materialism, which, in turn, corrupted his ability to fully grasp the significance of folklore and the Black Church in shunned spaces. However, writers such as Zora Neale Hurston found abundant cultural significance in the folklore and other belief structures of African American communities and codified her findings in books such as *Mules and Men* (1935). On the other hand, Wright frequently categorized faith in the non-physical as proof that the persecution of Black people extended to the disruption of the Black intellect, thereby rendering the race vulnerable to exploitation. Understandably, Hurston and Wright were on opposite ends of the spectrum of thought circulating among writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Each writer was a luminary in the African American canon, and each shared what Sarah L. Labbe labeled as a common goal "to promote the literary work of Black people" (2). Nevertheless, their divergent approaches were obvious in that Wright viewed the spaces of his youth through a lens of cynical horror, whereas Hurston celebrated her beloved

Eatonville as a gold mine for understanding the contributions of African Americans to both oral and written narratives. She celebrated the folklore traditions of her ancestors as the harbingers of community itself. In other words, Wright fled the rural shunned spaces of his childhood for many of the same reasons that compelled Hurston to return to her childhood home in Eatonville.

The ideological battle between Wright and Hurston rested, at least partly, on diametrically opposing views of the role of gender in each other's work. Not only does Wright dismiss Hurston's focus on folklore, but he unsurprisingly criticizes her approach to writing as too feminine. Megan Obourn writes in "Early Civil Rights 'Voice Work' in Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston" (2012):

Wright attempted to distance his writing from Hurston's more "feminine" narrative technique that "cloak" her prose in "facile sensuality" (*Their Eyes* 17), while Hurston dismissed Wright's "masculine" aesthetics with her comment on the lack of "act[s] of understanding and sympathy in *Uncle Tom's Children* (*Uncle Tom* 3)...Each critiqued the other for improper use of dialect, an important point of political voice work in their respective texts. Hurston says of Wright, "Since the author is himself a Negro, his dialect is a puzzling thing. One wonders how he arrived at it. Certainly he does not arrive by ear unless he is tone-deaf" (4). And Wright calls Hurston's use of dialect a continuation of the "minstrel technique" (*Their Eyes* 17). (238)

This bantering has strong currency for Wright's decision to implicate so-called minstrel techniques and to downplay the positive role of women in the shunned spaces of this childhood. Wright has almost certainly deployed a degree of poetic license in creating his memoir. It is

amusing to consider that such a young child, void of formal education and growing up in a highly segregated environment, where education is scarce, would authentically manufacture such prose. In essence, Wright is subtly promulgating a mythology about his development as a towering intellectual. Hence, he frees himself from a holistic perspective of shunned space to promote himself as thoroughly self-made. Unfortunately, the aspects of shunned space he removes are exactly those elements of community that are identity affirming, creative, and at least partly enervated to shield him from the most negative consequence of white dominion. Instead, he myopically focuses on the notions of rampant ignorance, apathy, and violence as the sole hallmarks of shunned space.

In “Understanding Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents” (2000), Robert Felgar states that the memoir challenges authority while exposing a network of self-defeating religious beliefs as catalysts that worsen the effects of scarcity. Where authority is inept and inconsistent, it is thrust on the marginalized members of society by the application of perpetual violence. Hence, Felgar insists that Wright implicates Jim Crow as violent because it is bereft of logic. Religion, according to Wright, is an intellectually defunct attempt to force the Black masses to regulate themselves according to the will of whites (34). Religion therefore becomes an instrument of oppression.

Despite his antipathy for religious matters, Wright cannot purge the influence of the South from his blood as he transitions to the shunned spaces of the North. In *The Negro in the Making of America* (1969), Benjamin Quarles offers insight into the urban shunned spaces to which southern Blacks fled during the Great Migration. He writes:

After the intoxication of being out of the South wore off, the newcomers found that the sprawling, impersonal cities of the North were not quite the land of promise they had expected. Though they no longer saw “White” and “Colored” signs everywhere, they quickly became aware of segregation in churches and social clubs. The color line took visual form in the existence of a “Black belt,” a section of the city, characterized by rat-infested houses, poor health and sanitation facilities, high incidents of crime and juvenile delinquency, and policemen too quick with the nightsticks or guns. (228)

Several criteria for determining shunned space are recognizable from this description, indicating that life for African Americans in the North was far from utopic. Echoes of contemporary police profiling are obvious in the passage, and the allocation of specific areas (African American spaces) for occupation by African Americans speaks to continuing trends of inequality.

Saunders Redding, author of *Reflections on Richard Wright*, insists that Wright cannot completely dissolve his rich connection to the environmental landscape and customs of the American South. For example, even as an expatriate in Paris, Wright insists on purchasing a farm just outside the city to guarantee ready access to collard greens, hog jowles, and other culinary staples from the American South. Wright’s culinary harkening invokes the shunned spaces of his childhood because food is the bridge between the human individual and the landscape from which it is derived. This is a heartening reminder that, although Wright appears to reject his shunned space roots, he nevertheless carries some vestige of his childhood experience with him throughout his life. In the shunned spaces of the Jim Crow South, food is eaten within sight of

where it grows or grazes. Wright's farm in France therefore offers an amusing example of his insistence in *Black Boy* that the South will remain with him wherever he goes (282).

As illustrated above, I contend that shunned spaces of Wright's works demonstrate that personal identity is framed both individually and collectively through family, community, religion, and environment. The writer's attempt to divest himself of all influence from his originating shunned spaces contributes to his personal fragmentation. He is a riddle wrapped in a paradox, a product of shunned space who often revolts against those spaces, but whose microscopic lens does not flinch from tortured kittens or gutted hogs. Instead, Wright positions himself as a four-year-old with the power to describe a landscape using numinous words. He is also the keyholder who gives voice to disenfranchised millions, while peddling misogyny and sex in exchange for the cost of an insurance premium from women he describes using the language of chattel. Wright is also the man who frames his mother as a murderous monster, hell-bent on avenging the possible destruction of a house by risking the loss of a son. At the same time, he is the young man who deals tenderly with his mother after her stroke. He takes his family to Chicago with him and works hard to keep a roof above their heads. Wright resists every element of his grandmother's religious dogma, while failing to comprehend the fact that, despite her faults, she remains head of her own household, which she has opened to her daughter's family, including her increasingly iconoclastic grandson.

away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people. (115)

Wright offers an oppositional rendering of Bigger's emotional state: hate and hope, benevolence and tyranny, imposed by the invisible hand of white intrusion. The red arrow reaches all the way into Bigger himself, implanting a fear that requires total extirpation, even murder, to exorcise the monsters it bred within him. Bigger's shunned space is too unstable and compromised by white interference to offer him substantial protection from the eviscerating forces of Jim Crow. Bigger's shunned space therefore provides an example of how such venues are sometimes inadequate to protect their residents from fragmentation.

In *Native Son*, Wright constructs a completely new stage, where a Black man exercises the agency to kill a white person. In so doing, he issues a warning to the racialized systems of Jim Crow and the inept liberalism that purports equal rights for all but has failed to enact such a basic principle: change is needed or war will come. Wright reminds Black men that they are not powerless and instructs whites to reflect on their own vulnerability. For Wright, the looming threat is that disgruntled masculinity will lash out in random waves of violence. Without the deep, spiritual rooting of community and land supplied by shunned space, Bigger Thomas is unhinged. He experiences romantic love as a phosphorescent burst that lingers for a moment before vanishing into the darkness. As a result, Bessie Mears is an object of physical desire and nothing more. Eventually, the violent wave even pierces the veneer of Bigger's relationship with her, and he views her as nothing more than a body in motion—a thing to be conquered and destroyed—at his whim. Wright offers the following conjecture:

[Bessie and Bigger] were physically dependent upon each other and they hated that dependence. Their brief moments together were for purposes of sex. They loved each other as much as they hated each other; perhaps they hated each other more than they loved. (401)

The stage is set for crisis as Bigger's anxiety about his dependency on Bessie grows to pathological proportions. Her body must be conquered and destroyed to neutralize its threat to him.

During the courtroom scene in *Native Son*, Attorney Boris Max argues that racialized systems have produced the rage within young men such as Bigger Thomas, and that life in prison offers the most civilized alternative when judging him. Therefore, Max's argument hinges on dehumanizing the women his client has killed by ignoring them. I therefore judge that Max's argument (and, by extension, Wright's) is more noticeable for the women it excludes than by the men it includes. The attorney states, "Steel bars between him and the society he offended would provide a refuge from hate and fear" (403). That is, the attorney asserts that prison insulates inmates from the systemic racism of the outside world.⁵⁷ Max is exclusively concerned with the restoration of Bigger's sense of community without any consideration for his victims, both of whom are female. The attorney further conflates his argument: "But if we say that we must kill him, then let us have the courage and honesty to say: 'Let us kill them all. They are not human'" (404-5). Wright poses the idea that Bigger's masculinized violence against women is reflected in

⁵⁷ As anyone who has investigated contemporary prison settings knows, racial divisions are observed throughout the prison population, encouraged by the continual threat of violence.

the larger society's endemic racism visited on all African American men. Furthermore, Bigger's misogynistic bloodlust erupts from social injustice, which inevitably sparks violent reaction from men who feel emasculated.

If Wright had more carefully considered the agency painfully forged within shunned space, *Native Son* would deploy a larger lens to view the dehumanizing process of Jim Crow. That is, Bigger is separated from the enabling features of his originating shunned space, and therefore finds himself unable to engage in a loving relationship with Bessie.⁵⁸ Also, the larger lens that I insist on using requires that the women of *Native Son* must endure their own calculus of negotiating with a racialized society. The fragmentation forced on current and former residents of shunned space is not reserved exclusively for men, but for women as well.

This is exactly the fault line where I argue that Wright's assertion is most fragile, because he has a blind spot for the cultural accomplishment of the spaces he fled as a young man. Shunned spaces must consistently generate cultural accomplishment in response to external aggression and endow their residents with identity affirming signifiers to avoid destruction. Shunned spaces cannot endure without cultural innovations to compensate for scarcity. Hence, Bigger Thomas's collapse as a man results as much from the repudiation of his original shunned space as it does from the lingering vestiges of urbanized segregation. When Boris Max multiplies Bigger's anxiety across the full spectrum of African American men, he fails to identify the impact on the female residents of shunned space. Since shunned spaces employ a collective

⁵⁸ Although shunned spaces provide no guarantee of safety from fragmentation, and human relationships are not guaranteed to succeed, Bigger's decision to separate himself from shunned also removes him from the potential of enjoying fulfilling relationships that aid in resisting personal fragmentation.

response against institutionalized racism, I assert that Bigger's violence against women eviscerates his ability to respond to the real threat of white aggression by "otherizing" at least half of his community.⁵⁹ Moreover, Bigger's agency to resist white oppression would have been amplified by acknowledging the agency of women within his community.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the anxiety generated within Bigger is reflected in the stress Wright faces later in his life.

Whether rural or urban, Northern or Southern, shunned spaces are created by the larger society. In *Native Son*, Mr. Dalton, Bigger's white employer, creates an urban shunned space. Wright states: "Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot" (174). Segregation, scarcity and environmental degradation are obvious in the passage.

In *Notes of a Native Son* (1957), James Baldwin offers sharp criticism of *Native Son* in a manner that brings shunned space into focus.⁶¹ Baldwin writes:

⁵⁹ In *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (1985), Trudier Harris addresses similar resistance by James Baldwin (at least in his earlier novels) to the full inclusion of feminine agency. She writes, "The sense of guilt the women feel [in Baldwin's novels] is often tied to their desire to break away from the roles that have been defined for them, or to their failure to fulfill a role" (5).

⁶⁰ In "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters" (1990), Trudier Harris gives a portrait of Mrs. Thomas, Bigger's mother, that parallels Wright's own grandmother. Harris writes: "Mrs. Thomas vacillates between strong-armed, matriarchal, emasculating declarations and something approaching feminine guile" (67).

⁶¹ As a gay man, Baldwin almost certainly took exception to what Margaret Walker labeled as Wright's "puritanical" ideas, including his penchant for homophobia. Such cynicism is confirmed by Wright's homophobia. In "Richard Wright's *Black Power*: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative" (2010), S. Shankar examines Wright's responses to seeing men dance together in an intimate fashion in the Gold Coast. Shankar writes, "The homophobic Wright then comes to the conclusion that 'Africa was another world, another sphere of being...'" In keeping with his lifelong practice of viewing incongruous situations through the lens of reason, Wright reaches the conclusion that he is indeed Western, shielded from what he views as African superstition and irrational behavior. Hence, "Wright struggles with the meaning that his ancestry has for him" (15-16). This is another illustration of Wright's desire to distance himself not only from his African ancestry, but from his childhood spent in the South's shunned spaces.

Despite the details of slum life which we are given, I doubt that anyone who has thought about it, disengaging himself from sentimentality, can accept this most essential premise of the novel for a moment. Those Negroes who surround [Bigger], on the other hand, his hard-working mother, his ambitious sister, his poolroom cronies, Bessie, might be considered as far richer and far more subtle and accurate illustrations of the ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival... What the novel reveals—and at no point interprets—is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. (35)⁶²

Bigger's manifestation as a tabula rasa figure in *Native Son* not only embodies his receptivity to systemic racism, but a penchant for internalizing its malevolent assumptions in ways that emasculate him. However, Bessie and other characters appear more three-dimensional, escaping racialized assumptions at least to the point that they can manufacture some internal resistance against the identity crushing force of intergenerational oppression.

Individuals such as Bessie, Bigger's mother, and even Bigger himself, form pieces of a Gestalten whole, a community that arises organically from the forces of history and exclusion. Baldwin touches on this idea when he writes the following extended criticism of *Native Son*:

It is this [impatient scorn] which creates [the novel's] climate of anarchy and unmotivated and un-apprehended disaster; and it is this climate, common to most

⁶² Imagine Richard Wright encountering the likes of Mia McKenzie, who celebrates her queerness by exhorting young gays to do the same. In a single sentence, she indicts the incompleteness of Wright's freedom manifesto: "We know how confusing it is when people talk about wanting you to be free, and then do everything they can to keep you from being free. We [Queer people] know what it is to wonder how freedom could possibly look like just the same old box" (118).

Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate.

(Baldwin 35-6)

I insist that shunned space brings forward a spectrum of African American accomplishment such that the "tradition" Baldwin references is drawn into stark relief. By simultaneously insisting that individual characters are at least partly derived from their originating spaces, it becomes impossible to parse history or landscape from personal development. Cultural productivity comes into focus and casts light on the ingenious manner in which the marginalized inhabitants of shunned space innovate strategies for their personal survival in a racialized, hostile world.

Bigger is a reactive agent whose actions are themselves prescribed by the invasive, larger society. Even his violence is a prescribed act to release pressure induced by the outside world. In Jay Paul Hinds' article titled "Redemptive Prose: Richard Wright's Re-authoring of the Patricidal Urtext" (2013), we discover Wright's motives for inventing a character like Bigger:

Surely one can rest assured that Bigger is just a literary anomaly, a fictionalized lost soul that only existed in the mind of Richard Wright. But can one be so certain? Wright gathered much of the information for *Native Son* from the news reports telling of the gruesome murder of Florence Johnson who was "beaten to death with a brick by a colored sex criminal" named Robert Nixon. For Wright, what proved to be just as scandalous as the murder itself was the brazen racist

language—e.g., “brick moron,” “rapist slayer,” “jungle beast,” “sex moron”—used to describe the murderer. This kind of racist phrasing sought to strip away the very humanity of Mr. Nixon; however, Wright used his acumen as a writer to inveigh against these attempts to dehumanize the perpetrator by arguing that it was a racist society, not inherent human defections, that created such a violent person. (Kinnamon 90)

Although Bigger Thomas appears unhinged and violent throughout *Native Son*, the novel is almost unthinkable without his collapse into psychosis. Obvious misogyny aside, Bigger represents thundering discontent with America’s racialized systems, and his fury serves to animate Wright’s readers against docile acceptance. Not only is Bigger a product of racism in the larger society, but he is also a free agent who acts out his agency in unpredictable ways when the larger society offers him no means of escaping emasculation.⁶³ That is, Wright presents violence as a reasonable choice for Bigger when other venues of self-determination are completely exhausted.

In “August Wilson’s Cycle of Bloodshed” (2017), Kyle Smith insists that “man can build his bridges from man to man, from idea to idea, from past to future, from old to new” in ways that offer alternatives to Bigger’s destructive decisions. Coming to terms with the Black community in which he was born could have sparked an alternative ending for channeling his resistance against racism to greater effect. Wright inadvertently lays the groundwork for

⁶³ Jim’s Crow’s racialized rules frequently centered on segregating white women from Black men. Hence, when Bigger finds himself in a white woman’s bedroom, he interprets violence as the only agency available to him, and he kills her. In blind rage, he kills the white girl to cover up any evidence and shield himself from the consequences.

exploring the role of shunned space in his paradigm of resistance by amalgamating stories he heard as a child into a series of novellas outlining the horrors of systemic racism. However, *Native Son* presents Bigger Thomas as little more than a puppet to white intervention, whose freedom of moral choice is arrested by a deterministic interpretation of the power of Jim Crow.

The Struggle for Sanctuary in the Shunned Spaces of *Uncle Tom's Children*

Uncle Tom's Children is a series of short stories that represents the necessity, fragility, violence, and resilience of shunned space communities. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the racialized fault lines of Southern life during Jim Crow come into focus as a group of young Black friends journey outside their shunned space to a swimming hole visited by a young white woman. Her fiancé responds violently, killing one of the naked boys. The white man is rushed by the remainder of the boys and dies after Big Boy shoots him with his own gun. Big Boy relies on the resources of his family and the rest of their shunned space community to escape the white mob assembled to wreak vengeance: “The truck sped over the asphalt miles, sped northward, jolting him, shaking out of his bosom the crumbs of corn bread, making them dance with the splinters and sawdust in the golden blades of sunshine” (53). Big Boy literally wears the last vestiges of his home as the shunned space of his childhood offers its final grace (safe transport) to shield him from white fury.

At first glance, the title “Big Boy Leaves Home” evokes a nostalgic scene in which a beloved child heads for greater opportunity and education.⁶⁴ However, as the story quickly

⁶⁴ Compare to Norman Rockwell’s painting titled “Breaking Home Ties,” which depicts a white teenage boy eagerly awaiting a chance to leave for school while his father, worn out by years of hard labor, sits nearby and reflects on the future without his son nearby. Source: <https://www.nrm.org/MT/text/Breaking-HomeTiesRockwell.html>

unfolds, the fact that a marginalized teenager is forced to flee his family home after witnessing the violent deaths of his closest friends stands in stark contradiction to the American Dream idealized by Rockwell—a vision Wright insinuates is rendered totally unavailable for most American Blacks trapped in the clutches of Jim Crow. Any thought of returning to childhood innocence dissolves in the flash of a single image: “a charred sapling on the slope of the opposite hill” containing Bobo’s lynched, charred remains (52). Almost certainly, the mob’s fury did not end with the murder of all but one of the Black boys. Wright describes Big Boy’s delirium in the back of the truck: “Once he heard the crow of a rooster. It made him think of home, of ma and pa. He thought he remembered hearing somewhere that the house had burned, but could not remember where... It all seemed unreal now” (52). The shunned space in which Big Boy lived and played just hours before might now be nothing more than a smoldering ruin, and even the safety of his parents and that of the other boys’ parents is not guaranteed. The short story’s title places a question mark above Big Boy’s head, whose future is suddenly rendered uncertain as he must journey well beyond the boundaries of his Southern shunned space, northward to other shunned spaces, and perhaps abandoning forever the confidence to call any place home again.

Wright continues with the theme of periodic violence in “Down by the Riverside,” in which an African American family is forced to evacuate during a great flood. A two-pronged attack is inflicted on Black residents as the river rises to cover their fields and homes, and they are berated by whites as they attempt to exit and reunite. The story centers on Mann, an African American man whose pregnant wife’s delivery is days overdue. In desperation, he asks Bob Cobb, a deceptive and unreliable relative, to sell the mule in exchange for a boat to deliver the family to safety. Bob returned with \$15 and a boat he stole from a white man (58)—a decision

that has grave consequences for Mann and his family. Jim Crow exacted a heavy toll on shunned spaces, especially during times of crisis, when Black men were conscripted en masse for forced labor (often to protect white property and interests). Bob describes the carnage:

The levees still over-flowin in the Noth, n they spectin the one by the cement plant t go any minute. They done put every nigger they could fin on the levee by the railroad, pilin san n cement bags. They driven em like slaves. Ah heard they done killed two-three awready what tried t run erway, cause two mo bridges done washed erway this mawnin n ain no trains runnin. (60)

The entire community, Black and White, is woefully unprepared for the deluge. However, the shunned space inhabitants, forced to live in the most vulnerable areas, are forced back into temporary slavery at a time when their own families are in greatest need of assistance.

As the water rises, paranoia sweeps the white community and causes panic for the marginalized residents of shunned space. Bob declares, “[Whites] were afraid of [their] stores and homes being looted... In times like this, they’ll shoot a nigger like a dog n think nothin of it” (56). For shunned space residents, the impact of natural disasters and other crises is amplified far above the stress members of the larger society endure.

Nevertheless, Wright insists that the inhabitants of shunned space, especially African American men, possess the agency to imitate and reciprocate violence. The following scene centers on Mann’s attempt to evacuate his family to safety using the only means available—the boat Bob Cobb stole from a white man. Wright relates the collision between a Black man’s attempt to save his family and the forces of a racialized patriarchy as the white man sees his stolen boat: “Nigger, bring that boat here! You *nigger!*” (68). Exiting the boat would bring

certain death for members of Mann's family and they attempt to remain as still and silent as possible, until the white man approaches the boat under a lighted flare, a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other. The consequences are lethal:

The flare flickered to and fro. [Mann's] throat tightened and he aimed. Then the flare hovered some five feet from him. He fired, twice. The white man fell backwards on the steps and slipped with an abrupt splash into the water. The flash-light went with him, its one eye swooping downward, leaving a sudden darkness. (69)

Obviously, Mann's decision to fire on the belligerent white man erupted from a primal need to save his own family. Curiously, the white man permits himself to be totally visible, parading a flashlight and walking from a lighted porch, screaming racial epithets. Wright therefore disrupts any claim to invincibility by members of the larger society. Tragically, Mann's battle to save his wife and unborn son proves futile. To protect his family, he must kill the white man (Heartfiel) who owns the boat they are using to flee from the flood. After white soldiers reluctantly allow his sick, pregnant wife entry to the hospital, Mann must enter through the "COLORED" entry, only to discover that both his wife and child have died. After Heartfiel's son identifies Mann as his father's killer, soldiers converge on Mann. In a final act to demonstrate his agency, Mann attempts to escape but is killed by guards before he stands trial for murdering a white man in self-defense.

Mann's shunned space is in an uproar, literally swept off its foundations. Whatever community once existed to protect Mann and his family is almost certainly destroyed by the flood. The constant barrage of racial epithets and assumptions adds to the dehumanization and

loss faced by Mann as his family as they seek refuge and medical care. In the presence of this natural disaster, Jim Crow grows to full vigor as it crashes through the levees and sweeps away the forty or so years that separate Mann from his ancestral bondage. Martial law brings back the long shadow of slavery and chattel signifiers as Mann is conscripted to work alongside other captured Black men to serve the needs of whites (56). Mann's shunned space, and any protection it could afford him and his family, are as dead as his wife and stillborn child.⁶⁵

Whereas Black men are empowered, if only momentarily, with the agency to match white violence with their own in *Down by the Riverside*, African American women are surprisingly docile, as illustrated by the fading presence of Lulu, pregnant and dying. In Arnold Rampersad's *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1995), the short story has lasting ramifications for Wright's future works depicting women. Consider the following quote:

Lulu's condition and her silence suggest something of the link Wright is later to make between Black women and a mindless sexuality that almost as much as racism is the bane of the Black man's existence...Rather than being merely another instance of the general male chauvinism pervasive in both Afro- and Anglo- American literature, Wright's female portraits are a part of a systematic presentation in the landscape he paints as backdrop for the action of his [presumably male] heroes. (65)

⁶⁵ Mann witnesses the destruction of his home as a torrent of color and motion. Wright describes the scene: "He looked out; his house was about twelve feet above the water. And water was everywhere. Yellow water. Swirling water. Droning water" (56). Mann's home, and presumably the entire shunned space around it, are subject not only to natural disaster but also white invasion. African Americans in the Mississippi Delta have been allocated modest homesteads in the most at-risk zones prone to flooding.

Lulu's quiet figure drifts silently into oblivion, and the only trace of her continuity is evidenced by her husband's ill-fated efforts to protect her and her unborn child. As in *Black Boy*, the religious matriarch offers contrast to Lulu's docility and thunders in the background, her language replete with religious fervor that, according to Wright, serves only the tyrannical desire of whites to maintain their control over Blacks. According to Rampersad, an obvious pattern emerges for Wright's depiction of Black women in that their characters tend to range from feckless insecurity to religious zealotry. Wright's works are therefore infused with an unmistakable, gender-based hierarchy that ironically contrasts with his desire to counterbalance racialized assumption.

As is the case with Wright's other works, the title "Down by the Riverside" connotes an ironic twist. The first stanza illustrates that peace arrives only after the instruments of war have been laid aside:

Ahm gonna lay down mah sword n shiel
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Ahm gonna lay down mah sword n shiel
Down by the riverside
Ah ain gonna study war no more... (63)

For Mann, peace arrives beside a raging river, echoed in the fury of white men who want to kill him for defending his family against an armed white man. With no knowledge of the fate of

other family members, Mann concedes defeat as his family splinters, his shunned home perishes in the flood, and any hope of justice dissolves.

Wright continues to explore the contradictions of masculine agency in “Long Black Song,” in which an African American man named Silas, although proud and strong, is forced to come to terms with the intrusion of white power even in his most intimate spaces. Despite the centrality of male ego, “Long Black Song” is presented primarily through the eyes of Silas’s wife, Sarah, who struggles to save her family despite her own rape, her rapist’s death, and the rage of her doomed husband. After Sarah’s sexual encounter with the white traveling salesman, Silas blames her and beats her from the house, waiting for the white man to return (118-9).⁶⁶

Silas intends to kill the white man who had sex with his wife, but he fails to acknowledge the possibility of her innocence.⁶⁷ Instead, he blames Sarah for violating his trust and views the white man’s invasion of his home in strictly personal terms. Her suffering is of no consequence to Silas, and his death wish is set in motion in retribution for what the white man has taken from him, not from her. In other words, Silas’s view of his home mimics the white patriarchy around his shunned space in that he insists on being its absolute ruler. As his wife and supposed

⁶⁶ Sarah resisted as fully and completely as possible without exposing either herself or her family to mortal danger. The South’s legal system under Jim Crow favored white word over black word, and especially trivialized the testimony of a Black woman. If Sarah rebuked the white salesman too strongly, or physically fought him, the consequences could have been lethal for her and her baby. She did not once offer him consent to have sex with her. Given Silas’s choice to die and fight rather than yield, it is possible that Wright incriminates Sarah’s response as insufficient.

⁶⁷ In “Peace in the War of Desire: Richard Wright’s ‘Long Black Song’” (2013), Trudier Harris argues that “Sarah’s faint protests are a ruse, that, when one considers the descriptions of a horny Sarah before the young white man’s arrival, she merely uses him to quell the sexual urges that neither her absent husband Silas nor her equally absent previous lover Tom is available to satisfy” (189). If Sarah freely consents to the white man’s sexual advances, then she has exercised agency over her own body and is not fully victimized throughout the story.

benefactor of his labor, Sarah is reduced to the status of immoral chattel, a mere vessel incapable of summoning moral courage to fight and fend off white aggression. Therefore, when Richard Yarborough asserts that “Silas is far more mature and self-aware than either Big Boy or Mann,” I disagree (27). Instead, Silas’s maturity—as far as it extends—is merely an expression of his bond with the land he owns, and an unwieldy masculine ego that echoes the assumption of white men and refuses to accept anything less than his transactional right to establish dominion over every square inch of it, including his wife’s body. The white salesman violates Silas’s sense of place and home, and the consequences eventually reduce the entire shunned space, including the space of Silas’s own body, to cinders. As he approaches death, he echoes the vacillating tendencies of Hamlet with an additional layer of futility: “But, Lawd, Ah don wanna be this way! It don mean nothin! Yuh die ef yuh fight! You die ef yuh don fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin...” (125). Ultimately, Silas chooses the ancient prescription of death to prove his unassailable honor. He drives Sarah and his child from their house to exempt her not simply from the carnage soon to unfold, but also from displaying proof of manly honor that white men have attempted to steal from him.

It is a white notion of honor that compels Silas to convert his farmhouse into a doomed fort. The bullets that pierce white skin and stop vicious white hearts do nothing to move Silas an inch toward freedom. The liberty⁶⁸ available to him vanished with the approaching white mob,

68 Wright obsessed over the attainment of freedom even as he cavorted with Jean Paul Sartre, the father of Existentialism, who insisted that choice was innate to the human condition, despite the possibility of deleterious consequences. Wright challenged Sartre by highlighting the limited choices available to African Americans under the grip of Jim Crow. *In Paris Interzone* (1994), James Campbell asserts that black Americans must encounter freedom only within the cynical boundaries of an alternative interpretation of Sartre. Regarding *Native Son*, Campbell writes:

and it spoke through the pleas of his wife who accepted the fact that the family's survival demanded a swift retreat. Sarah begs her husband to join her before the mob descends on the farmstead, but he declares his allegiance to the land and the sweat equity he has poured into it:

“It don't make no difference.” He looked out over the sunfilled fields. “Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git mah farm free...” His voice broke off. His lips moved as though a thousand words were spilling silently out of his mouth, as though he did not have breath enough to give them sound. He looked to the sky, and then back to the dust. “Now, its all gone. *Gone....*” (124)

Family is absent from Silas's proclamation of home, and his lamentation centers on the fate of his farm, not the pending loss of his wife and child. All his personal stamina and loyalty is embedded in the very dirt around him, and his emotional detachment from Sarah allows him to drift inexorably into its dust. He wants to die and become part of his beloved land.

Silas has lived an illusion predicated on the notion that he owns the land that has consumed so much of his life force. The concept of ownership has never been driven from him. Instead, his hard work and physical prowess have spilled over the boundaries of tilling his land, building his house, and owning every soul that journeys onto his property. Anyone who dares to trespass, especially a white man with foul intentions, is destined to face his wrath. Silas fails to see the red arrows of periodic invasion surrounding him. The absolute ownership he claims was long ago ceded to the unseen white hand.

“This is Wright in the act of formulating an ‘existentialism’—without at the time having the word in his vocabulary—of the black American mind. Where Sartre's decision to choose freedom led to freedom itself, for Bigger Thomas, it led to the electric chair” (11-2).

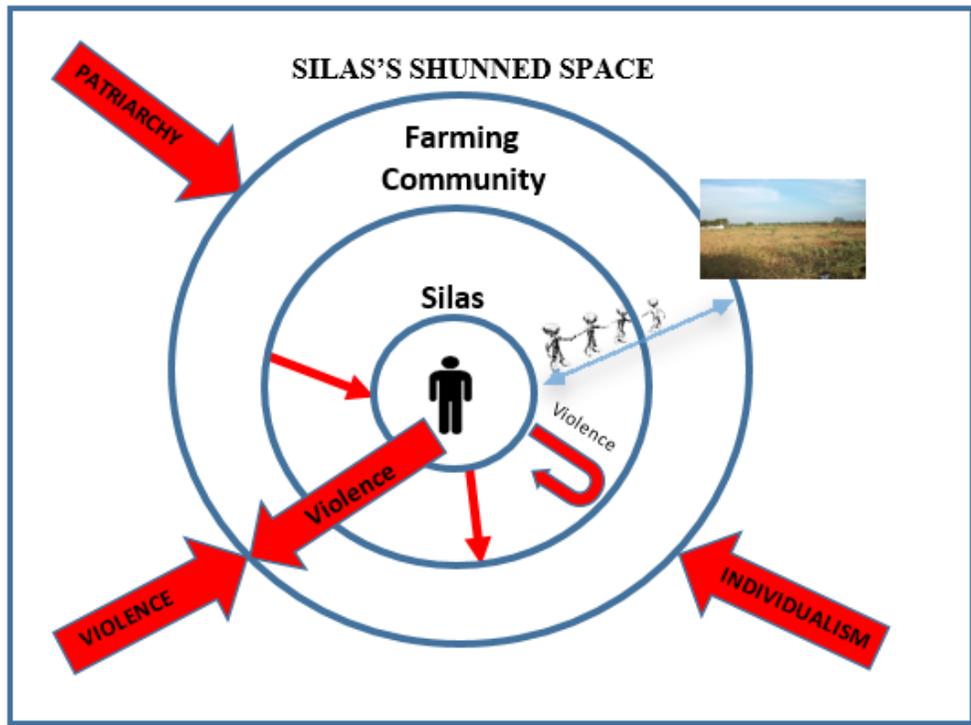


Figure 15 Silas's Extreme Individualism within Shunned Space

As illustrated by the above diagram, the African American community linking Silas to the outside world is merely an echo of its full potential. He is unaware of the powerful influence the larger society has exercised on his own identity through the introduction of patriarchy, violence, and extreme individualism. Silas labors in denial of the prerogatives the white community around him has reserved for itself. Namely, the larger society does not acknowledge Silas's claim to the land as equal to that of a white man. Even his pending "ownership" of the property, forged through nearly ten years of grueling labor, is subjected to repeated invasion. Until Sarah's sexual encounter with the white man, Silas is desensitized to the vulnerability of his own claims to ownership and identity.

As a woman, Sarah was always destined to wander outside the boundary of patriarchal privilege. Wright describes her movement after Silas banishes her: “She circled the house widely, climbing a slope, groping her way, holding the baby high in her arms” (120).⁶⁹ Silas’s reaction mystifies her given the fact that he has treated her relatively well until now. Wright states, “Silas was as good to her as any Black man could be to a Black woman” (121). The racialized language not only implies inferiority in the way African American couples interact, but it also demonstrates that white assumptions of superiority find their way into the thoughts and words of marginalized victims. This shunned space is awash in racialized, patriarchal language sourced in the larger society.⁷⁰

The title “Long Black Song” demonstrates Wright’s insistence that the inequities visited on African American men across generations and centuries have not been forgotten. Silas is therefore an Everyman among Black men in the Jim Crow South in that he owns nothing absolutely. Despite any deed to house and land in his possession, this Everyman lives in the shadow of chattel, no more than a few steps removed from his ancestral bondage. Silas’s anger is as understandable as his desire to kill his persecutors. However, Silas is unique in that he insists on fighting with no clear outcome and with the odds stacked against him. He ignores Sarah’s

⁶⁹ Margaret Walker specifically addresses Wright’s diminutive portrayal of Sarah as a seductress by stating that “Long Black Song” “foreshadows Wright’s negative treatment of all women, and particularly black women. Nothing grieves and upsets him more than the Black woman whose sexual partner is a white man—no matter how accidental or temporary the liaison” (117).

⁷⁰ Ayesha K. Hardison references an ironic twist in Wright’s oeuvre with the creation of a radio show titled “Man of All Work,” which depicts an unemployed Black man named Carl who disguises himself as a Black woman to obtain domestic employment. After only a few hours, he grows entwined in a network of complexities that nearly results in his castration. In an apparent reversal of his patterned depiction of women as inferior vessels, Wright offers an apologetic denouement as Carl declares: “I wouldn’t be caught dead again in a dress” (39-41).

pleas to flee with her before the white posse arrives and, instead, forces her from the house and prepares to kill and die.

In many ways, Silas's intransigence in all its machoistic virtue parallels Wright's determination to sweep aside many of the influences of his troubled relationship with shunned space. He would therefore oppose Carlyle Fielding's opening statement in the Forward to *Black Spirituality & Black Consciousness: Soul Force, Culture, and Freedom in the African American Experience*. Fielding writes: "African Americans have long expressed their yearnings for freedom through cultural creativity and an engagement with the life and power of the spirit" (xi). Such ethereal terms as "spirit" run contrary to Wright's mantra of freedom since religion for him automatically translates into mental slavery. But Wright's disagreement with the notion of enabling shunned space goes further than simply a disagreement with religious faith. Instead, his rejection is framed primarily by what he considers the failures of women like his grandmother and mother to equip young Black men to adequately battle Jim Crow.

Chapter Reflection

Clearly, Wright has invested Bigger, Silas, and Mann with the power of tragic heroes. Each is destined to exercise some degree of freedom in choosing his own death. Each chooses death while giving battle to the racialized systems that have targeted them. Each epitomizes the masculine force available to all Black men and underscores Wright's desire to herald their collective dignity and strength to deconstruct the mindless assumptions of racism. In so doing, Wright has proven that the African American communities that evolve within shunned space can incubate masculine dignity and accomplishment.

Wright views the world through a hyper-masculine lens that is binary to its core. His intellectual approach to problem solving is to take no prisoners, sweep aside any sense of accommodation, and view the world in purely materialistic and rational terms. He sounds the trumpet loudly by consistently calling for reform in America's racialized apartheid and to flatten Jim Crow once and for all.⁷¹ His fiction freely confesses the profligacy of violence in shunned space, yet he avoids the notion that such spaces originate their own framework of cultural productivity. Wright held allegiance to the idea of freedom, mental and physical, for African Americans. Yet, he had little appreciation for their cultural achievements while in bondage to white interests, and he considered black music, religion, and other arts to be fiat agents that imposed white will on black bodies. Despite his powerful indictments of Western ideology as the cauldron and incubator of racialized systems, Wright freely acknowledged that he was indeed a Westerner who considered native African traditions as void of accomplishment. This view is contrary to the positions of literary analysts such as Mercer Cook, who stated, "The African wanted the progress [of the West], but he also wanted to retain the more valid, human aspects of his own culture" (28). These "human aspects" of African American culture have been largely cut from Wright's dialog in *Black Boy*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and *Native Son*. Nevertheless, Wright's political intent to achieve freedom from Jim Crow remained in full force throughout his life, and his powerful memoir and fiction overwhelmed the fragile minds arrayed to protect the nation's racialized systems. His writings produced thunder loud enough to attract J. Edgar Hoover's FBI to investigate him for supposed "un-American activities." They shadowed him for

⁷¹ Consider the overtly political leanings of his novel titled *White Man, Listen!* (1957). Even the title deploys an injunction against racism.

the rest of his life. Although some analysts recoil when confronted with Wright's shortcomings, it is edifying to remember that his life, like all others, was a cultural intersection of its time and place. It is entirely possible that the currents of history and an inspiration to holistically view his childhood spaces would have lifted Wright to more progressive stances concerning community, gender and religion, if only he had not passed so quickly from the stage.

CHAPTER 4: WILLIAM FAULKNER

Overview

William Faulkner was an observer of shunned space, not a participant, and I argue that this fact both limits and expands his insight into these venues. In September 1956, Faulkner made a grand confession in a letter to *Ebony* titled “A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race”⁷² in which he declared the limitations of white, privileged writers in attempting to comprehend the lives and vision of marginalized communities. Faulkner states: “It is easy enough to say glibly, ‘If I were a Negro, I would do this or that.’ But a white man can only imagine himself for a moment a Negro; he cannot be that man of another race and griefs and problems” (110). Faulkner’s outsider status minimizes the currency of any contrived, first-person attempt to conjure a full rendering of the African American experience in shunned space. At first glance, this seems to contradict Faulkner’s metanarrative of writing vivid portrayals of African American life throughout Mississippi during Jim Crow. That is, the authentic power of expressing what one sees on a daily basis and feels in his or her gut as a result of direct participation in a marginalized community triumphs over even the most compassionate and insightful outsider’s viewpoint.⁷³ Nevertheless, the circles of Faulkner’s life often intersected

⁷² The original title was “If I Were a Negro” (1956). Faulkner’s decision to change the title underscores his ambivalence to represent fully the lives of African Americans in shunned spaces.

⁷³ Faulkner descends from a long line of bankers, military officers, and businessmen.

shunned spaces reserved for many of Mississippi's most impoverished African Americans, especially Caroline "Mammy" Barr.⁷⁴

Barr's influence on Faulkner extends back to his early childhood, and he credits her as one of his two mothers. "In Praise of the Black Mother; An Unpublished Faulkner Letter on 'Mammy' Caroline Barr," Bart H. Welling describes the monumental role Barr played in Faulkner's formative years. He writes:

His mammy by inheritance, Caroline Barr—a tiny, quick-tempered, stubborn woman who gave him the gift of environmental literacy and responsibility, schooled him in his family and the art of storytelling and kept nudging or shoving him back onto the straight and narrow until the end of her almost one hundred years of life—was black... To the curious duality of his upbringing he owed a less obvious but equally powerful debt—this one as a novelist, and especially as one whose works resonate more and more in an age of rapidly blurring cultural boundaries. (541)

In other words, Barr brought shunned space with her, inside her, and shared the golden nuggets of wisdom her own childhood spaces taught her to Faulkner. In turn, the young novelist invested his work with Barr's palpable influence.

Although his privileged lens allowed him to focus on bits and pieces of Black lives and their communities swirling around him, Faulkner was a master at assembling the bigger picture

⁷⁴ Mammy Caroline Barr is perhaps the greatest example of how Faulkner's life intersected with a former resident of shunned space. He delivered her eulogy with unmistakable tenderness and respect: "I saw fidelity to a family which was not hers," he wrote, "devotion and love for people she had not borne" (117). Source: "Funeral Sermon for Mammy Caroline Barr" (February, 1940).

from a torrent of smaller pieces. Moreover, even when all the pieces fit together like an elaborate jigsaw puzzle, Faulkner's image of shunned spaces is blurred around the edges. As a result, he never acquired the resolution found in the narratives of writers such as Ward and Wright, whose firsthand accounts have generated their own authenticity. In this chapter, I use Shunned Space Theory to discuss three of Faulkner's novels: *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *The Reivers* (1962). Within *Go Down, Moses*, I focus primarily on the introduction titled "Was," which I feel deserves more attention than literary analysts have given thus far, even though it explores themes such as miscegenation, the trickster motif, and portability between shunned spaces. *Intruder in the Dust* illuminates the unbendable dignity of Lucas Beauchamp, a Black man falsely accused of murder, who refuses to buckle to Jim Crow laws and customs. Instead, he lives on a ten-acre plot in the center of the white Beauchamp Plantation. Lucas Beauchamp's homestead is separate from larger shunned spaces near Jefferson, where he must travel to attend Church and mingle with other African Americans. Finally, I explore Faulkner's Pulitzer Prizewinning novel, *The Reivers*, which has been repeatedly castigated by critics for its overtly conciliatory attitude toward Jefferson's racialized society near the beginning of the 20th Century. However, I contend that Ned Beauchamp, the African American protagonist who eventually wins a horse race by stealth, offers the power of a trickster, a primary survival strategy in shunned space, to turn the tables on white privilege. Next, I argue that Ned makes a decision to stay in place not only to assuage the area's white population, but because he, like many other residents of shunned space, including Jesmyn Ward, feels a strong pull toward home. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of Caroline Barr, Faulkner's "Mammy," who does not fit the stereotypical profile. Instead, she is, in many ways, the moral and spiritual center of the

Faulkner household. Her agency is illustrated by the difficulty she overcomes to visit her family in their shunned space near Sardis. Although Barr has no formal education, she is a brilliant storyteller who regales young William Faulkner with many tales that later influence his fiction.

Figure 16 below lists the selected shunned spaces of Faulkner’s writings examined in this chapter.⁷⁵ All of these spaces are within the boundaries of Yoknapatawpha, a mythical county Faulkner has created to approximate his own ancestral record in Lafayette County, Mississippi. I will also allude to *intersectional spaces*, such as Faulkner’s homestead of Rowen Oak, in which Blacks and whites lived together as “family”:

	Timeline	Shunned Space	Location	Notes
1	Just before Civil War	Cabins of Enslaved Persons	McCaslin Plantation	This was Tomey’s Turl’s original address in “Was.”
2	Just before Civil War	Cabins of Enslaved Persons	Beauchamp Plantation	Teenie’s address in “Was.”
3	Early 20 th Century	Cabin on 10 acres, orphaned from larger shunned space	Beauchamp Plantation	Lucas Beauchamp’s address in <i>Intruder in the Dust</i> . A satellite to the primary shunned spaces in around Jefferson
4	Early 20 th Century	Collection of cabins	Near and within Jefferson	Shunned spaces of Ned McCaslin in <i>The Reivers</i> .

Figure 16 Selected Shunned Spaces in Faulkner’s Fiction

⁷⁵ Unfortunately, Faulkner does not discuss Barr’s shunned spaces from which she derives her stories. He does not directly credit her influence on his writing, although some scholars argue otherwise.

Although Faulkner’s fiction highlights the importance of family, a larger narrative quickly emerges as Faulkner’s writings materialize along land and lineage, privileged and shunned, and move into the darker realms of racism, misogyny, greed, and murder. Shifts in the resulting political landscape within and among patriarchies determine how land is ceded among Blacks and whites, including the creation of shunned space. All are predicated on the lie of racial purity, that Blacks and whites must be allocated separate spaces in order to minimize interaction between the races and to reserve the best resources for white consumption.

Shunned Space in *Go Down, Moses*

Figure 17 illustrates the complex overlay of white and black bloodlines, attesting to the powerful contradiction they pose to the white South’s myth of racial purity:

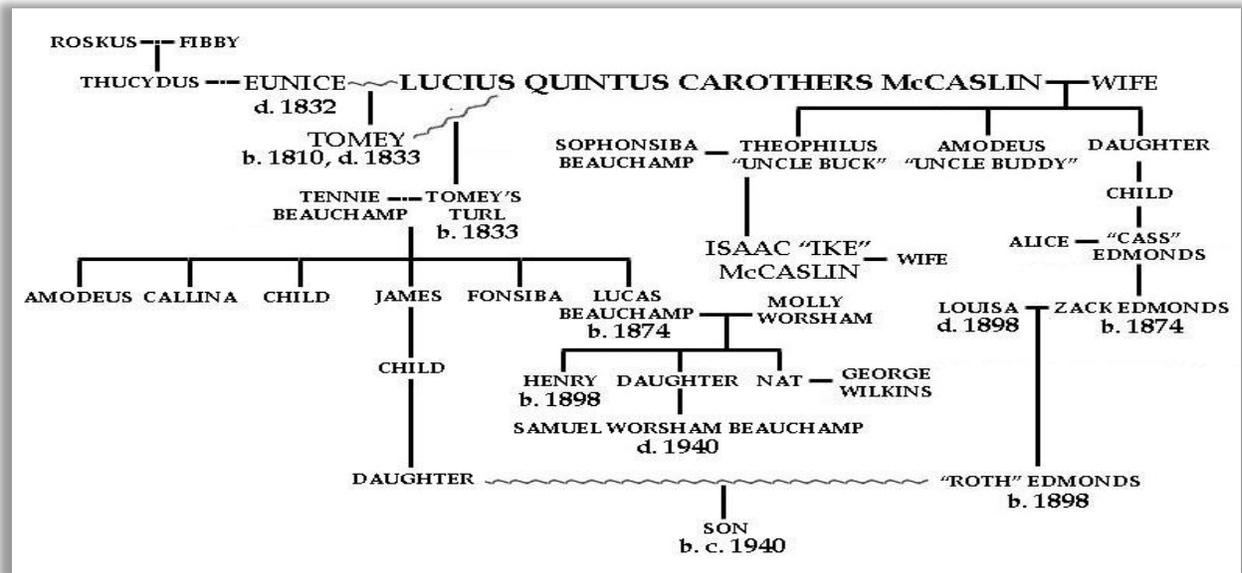


Figure 17 Lineage of Primary Characters in *Go Down, Moses*⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Source:

https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS810US810&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=V48HXeKxI4K4sgWl-

Interracial characters such as Tomey's Turl are shown as the children of white masters and enslaved women. Faulkner's honest portrayal of sexual unions between whites and blacks (often involving rape) clouds many of the racialized assumptions held by the South's aristocracy given that a considerable number of children on plantations result from the commodification of Black women. Faulkner's novels clearly illustrate miscegenation as endemic to an entrenched, white patriarchy whose laws forbade interracial sexual unions. Additionally, such unions often result from rape and further underscore how fragile a membrane separates shunned space from the sexual violence of the white patriarchy, under whose dominion Black women occupied the lowest rung of social empowerment.

Faulkner describes an example of racialized, sexual exploitation and its relationship to feminine disempowerment. He relates how sixteen-year-old Isaac McCaslin makes a stunning discovery when combing through family records:

As a boy of sixteen, he wonders, as he reads through the old plantation ledgers of his family, why the bondwoman Eunice had committed suicide by walking into the creek one Christmas day. He finds the answer by putting together what is told and not told in the records: that Eunice came to recognize the agonizing fact that her daughter by her master (although passing for the daughter of her husband, Thucydus and recorded as such), was unwittingly carrying the child of her own father and master, Lucius McCaslin. The young girl had been called into the old

[5j4Cg&q=william+Faulkner+ned+mccaslin+lineage+chart&oq=william+Faulkner+ned+mccaslin+lineage+chart&gs_l=img.3...196194.201585..202016...6.0..0.278.1471.17j1j1.....0....1..gws-wiz-img.P17RltW7_ZQ#imgrc=KV3EgSEjDAfB-M:](#)

master's house to perform house work, then raped by him who knew in the moment of his incestuous act he would become both father and grandfather to the child she bore, Tomey's Turl. (60)

Despite her prominence on the family tree (see Figure 17), Eunice could not prevent the incestuous union. Instead, the only agency she could muster was to disrupt the family's Christmas by killing herself on December 25, 1832. Eunice's death underscores the fact that the violence committed against the residents of shunned space sometimes boomeranged against white elites as well, who often buckled under the weight of their own racialized prescriptions.

Furthermore, the marginalized women who inhabited Faulkner's depictions of shunned space were often tied to domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning for whites. Although few might label Faulkner as an ardent feminist, especially regarding Black women, his narratives are frequently defined as much by what they imply as what they state outright. The process of uncovering these "hidden meanings" reveals a gold mine of insights into Faulkner's perception of women.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, some critics discredit Faulkner as an ineffective purveyor of feminine empowerment. For example, Irving Malin launches into a scathing summary of Faulkner's attitude toward women in *William Faulkner: An Interpretation* (1957):

Faulkner's women are, for the most part, stereotypes who live in a world of their own. One feels that they are elusive because Faulkner cannot adequately describe their feelings or see them as well-rounded individuals. I will try to indicate that his women fall into two large groupings: the sexual and the asexual. (31)

⁷⁷ As we will see throughout this chapter, Caroline "Mammy" Barr is an excellent example of Faulkner's exploration into the agency of Black women.

Malin places Faulkner's approach to women in the same category as other notable writers, including Mark Twain and James Fenimore Cooper. From the perspective of the Jim Crow South, the role of women is heavily prescribed and they remain framed as subordinate individuals who exist to serve the interests of white patriarchs. In particular, the Black women who reside in shunned space are vulnerable to the violent whims of white men. Hence, although the genealogy diagrams associated with works such as *Go Down, Moses* and *The Reivers* appear static at first glance, the prominence of miscegenation indicates the sexual violence imposed on Black females in shunned space. A genealogy chart therefore represents an intergenerational war zone for marginalized, sexual females.

Black males fare little better in resisting the fragmentation associated with periodic invasion during both the Jim Crow era and American Slavery. It is their wives who are commodified by white men, and their power to resist such oppression is exercised only at considerable risk to themselves, and by extension, their families. Hence, Tomy's Turl's decision to escape the invisible boundaries imposed on him at the McCaslin shunned space is rendered even more remarkable by its success. I argue that Tomy's Turl's frequent visits to Teenie's cabin at the Beauchamp Plantation reflect more than a need for frequent sexual intercourse, or even a strong desire to engage her company, but a need to present the white men at her plantation the least opportunity to sexually exploit her. Tomy's Turl is literally protecting his family from external invasion by the larger society. Obviously, he is invested with uncommon agency rarely granted to enslaved persons in lieu of his genetic ties to whites. Tomy's Turl's place on the genealogy chart therefore disrupts not only any presumed category of racial purity staked out both by the McCaslins and the Beauchamps, it also confounds any attempt by his "master" to

totally otherize and commodify him. The result is the best possible outcome that a marginalized man of mixed race could hope for—the power to exploit genealogical confusion in a racialized society that is equally fixated on ancestry and color. Tomey’s Turl’s portability across shunned space is an anomaly that adds a unique twist to Faulkner’s narratives.

Despite his sensitivity to miscegenation and the disempowerment of Black women, Faulkner experiences the South in wildly differing ways from either Wright or Ward. His description of shunned spaces and their residents is also distinct. For Faulkner, the dilapidated plantations dotting the sweltering landscape of Northern Mississippi bear witness to the old stories he heard from uncles and grandparents about a glorious, Confederate past. His family, although defeated during the Civil War a couple of generations before him, views their connection to the land as dissoluble. Faulkner even posits his own version of “White Man’s Burden” in his 1955 “Address to the Southern Historical Association”:

We, the western white man who does believe that there exists an individual freedom above and beyond this mere equality of slavery [Communism], must teach the nonwhite peoples this while there is yet a little time left... We, America, have the best chance to do this because we can do it here, at home, without needing to send costly freedom expeditions into alien and inimical places already convinced that there is no such thing as freedom and liberty and equality in peace for all people, or we would practice it at home. (*Essays*, Faulkner, 148-9)

Faulkner’s speech is rife with racialized language, and ironic in that it declares that whites must instill the knowledge of individual human freedom for all nonwhites, even though many white Americans strongly resist any such egalitarian notions for African Americans and other

minorities. Faulkner insists that “liberty and equality” will result in a successful model to be followed across the globe by de-marginalizing the residents of shunned space and breaking down political and economic barriers that enforce the scarcity in such spaces.

The speech is a strange departure from William Faulkner’s usual decorum, and I argue that he cannot be broad stroked as a racist and sent to the ash heap of history. His novels and other speeches clearly contradict the racist sentiments raised in the Address to the Southern Historical Association. Even within the same speech, Faulkner writes:

It is our white man’s shame that in our present southern economy, the Negro must not have economic equality; our double shame that we fear giving him more social equality will jeopardize his present economic status; our triple shame that even then, to justify ourselves, we must becloud the issue with the purity of white blood... (*Essays* 150)

The above quote animates many of the African American characters in Faulkner’s novels, and accounts for both the individual agency granted to them as well as the material obstacles placed in their way by Jim Crow limitations.

Although many readers and literary analysts may view Faulkner as the panacea to white racism in the Jim Crow South, he is clearly conflicted over the role of Blacks in American society. I contend that his contrapuntal attitude toward race emerges from an incomplete understanding of shunned spaces and the cultural accomplishments they herald. In other words, by negotiating simultaneously with scarcity and political exclusion, Black Americans not only prove themselves equal to the task of American citizenship, but of mentoring the larger, mostly white society about a myriad of accomplishments innate to shunned space. In Faulkner’s fiction,

the residents of shunned space illustrate their cultural accomplishment by resisting racialized oppression and by frequently turning the tables on their oppressors.

Erskine Peters, author of *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha World and Black Being* (1983), addresses the fact that marginalized residents are fully aware of their oppressors' motives. He writes:

What is apparent in these particular characters, moreover, is that Faulkner grants them a high sense of awareness of their relationship to the culture which they know is juggling them. They are not as submissive in their roles as some critics have held. One might say that while they are biding their time and eking out the best existence that they can for the moment, they are also maneuvering whenever possible to gain control over their immediate situations. (189)

Peters rejects the notion that shunned space residents are childlike and pliable to white demands. It is important to note that "biding their time" is a luxury reserved for whites. Hence, African Americans remain vigilant for any option that presents itself to improve their lot. They are fully aware that they are confronted with a monolithic, racialized system that perennially imposes disadvantages on them as individuals and their communities. Blacks also comprehend the origin of such thinking, and it has everything to do with the force that holds together the monolithic structures of elite white power.

Additionally, the South has a unique culture that regards conformity as a paramount virtue, and Faulkner himself is a product of this way of thinking. In turn, this conformity scaffolds a common domain of opinions into a formidable political apparatus that brokers no differences. The results of such thinking tend to be two-fold: on one hand, those who adhere to

its culturally acceptable belief structures and behaviors are rewarded with a nearly universal comradery, whereas anyone who promotes or represents diversity is otherized. Hence, shunned space is a natural byproduct or outgrowth from the Southern way of thinking. In their introduction to *Faulkner and the Ecology of the South: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* (2003), Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie address the Southern penchant for rewarding commonality and rejecting diversity:

The ecology of the South is thus characterized by what Faulkner termed a persistent and ‘common acceptance of the world, a common view of life, and a common morality.’ The sense of commonality is fertile ground for conflict, when one person’s will, acting on something perhaps far deeper than community standards or practices, comes up against an orthodox or entrenched view held in common and enforced universally. (xiii)

During the Jim Crow period of racialized segregation and shunning, when Faulkner completed most of his fiction, “entrenched views” included religious, racial, and gender-based assumptions that were upheld by violence whenever such principles were threatened.⁷⁸

The Shunned Spaces of *Go Down, Moses*

Violence often eviscerated the human realm and the natural world, as illustrated in “Bear” from *Go Down, Moses*. Faulkner frequently references nature symbolically, especially as he describes its ongoing evisceration. Consider the following scene from “Bear” in which a boy

⁷⁸ Faulkner presents Lucas Beauchamp, an African American who demands respect even from whites, as an example of an individual who steps outside the bounds of socially acceptable behavior in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). Eventually, the town’s white majority galvanizes against him and he is falsely accused of killing a white man.

participates in a hunt for Old Ben, an enormous bear who perennially evades capture. Faulkner writes:

[The bear] loomed and towered in [the boy's] dreams before he even saw unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big, too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it; too big for the very country which was its constricting scope. It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness... (184-5)

Clearly, the bear has transcended into something even larger. Old Ben has become the natural world under assault, and the boy bears witness to humanity's suicidal march toward ecocide. As usual, the destruction of the land impacts marginalized communities far more than whites, because the risk of famine or violence affects them most strongly. Hence, shunned spaces are often the first human outposts to quiver at the approach of natural disaster, whether human induced or purely natural in origin.

Go Down, Moses traces the history and lineage of many characters found throughout Faulkner's fiction and details the first episode of miscegenation in the McCaslin and Beauchamp families. Each family eventually bifurcates into Black and White branches, and the South's racialized environment complicates life for both branches over several generations. *Go Down, Moses* is a series of seven short stories, including "Was," written as either individual chapters in a single book or as novellas that strongly interrelate and could easily blend together into a single

novel. I focus on “Was,” the first novella, to extrapolate how shunned space is created through otherization and subsequently maintained through law and custom, exercised primarily against Black men, as they struggle both to accommodate and resist the forces of slavery and Jim Crow.

Additionally, “Was” introduces *Go Down, Moses* as a pivotal work in the chronicles of environmental literature, an idea clearly worth exploring given the South’s historical attachment to the natural world. I argue this attachment leads simultaneously to an appreciation of the pristine world and a desire to control or consume it. The dominant culture’s pursuit of exclusive privilege leads to the sidelining of those deemed as “other” such that any desired resources continue to flow into white hands.

Despite the prevalence of racial epithets throughout *Go Down, Moses*,⁷⁹ the collection is a stinging indictment of the institution of American slavery.⁸⁰ The evolution of shunned space is a process that hinges on dehumanization and otherizing whole groups of people. Racial epithets are deployed to codify this dehumanization, and to reinforce a sense of superiority for members of the larger society. The prevalence of the word “Nigger” in *Go Down, Moses* indicates that racial epithets, in addition to the threat of continual violence, political exclusion, and periodic invasion, are continually used to reinforce the notion of Black inferiority, and to justify the allocation of inferior resources to marginalized human beings. Wherever shunned spaces exist, they are accompanied by the introduction of such epithets and universal identifiers employed to denigrate the marginalized communities housed within these venues. The “N-word” is therefore

⁷⁹ Some variant of the word “Nigger” appears 87 times in the book.

⁸⁰ Despite the reader’s discomfort when encountering a barrage of racial epithets, Faulkner’s goal is certainly not to normalize the word, but to render the raw, authentic racism that produced its nearly ubiquitous usage during American Slavery and Jim Crow.

an invention of whites who seek to maintain an asymmetrical flow of resources that benefits them.

In *William Faulkner: the Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), Cleanth Brooks answers a vital question about whether humor diffuses the horror of slavery in *Go Down, Moses* when he states:

Does [Faulkner] treat the case of Tomey's Turl humorously in order to suggest that slave-hunting in the South was not really cruel and had its lighter moments? Hardly. The judgment passed upon slavery generally in *Go Down, Moses* is a withering one. What Faulkner is doing is giving human depth to what is too often treated as melodramatic abstraction, and this process points two ways: if, by 'humanizing' slavery, he seems to make it more tolerable, the same process makes it the more terrible and anguishing. (Brooks 248)

In other words, idealizing the anguish of slavery distills every other element of an enslaved person's potential accomplishment or livelihood into monolithic grief. Cleanth Brooks suggests that it is literally dehumanizing to present a linear narrative about enslaved people, converting them into vessels fit only for pity. Tomey's Turl therefore embodies a resourceful human being who relishes his romantic relationship with Tennie and the humor of his own escapades. As a trickster, he also reflects the fact that shunned spaces, whether they include rows of cabins reserved for enslaved human beings or sharecropper shanties assigned to African Americans during Jim Crow peonage, or contemporary communities inhabited by marginalized communities, produce their own geniuses who effectively counteract the extreme limitations (movement, resources, violence) imposed on them and their communities. As shown in Figure 18, Tomey's Turl's new agency of portability between the McCaslin and Beauchamp plantations

creates a complicated character diagram. It also reveals the limitations of shunned space to restrict the movement of marginalized residents.

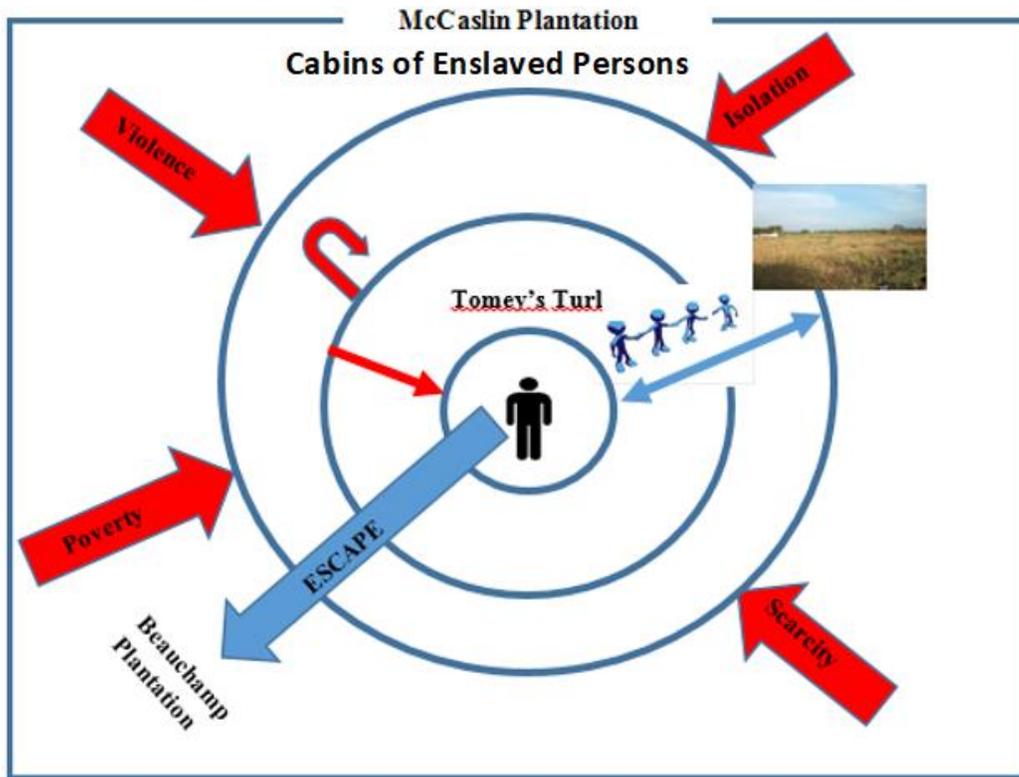


Figure 18 Tomey's Turl's Diagram

In “‘Being Uncle Remus’: The Folk Uncanny and the Remus/Rabbit Archetype in Faulkner’s ‘Was’ and *The Reivers*” (2015), Chad Jewett discusses Tomey’s Turl’s role as a trickster in *Go Down, Moses*. He writes:

While the literal voices of narrative is left in the hands of white characters like Cass Edmonds in “Was” and Lucius Priest in *The Reivers*, the role of expressing the New South’s racial turbulence is left to Black characters like Tomey’s Turl and Ned McCaslin. Like Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit in Joel Chandler Harris

plantation stories, to which both Turl and Ned share a similarity, both of significance and depiction, these characters offer counter-narratives of disruption and expressions of black striving and resistance. (370)

As evidenced by this passage, Faulkner recognized the significance of trickster imagery found throughout the South's African American shunned spaces as far more than archetypes of humor. Although Tomey's Turl is unvoiced throughout "Was," his machinations to achieve his personal goal of joining Teenie speaks volumes about his ability to invert the perceptions of his white pursuers. That is, the white patriarchs are repeatedly confounded in their efforts to find and contain him. Like the stereotypical trickster, Tomey's Turl performs a spatialized bait and switch that leaves the white men in the humiliating position of repeatedly taking the wrong path.⁸¹

As illustrated in Figure 18, Tomey's Turl, an enslaved, mixed-race man on the McCaslin Plantation, flaunts his ability to escape to the nearby Beauchamp Plantation, where Tennie, his love interest, waits for him in her cabin (5). McCaslin and Beauchamp eventually reach a solution concerning the fate of both Tomey's Turl and Tennie over a series of card games (28-9).⁸² As a result, McCaslin gained ownership over Tennie, and a cancelation of the debt he owed Beauchamp. McCaslin summarizes the perspective of each white man: "So what it comes down to is, I either got to give a nigger away, or risk buying one that you done already admitted you can't keep at home" (28). From a superficial perspective, the game is played such that agency

⁸¹ Later in this chapter, we will see how Ned Beauchamp fulfills a similar trickster role in *The Reivers*.

⁸² The act of transferring ownership of two human beings between plantations is cruel for contemporary readers. Clearly, Faulkner seeks to accomplish more than a few laughs in these paragraphs as he not only exposes the cruel side of chattel slavery, but also the resolve of enslaved people to negotiate for their own agency.

vanishes for both Tennie and Tomey's Turl, who, at first glance, appear to be thoroughly commodified in the scene. From the perspective of the young, Black couple, the entire story boils down to determining which shunned space they will occupy together and maneuvering to protect their evolving relationship with each other. That is, they effectively employ the trickster strategy to build a life together.

However, a question looms over the notion of an enslaved man exercising so much agency within the confines of a shunned space whose inhabitants are regarded by their white owners as chattel. As a body, Tomey's Turl is reduced to a machine of labor. As a mind, he is masked by a racialized system that refuses to grant him equality with whites. As a citizen, he is nonexistent within a society that refuses to grant him any more agency than that allocated to a farm animal or even a piece of furniture. Given that slavery is maintained by violence, how does Tomey's Turl avoid brutal beatings, dismemberment, or even death when flaunting his ability to escape on a whim, thereby neutralizing the institutional claims that represent him as a mindless tool of labor? The institution of slavery removes the liberty of enslaved individuals to travel where they choose. Therefore, each time Tomey's Turl escapes without fear, he neuters some portion of his white master's claim to dominion over him. Hence, either the social dynamics within the McCaslin Plantation operate such that Tomey's Turl is granted agency vis-à-vis his direct lineage from the patriarch, or he has become an object of sport, a piece of McCaslin chattel that must be hunted on a regular basis. Or, thirdly, Tomey's Turl has negotiated his agency over a period of years, thereby insulating himself from consequences visited on any other enslaved person who attempted to display such agency. Fourthly, as many scholars argue, a childlike

quality saturates the narrative in “Was” to implicate both the intellectual and moral duplicity of slavery and also, I argue, the segregation of enslaved people into shunned spaces.

In “Elements of the Carnavalesque in Faulkner’s ‘Was,’ Sandra Lee Kleppe offers a possible solution to why Tomey’s Turl has received so much agency. She writes:

The carnivalesque hunt in ‘Was’ is a sharp parody of the ritual hunt in ‘The Old People,’ where Isaac earns the status of a hunter in the sacred order of the wilderness. Parody, Bakhtin claims, has a natural affinity with carnival as a non-official practice. One of the most important functions of parody, he suggests, is to break down ‘the power of myth over language’ found in the serious genres (*Problems*, p. 60) This epic vision of a sacred primal order is consistently parodied by the carnival events in ‘Was.’ (442)

Of course, the hunt is at least partly orchestrated by Tomey’s Turl to assist Sophonsiba’s efforts to trap Buck into marriage, while also ensuring that he and Teenie remain together. I contend that the carnival disorients both patriarchs such that, by the time events settle back down to normal, the incentive to brutalize the inhabitants of both shunned spaces (to prevent enslaved persons from attempting future escape) is removed. Tomey’s Turl and Teenie can then establish a life together without fear of being separated in the foreseeable future. I therefore agree with Sandra Lee Kleppe that the carnival serves several purposes, not least of which is to persuade the white masters to accept the new status quo without “punishing” the enslaved people for manipulating whites. Nevertheless, even the distraction provided by a circus of blunders will not work if Tomey’s Turl’s mostly quiet and unseen partner, Teenie, does not work with him. Throughout

this scene, a member of a shunned space has outwitted his white masters and illustrated that cunning resolve is a cultural innovation that saves families and entire communities.

Finally, Tomey's Turl's ability to escape the McCaslin Plantation and meet Tennie at will displays agency that the white owners feel they must confront. In other words, Tomey's Turl is no longer effectively assigned to his shunned space, which challenges the authority of the white patriarchs. Tomey's Turl's resistance enables him to at least partly determine his own future by refusing any space that does not include Tennie. Even the manner in which the cards have been dealt is drawn into question. Faulkner describes McCaslin's suspicion:

‘Who dealt these cards, Amodeus?’ Only he didn't wait to be answered. He reached out and tilted the lamp-shade, the light moving up Tomey's Turl's arms that were supposed to be black but were not quite white, up his Sunday shirt that was supposed to be white but was not quite either, that he put on every time he ran away just as Uncle Buck put on the necktie each time he went to bring him back... (29)⁸³

Whether Tomey's Turl is complicit or not in stacking the deck, it is clear that McCaslin views him as an uncontrollable disruptor without any real connection to place.⁸⁴ However, as evidenced by later novellas in *Go Down, Moses*, Tomey's Turl and his descendants grow deep roots in the

⁸³ In “Faulknerian Sleight of Hand: The Poker Game in ‘Was,’” Robert Merrill identifies that two games may have been played in this scene (Merrill 31).

⁸⁴ The fact that Tennie is described only in proximity to Tomey Turl's affection for her reinforces the level of exclusion visited on Black women during American Slavery.

land in and around the McCaslin and Beauchamp plantations, and the shunned spaces allocated to them quickly sprout stories filled with angst, hope, and blood. Although “Was” is only twenty-eight pages long, it successfully introduces the friction forced on Yoknapatawpha’s white and Black inhabitants by endemic racism.⁸⁵ The rest of *Go Down, Moses* amplifies the yearning for freedom among shunned space residents with a powerful sense of dignity.

In “*Go Down, Moses* and the Discourse of Environmentalism” (1996), Judith Bryant Wittenberg underscores how *Go Down, Moses* reflects attitudes leading to the early environmental movement. She writes:

Faulkner’s compelling depiction in *Go Down, Moses* of various attitudes toward the Mississippi landscape and its function as a background for a series of morally problematic and frequently destructive human relationships not only gives the work a breadth and resonance found only in a handful of his greatest fictions, it also connects the novel with a significant aspect of the cultural context, the growing discussion of environmentalism and ecology that was taking place during the 1930s and the 1940s... (52)

The discussion of this “cultural context” begins in a microcosm of Northern Mississippi, where Faulkner and his family were at liberty to roam and hunt without interference.

The attitude of white landowners, especially slaveowners, toward the landscape significantly impacts not only the shunned spaces inhabited by enslaved Blacks, but also

⁸⁵ In Part 1 of “Was,” punctuation is absent between paragraphs. It is as though Faulkner presents this small division of the narrative as the inchoate mass of ancestral memory that originates his Yoknapatawpha saga. Each paragraph seems to collide into the next; and each terminates without appropriate denouement. In Part 2 and afterward, standard punctuation appears.

resonates into our own time and affects contemporary shunned spaces. First, the overwhelming majority of desirable land is reserved for white use, leaving marginalized communities to cope with landscape that is more difficult to farm or less desirable to live on. Secondly, white settlement typically involves the cutting of whole forests, which invariably impacts any wildlife inhabiting the biosphere, sometimes depopulating whole species upon which marginalized communities depend for their food stores. Thirdly, environmental poisons from the larger society are frequently discarded close to shunned spaces in a manner that compromises human health and well-being. Fourthly, the pristine land that remains is commodified as hunting and fishing venues reserved primarily for whites. In all four cases, shunned spaces are directly impacted by the deleterious sweep of white influence over the landscape.

For Southern whites living throughout Mississippi, especially white men, nature simultaneously was a place to escape, admire, bond with, and control during this period. With African American men, however, pastoral images of nature unaccompanied by struggle were elusive. The Southern landscape was both life-affirming and life-taking. A beautiful oak was not simply a tree when loved ones were periodically lynched on its thick branches. Hence, Blacks must undergo the extra step of re-appropriating the lands on which they or their ancestors were enslaved and forced to sharecrop before they could feel an uninhibited bond with the landscape in the same way as whites. This is especially the case for millions of Blacks from shunned space, who must continually negotiate with their environment for basic sustenance. For many marginalized inhabitants of Southern shunned space, nature is too important and restraining to view as mere recreation.

Faulkner's representation of African Americans and the spaces they inhabit undergoes significant evolution over the course of his writing career. Erskine Peters addresses how Faulkner depicts African Americans in his early works such as *Soldiers' Pay* (1926). According to Peters, "The Black community is very much like the chorus in the Greek drama, although it appears unaware that it is playing a role of any significance" (Peters 49). Of course, the assumption that African Americans have no collective awareness flies in the face of the nascent Civil Rights Movement, orchestrated in large part by African Americans. Peters states that characters such as Ned McCaslin in *The Reivers* are far more culturally aware than Faulkner's earlier Black characters.

I assert that, in addition to engineering the best possible control of the environment within their shunned space, these characters work best when in concert with other inhabitants of shunned space in well-established communities. Of course, this reasoning goes to the heart of Shunned Space Theory, which posits that Black communities mature within shunned space via a shared sense of community. Faulkner produces a similar depiction of the growing Black awareness of their originating communities when exploring *Go Down, Moses* and, as we will see later in this chapter, in *Intruder in the Dust*.

One of the most powerfully insightful passages from *Go Down, Moses* conveys Faulkner's description of the overlay of space, racism and ecocide rivaled by few other authors. He writes:

This Delta, he thought: This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derived in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and Black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive,

where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth...No wonder the ruined world I used to know don't cry for retribution! He thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge. (346-7)

Ecological devastation occurs throughout the Delta as the stasis of flood and swamps is vanquished for short-term economic gain. In the process, racism amplifies the pyrrhic effect on African Americans by warping shunned spaces and their capacity to resist fragmentation and environmental catastrophes such as floods.⁸⁶

If community cannot root itself inside the shunned space with the necessary resources to shield residents from fragmentation, the scarcity becomes unmanageable and the community perishes. Without community, the mitochondrial nature of shunned space grinds to a halt, and the ability to mitigate dehumanization with cultural productivity vanishes. The larger society often wreaks havoc on the environment within or near the boundaries of shunned spaces by overturning centuries of negotiation between marginalized residents and the limitations imposed on them. Hence, environmental racism is suicidal, destroying shunned space communities and obliterating (sometimes forever) the organic vitality of such venues.

⁸⁶ Although both Blacks and whites inhabit communities in the Mississippi Delta, the color line is solidly defined by the South's racialized systems. Hence, Black communities are physically separated from white communities, with many, if not all, of the African American venues meeting the criteria for shunned space. During natural disasters, such as the 1927 flood detailed by both Wright and Faulkner, relief from the larger society is supplied most readily to meet the needs of white communities. I therefore contend that the entire Mississippi Delta is pockmarked by shunned space.

Go Down, Moses is intertextually linked to *Absalom! Absalom!* regarding the environmental impact of the colonizing patriarchs. Many works of literature describe patriarchy's destructive impact on the natural world, and few are more explicit than *Absalom! Absalom!* As Ike McCaslin and his entourage of family, enslaved persons and French artisans move through the wild woods of Northern Mississippi, they seem subconsciously engineered to toss off the natural order, rip away trees, and mark a large swath of the landscape with the footprint of their white patriarch. This destructive process also serves as the blueprint for creating shunned space. What the white master values most, he takes. What he rejects as scrap-land goes to the marginalized community within his grasp. Hence, as the great mansion rises, so do the nearby slave cabins and their nascent community of captives. The following passage from Erskine Peters reveals the historical foundations of shunned space as a collective enterprise for white patriarchs:

Surely the circumstances of bondage were created by the whites in league with one another, whose strength was based on the fact that they possessed the mechanisms and means to inflict violence, thus to terrorize. It is mainly through this that whites like old Carothers McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*, acquired slaves over whom they held the power of life and death. Through the same means they stole land and had it cleared. What is apparent in this scheme, although Faulkner does not point it out precisely in these terms, is that the blacks in bondage were considered a natural part of the European conqueror's effort to seize dominion over nature. (58)

The language of chattel arrives shortly after seizing large sections of the landscape. In order to justify the practice of slavery, marginalized individuals had to be dehumanized. Therefore, a great deal of America's shunned spaces evolved as necessary byproducts of white supremacy in order to keep the workforce local, impoverished, and subordinated to the needs of the more prosperous white areas, while also controlling access to natural resources required to sustain these spaces.

The Shunned Spaces of *Intruder in the Dust*

Lucas Beauchamp's land and home were positioned on the precipice of privilege. Faulkner writes about the way Lucas purportedly acquires his home:

The legend: how Edmonds father had deeded to his Negro first cousin and his heirs in perpetuity the house and the ten acres of land it sat in—an oblong of earth set forever in the middle of the two-thousand acre plantation like a postage stamp in the center of an envelope—the paintless wooden house, the paintless picket fence whose paintless latchless gate the man kneed open still without stopping or once looking back... (7)

This passage is packed full of spatial and cultural information about the origins of Beauchamp's home. It also attests to the fact that Lucas does not inhabit a shunned space community, but a discontinuous shunned space. For example, he does not have the security and support offered by a home set inside a marginalized community set inside a larger shunned space. The boundary between Beauchamp's land and the outside world is compromised by the fact that the gate surrounding his land is forever open to anyone who makes it inside the larger plantation that contains it. As part of a discontinuous shunned space, Lucas's land is subject to periodic invasion

by the larger society. Disconnected from a primary shunned space, Beauchamp is especially vulnerable to invasion from the outside world.

Nevertheless, Beauchamp is a formidable presence, and he demands as much respect as he gives. Consider this passage:

Someday Lucas Beauchamp can shoot a white man in the back with the same impunity to lynch-rope or gasoline as a white man; in time he will vote anywhen and anywhere a white man can and send his children to the same school anywhere the white man's children go and travel anywhere the white man travels as the whiteman does it. (151)

Many of these occurrences will not materialize until decades later. Lucas Beauchamp therefore awakens a frightening realization within Jefferson's whites that their racialized system is doomed. His composure and confidence therefore rattle them with a vision of a more egalitarian society most of them reject as dangerous and revolting.

The instruments of racialized violence are on display in this passage, linking the personal freedom of a Black man to his supposed ability to equalize any injustice or insult hurled against him. Whether by the potential of lynching or enkindling, Lucas's presence and freedom stir up the paranoia of whites to the point that they clamor for action to remove him.⁸⁷ Although Lucas Beauchamp is surrounded by an ocean of white privilege, it does not drown him. Instead, he

⁸⁷ In his essay titled "On Fear: Deep South in Labor: Mississippi," Faulkner explains the source of this fear. He writes that "what the Negro threatens is not the Southern white man's social system but the Southern white man's economic system which the white man knows and dares not admit to himself is established on an obsolescence—the artificial inequality of man—and so is itself already obsolete and hence doomed" (96).

simply insists that, in every circumstance, he will remain a man worthy of respect, even if it prompts white rage. This resistance motif is a key element of shunned space.

Lucas Beauchamp wields silence like a sword, and his presence fills every space, shunned or privileged, with a reluctant awe. I contend that his *pièce de résistance* in the novel does not arrive with eventual exoneration for a crime he did not commit, but for the expression of incalculable power simply by looking the part. Consider the following passage from *Intruder in the Dust* where the sheriff, a huge, muscular white man, arrives for Lucas, whose hat has fallen like a crown. The sheriff bends to pick up the hat, echoing the image of a subject prostrate before his Black lord, and returns the hat. Faulkner then amplifies this obeisance into royalty:

Lucas looked at them for the first time and he thought *Now. He will see me now* and then he thought *He saw me. And that's all* and then he thought *He hasn't seen anybody* because the face was not even looking at them but toward them, arrogant and calm and with no more defiance than fear: detached, impersonal, almost musing, intractable and composed, the eyes blinking in the sunlight... (43)⁸⁸

Given his self-conscious awareness, Lucas fully understands that power and respect are performative agents. He has consistently played the part of a totally free man all his life, thumbing his nose at Jim Crow with voiceless resolve hinging on a glance or near-glance that nullified any attempt to intimidate him. Now, his home is overrun by white authorities, and he

⁸⁸ Clearly, the larger society has invaded Beauchamp's space, which is part of a larger, though disconnected network of spaces reserved for African Americans in and around Jefferson. Altogether, these form an extended shunned space.

still does not capitulate to their overt expressions of power. As a result, both he and his home, a satellite of shunned space, hold their dignity intact and neither is destined to be trampled.

Lucas lacked fear, but he was not blind to the discretion necessary to ensure his survival during Jim Crow. He knew the world he lived in was White. Lucas also knew that he was the product of miscegenation, and his home, like his bloodline, was located between two worlds: one Black and one White. Like White men, he inherited something from his father—and his unadorned house was built on top of that land. He also knew it was a small plot of land, surrounded by two-thousand acres of White privilege. But a small plot was nevertheless evidence of ownership and a place in which to live proudly and be buried as more than chattel—it was the container within which Lucas's identity grew into a fullness of manhood that refused to bow when Whites passed. Every stick of wood or briar that grew on its surface belonged to him, and every footprint that found its way to his door would enter no further without his permission. Nevertheless, his home was chosen by his father, a White man, and like all other shunned spaces, it would eventually be subjected to White invasion.

Shunned spaces are not always contiguous. Just down the road from Lucas's home, beyond the boundaries of the spreading plantation, a cluster of shanties barely held up against the tug of gravity. As the two-boys-turned-witnesses clamor toward the courthouse, Faulkner describes a shunned space:

[The] road lay pale and empty before and behind him too; the lightless houses and cabins squatted or loomed beside it, the dark land stretched away into darkness strong with the smell of plowed earth and now and then the heavy scent of flowering orchards lying across the road for him to ride through... (92)

The “lightless houses” had no electricity, belying the intrinsic scarcity of this shunned space. Unlike Lucas, these sharecroppers did not own the ground they plowed. However, they were a community evolved within a shunned space, and the two black teenagers en route to the courthouse to bear witness and exonerate Lucas almost certainly called it home. Both can be pictorially represented as shown in Figure 19.

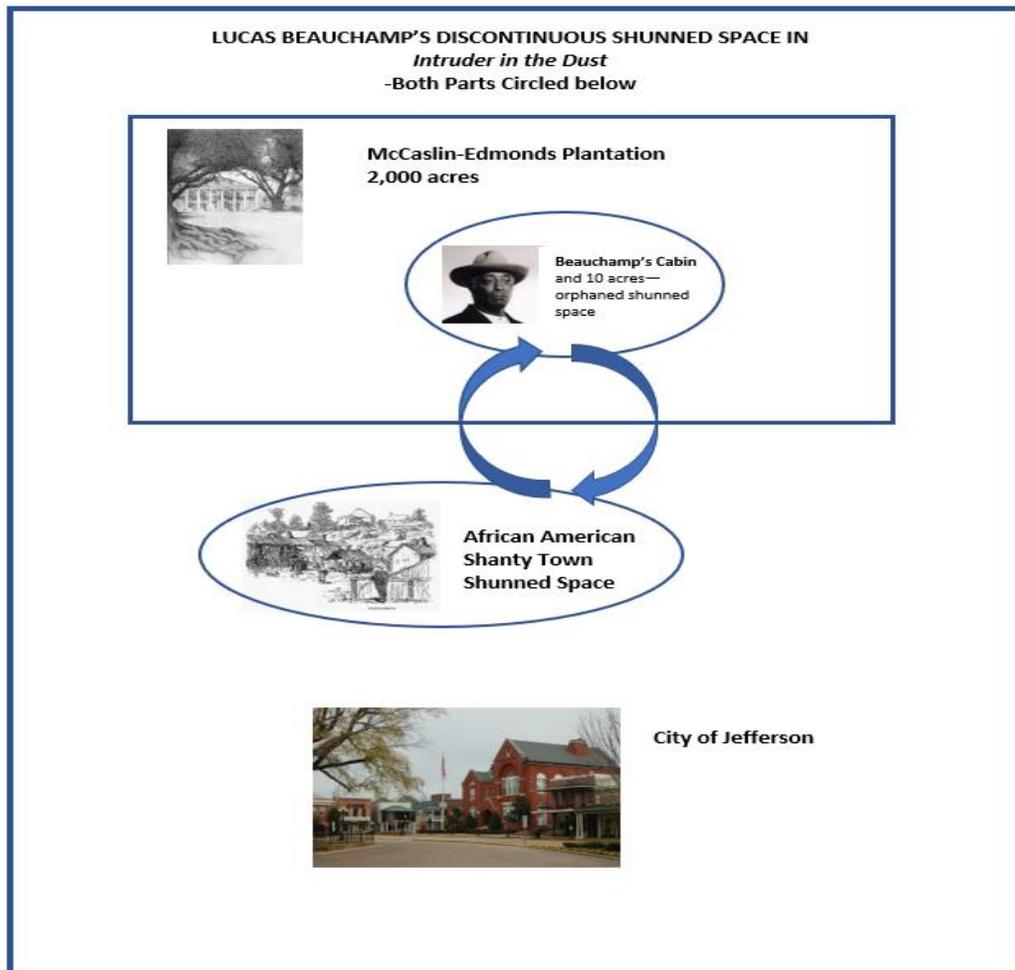


Figure 18 Lucas Beauchamp’s Discontinuous Shunned Space in *Intruder in the Dust*

Whereas Tomey’s Turl’s dual residence in two shunned spaces complicates his character diagram, Lucas Beauchamp has residence in a shunned space that is split across at least two

venues, including his home and the main row of cabins in Jefferson. Both characters display agency: Tomey's Turl through his ability to trespass the boundaries of his shunned space seemingly at will, and Lucas Beauchamp's portability into White venues by exercising an effective stonewalling that leaves the Whites nonplussed.

In an article for *The Southern Quarterly* titled "The Last Faulkner: *The Reivers* on the Road to Banality" (2017), Michael Kreyling offers a diminutive interpretation of Faulkner's last novel as portrayed in film. For Kreyling, the novel is steeped in racialized subordination that anesthetizes Ned's desire to capitalize on an opportunity to promote the rights of African Americans. Ned's advice to Van Tosch regarding Bobo's fate seals the deal for Kreyling and marks the novel's central fallacy: "Keep him in his menial job, keep him in his subordinate and dependent relationship to White power and capital...The novel closes with Ned's affirmation that there is nothing in racial equality but misery and unrest" (Kreyling 25). Although *The Reivers* is not overtly charged with the political posturing of Faulkner's other novels such as *Intruder in the Dust*, I argue that it nevertheless offers some insight into the author's use of humor and indirect references to shunned space as empowering agents. Faulkner deploys the trickster motif in combination with an undercurrent of racial distress to codify Ned's response to Jim Crow forces arrayed against him and his shunned space community.

The following passage bears witness to Ned's humble beginnings. Faulkner writes that Ned considered himself privileged

Because he—Ned—was a McCaslin, born in the McCaslin back yard in 1860. He was our family skeleton; we inherited him in turn, with his legend (which had no firmer supporter than Ned himself) that his mother had been the natural daughter

of old Lucius Quintus himself and a Negro slave; never did Ned let any of us forget that he, along with Cousin Isaac, was an actual grandson to old time-honored Lancaster where we moiling Edmondses and Priests, even though three of us—you, me and my grandfather—were named for him, were mere diminishing connections and hangers-on. (30)

Ambivalence sweeps through this passage as scarcity immediately manifests in the reference to a back-yard birth. Nevertheless, miscegenation gives Ned a direct lineage to the apical patriarch whose legacy, in the minds of local Whites, places him above them in genealogical rank. In the Jim Crow South, genealogy establishes status for Whites and, apart from skin color, is a primary determiner of social status. Ned's rightful claim to direct lineage to McCaslin himself automatically conveys a social status that cannot be fully erased by Whites. Ned therefore turns the tables on White privilege in *The Reivers* by weaponizing elements of their own mythology against them.

Racial mythology is further deconstructed⁸⁹ when Uncle Parsham humorously instructs Ned about the intelligence and dignity of mules:

[A mule] can hold two notions at the same time and the way to change one of them is to act like you believe he thought of changing it first. He'll know different, because mules have got sense. But a mule is a gentleman too, and when you act courteous and respectful at him without trying to buy him or scare him,

⁸⁹ A similar pattern of events unfolds in the carnivalesque environment of "Was."

he'll act courteous and respectful back at you—as long as you don't overstep him.

(239)

Uncle Parsham's use of anthropomorphic language is no accident as he describes the mule's sentient agency. The excerpt contains an element of caution by warning that the mule should not be disrespected or overstepped. Likewise, scholars such as George B. Ellenberg address the centrality of the mule as a symbol of enslaved African American men.

In "African Americans, Mules, and the Southern Mindscape, 1850—1950," Ellenberg exposes Faulkner's intent for using an animal to symbolize human beings who endured peonage.

He writes:

In developing metaphors for the South in much of his work, William Faulkner settled upon the mule. Faulkner's choice sprang in part from his particular genius—he understood the significance of the South that the animal held in both real and symbolic terms. Importantly, much of Faulknerian portrait linked the mule and the African American...Faulkner, of course, did not create the relationship between mules and southern blacks, he only perceived its power and called for a closer investigation of the subject...The physical ties between mules and African Americans have been clearly established. (381)

Superficially, the idea that African Americans are physically tied to mules is racist. However, the statement can be changed to reflect the fact that Black men are frequently commodified by the racialized strictures of the South—a reality that continues to shape the relationship between African Americans and the landscape of their enslavement. Having been codified as a creature

that converts labor and dirt into agricultural abundance, African American men are dehumanized by the “peculiar institution.”

In order to counter the fragmentation of slavery and Jim Crow, Black men therefore must rely on a collective response to preserve their identity as human beings. That is, the marginalized male residents of Ned’s shunned space must work with other residents to convert the scarcity they face into a way of life that enables community and counterbalances the destructive influence of the larger society. Faulkner’s insistence vis-à-vis Uncle Parsham both acknowledges the Southern White view during Jim Crow that dehumanizes African Americans into chattel and deconstructs it using the same symbolic power. Furthermore, in a direct reference to the political agency of marginalized African Americans, Faulkner writes: “[A mule] will work with you patiently for ten years for the chance to kick you once” (120).

In “*The Reivers and Huckleberry Finn: Faulkner and Twain*” (1965), William Rossky examines the origins of a childlike quality within *The Reivers*. According to Rossky:

A rather casual examination reveals a number of specific, and perhaps at first sight specious yet ultimately significant, parallels between *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Reivers*. In both, boys serve as centers for the action and voices for the authors’ feelings about and criticism of life. Indeed, probably more than any other significant American writers, Twain and Faulkner have used—needed—children as technical points of view or subjects to express feeling and idea. (Rossky 374)

Perhaps the easy relationship between many of the novel’s Black and White characters evolves from possessing the viewpoint of a child—a lens uncorrupted by racism. If so, then Faulkner is

soliciting children (or at least a childlike worldview) partly to neutralize the contamination of Jim Crow on the lives of Ned and Boon.⁹⁰

Faulkner alludes to shunned space with nuance that could easily brush past the reader. For example, a sheriff confronts Ned and Boon about their presence in his county. He's especially concerned about Ned, who introduces himself as "Ned William McCaslin Jefferson Mississippi" (169), thereby establishing his pedigree. "You got too much name" (169), the sheriff replies, indicating that Ned is too haughty for an African American. The sheriff then issues a condescending note of caution: "at least you got sense enough to recognize Law when you see it" (169). Ned's response is quick, but revealing: "'Yes sir,' Ned said. 'I'm acquainted with Law. We got it back in Jefferson too'" (169). Both the sheriff's quip about Ned's haughtiness and his implied warning about the Law's ubiquity implies the ever-present danger that law enforcement represents for the inhabitants of Ned's shunned space. It also introduces enough disturbance to remind marginalized individuals such as Ned that they "do not belong" in a space occupied primarily by Whites. Hence, we witness that one mechanism for establishing shunned space involves systematically excluding African Americans from all other venues.

Ned further describes violence exercised against Black communities, including his own shunned space, as encoded within White thought and practice from an early age. Faulkner writes:

⁹⁰ The natural tendency of children to ignore racial differences intertextually links to *Go Down, Moses*, where Faulkner explores a heartbreaking scene in which Henry, White, awakens to racialized prescriptions and destroys his close relationship with Lucas, his Black cousin. Although the two had been inseparable as children, the moment of their separation arrived like a malevolent epiphany. Faulkner describes the scene: "Then one day the old curse of his fathers, the old haught ancestral pride based not on any value but on an accident of geography, stemmed not from courage and honor but from wrong and shame, descended to him...They never slept in the same room again and never again ate at the same table because [Lucas] admitted to himself it was shame now and he did not go to Henry's house..." (107-9)

A man that never had nothing in it nohow, one of them little badges goes to his head so fast it makes yourn swim too, Ned said. Except it aint the badge so much as that pistol, that likely all the time he was a little boy, he wanted to tote, only he knowed all the time that soon as he got big enough to own one, the law wouldn't let him tote it. Now with that badge too, he dont run no risk of being throwed in jail and having it took away from him; he can still be a little boy in spite of he had to grow up. The risk is, that pistol gonter stay on that little boy mind just so long before some day it gonter shoot at something alive before he even knowed he aimed to. (181)

The passage incriminates law enforcement's role in Black communities during Jim Crow. Therefore, in the name of fiat justice, some Blacks are targeted as cannon fodder to fulfill a twisted fantasy to enact violence against other human beings.⁹¹

In *The Reivers*, Faulkner therefore insists that the primary obstacles endured by the inhabitants of shunned space, including scarcity and violence, are well out of proportion to those that Whites face. His use of humor and other antics does not detract from the novel's power to upend the racialized assumptions of Jim Crow. Although scholars such as Michael Kreyling raise strong objections to the notion that *The Reivers* should receive the accolades of Faulkner's earlier novels, I contend that the character of Ned must be explored more thoroughly in his relationship

⁹¹ As of this writing in 2019, this unfortunate trend continues as Black men are shot and killed by law enforcement officials without provocation. In most cases, the officers are exonerated.

to shunned space. Consider the following passage describing Ned's newly-acquired personal empowerment with respect to the constancy of his shunned space:

We crossed the street toward home. And do you know what I thought? I thought *It hasn't even changed*. Because it should have. It should have changed of itself, but that I, bringing back to it what the last four days must have changed in me, should have altered it. I mean, if those four days—the lying and deceiving and tricking and decisions and undecisions, and the things I had done and seen and learned that Mother and Father wouldn't have let me do and see and hear and learn—the things I had to learn that I wasn't even ready for yet, had nowhere to store them or even anywhere to lay them down, if all that had changed nothing... But nothing: just a house I had known since before I could have known another... (293-4)

Ned returns home to his shunned space in an effort to neutralize his experiences while on the road. He embraces his family homestead, lackadaisical as it is, as though perfectly content to reset his life to a duller ring. On some level, it is possible that Ned sowed his wild oats with no desire to repeat them.

Although Ned's problematic, racially charged exchange with Mr. van Tosch near the end of the novel wreaks of capitulation to White patriarchy, the novel does successfully empower Ned to confront and prevail against Jim Crow on several levels.⁹² Consider the following exchange between van Tosch and Ned concerning the purpose of the race:

⁹² Despite such attempts to establish a rapprochement between Blacks and Whites, Faulkner sometimes rages against the Civil Rights Movement. In "Forward Movement: William Faulkner's 'Letter to the North,' W.E.B. Du Bois's Challenge, and *The Reivers*" (2016), Richard C. Moreland quotes Faulkner: "If it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes" (Moreland 79).

“I see,” Mr van Tosch said. “It was all just to save Bobo. Suppose you had failed to make Coppermine run, and lost him too. What about Bobo then?”

“I made him run,” Ned said. “You seen it.”

“But just suppose, for the sake of the argument,” Mr van Tosch said.

“That would a been Bobo’s lookout,” Ned said. “It wasn’t me advised him to give up Mississippi cotton farming and take up Memphis frolicking and gambling for a living in place of it.”

“But I thought Mr Priest said he’s your cousin,” Mr van Tosch said.

“Everybody got kinfolks that aint got no more sense than Bobo,” Ned said.

“Well,” Mr van Tosch said. (286)

Eventually, Ned persuades the White man to keep Bobo in his service. On some level, this is problematic because Ned does not use his newly acquired money to help reestablish Bobo in another venue with superior opportunities. Instead, he implies strongly that Bobo is not yet ready for the larger world; that catapulting him out of his shunned space may do far more harm than good.

The Reivers is a novel in motion, and therefore provides fleeting opportunity to review shunned space in detail. Despite his success in the race, and his ability to manipulate Whites, Ned chooses to return to his shunned space home. This fact draws the book into conversation with many others by authors such as Jesmyn Ward, who leave home only to return a few years

Although Faulkner discarded such hardened views after extensive correspondence with W.E.B. Du Bois, the unfortunate quote from 1956 was among his most widely read interviews. However, despite such outbursts, Moreland further asserts that *The Reivers* results from Faulkner’s evolving sensitivity concerning racial equality (80).

later. The point is that shunned space, despite brutal poverty and violence, has a strong pull on many of its residents, who choose to re-enter the painful yet sacred circle of home. Although Faulkner does not offer the authentic voice of a shunned space resident, he is nevertheless aware of the ironic fact that African Americans carry a strong allegiance to their originating communities, and many are willing to face a cascade of unpleasant memories to re-root themselves within them.

Ned McCaslin is proof that elements of shunned space are scattered throughout Faulkner's writings. For example, Ned's ingenuity evolved within his shunned space alongside his most powerful, personal relationships. His ability to negotiate with Whites originates at least in part from the lessons he has learned from its shunned community. However, it is easy for the reader to reject Ned's decision to avoid fully exercising his agency near the end of the novel. Any action he takes against the White community surrounding his shunned space will almost certainly meet with a more extreme reaction. I contend that the option he chose lines up with good reason. Ned regards his originating community, the shunned space that fed and clothed him (even if meagerly), as a fragile enclave, a reservoir of resistance against potential devastation from the outside world. He therefore chooses to return home. This choice stuns readers during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement who view active resistance as *prima facie*. I submit that Faulkner's decision to mortify Ned's political agency at the end of *The Reivers* falls directly in line with his own conservative views about the Civil Rights Movement and a deeply personal desire to put the brakes on the Movement. In other words, Faulkner pleaded with African Americans to be satisfied with incremental progress toward legal and economic equality: a plea emerging from a man who has lived in privilege all his life, exempt from any direct

consequences of the brutalized, racial system endured by the town's Black population. Even so, I propose that the influence of Caroline Barr was too strong to permit young Faulkner from turning his glance away from the horrors of Jim Crow that manifested all around him.

Caroline “Mammy” Barr

One of the most emotionally riveting lines in Faulkner's eulogy to Caroline “Mammy” Barr amounts to a confession. Regarding her sacrifice, he writes: “I saw fidelity to a family which was not hers, devotion and love for people she had not borne” (*Essays*, Faulkner, 117). For Mammy, her devotion to the Faulkner family came, at least in part, at considerable cost to her own biological family. Every moment with the Faulkner children is a moment apart from her own. Her life, livelihood, funeral service, and interment are appropriated to his control, and she is buried in the “Colored Section” of Oxford's Saint Peter's Cemetery, a mostly White cemetery where William Faulkner is also interred. All of this would appear to insinuate that Barr's story was completely intertwined with that of the Faulkner family, but she had her own personal saga to relate.

Before the Civil War, Barr was enslaved in South Carolina. After surviving slavery, she joined many of her other family members on the long walk from South Carolina to their new home in Helena, Arkansas. When Barr's family subsequently moved to Northern Mississippi, she was there as well, and the shunned space in which they lived rippled with thousands of stories ranging from ghost lore to African legends. In Mississippi, she worked with the Carothers and then the Falkners in 1902.⁹³ Consequently, Barr was a resident of several shunned spaces—

⁹³ William Falkner later added a “u” to his last name in order to anglicize it and increase his chances of joining with the Royal Air Force in Canada during World War I (Blotner 61).

each of them a fountain that flowed into her own rich love of storytelling. As Figure 20 illustrates, her century-long life is richly interwoven across continents and cultures. She has known slavery and freedom, yet freedom did not supply security, and the KKK frequently threatened her family's tenuous existence. Barr carried these stories with her to the Faulkner estate, and dazzled the children with worlds they had never seen before.

Although there is no evidence that Barr dictated any portion of Faulkner's novels, her influence manifests like a fingerprint, and is easily discovered by exploring the nature and category of stories related to the author at a young age. Judith Sensibar insists that her influence was lodged deeply in his psyche when she writes:

Early in his childhood Faulkner transformed his forbidden and therefore unmourned love for Callie Barr into a core memory. Lodged in his unconscious it served as the 'figure of transgression and hybridity at the center' of the writer's imaginative life. His fiction claims the world she opened up to him. (111)

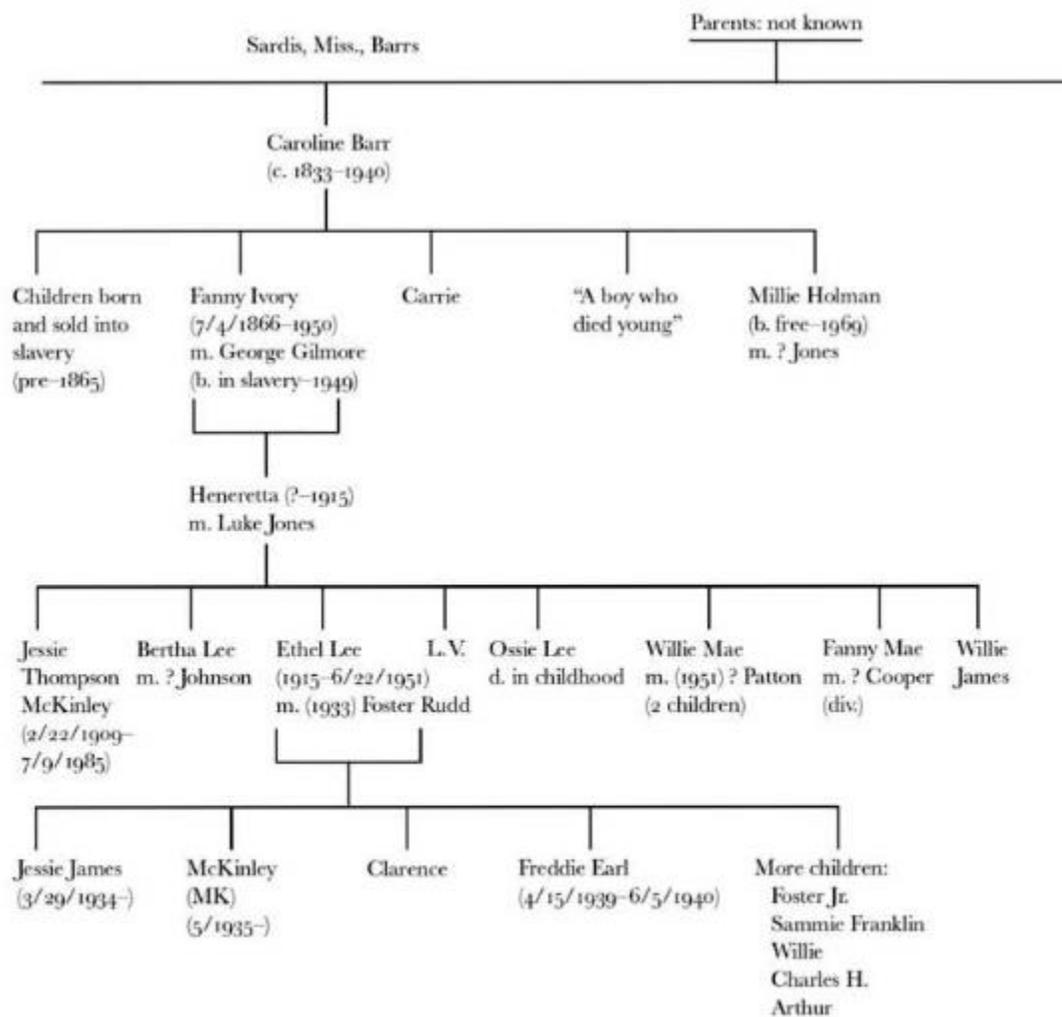
In other words, Barr's influence was *prima facie* in granting permission for the young author to explore the taboo subjects of miscegenation and interracial love. Moreover, Barr's stories told to young Faulkner and the other children catalyzed their view of African Americans. The rich tapestry of her folklore, humor, and moral tales served as the literary protoplasm out of which Faulkner's racial consciousness was to gradually evolve.

Barr's stories covered a lot of ground and personal history, spanning her life as a slave in South Carolina until she went to work for the Falkners. One of these stories prompted young William to doubt its veracity. According to Sensibar: "[Barr] also told tales [William] called 'utterly absurd,' that is, folktales. One of the two he records, one she also told Jill, is about the

‘stinging snake. It would go to a tree, sting the tree, and twelve hours later, the tree would wilt and die⁹⁴’ (86). Nevertheless, Faulkner had long abandoned his revulsion for folklore as he told similar tales to children. These stories are collected and posthumously published in *The Ghosts of Rowan Oak* (1981). Moreover, the tale about a snake inflicting a mortal bite on a tree suggests historical significance for African Americans, whose experiences with “Strange Fruit” simultaneously conflate trees with lynching and haunting.⁹⁵ African American folklore therefore relates the layered history of slavery and Jim Crow within the landscape of the South as a compendium of horrors. Such tales also caution shunned space residents to remain mindful that their homes and communities are sometimes subjected to external invasion and intense violence.

⁹⁴ This story could be related to the New Testament telling of Christ cursing the fig tree, which dies almost immediately as recorded in Mark 15.

⁹⁵ *Strange Fruit* (1944), by Lillian Smith, is a novel that relates the wrongful accusation and lynching of an African American man caught in the crossfire of an interracial relationship. The physical imagery associated with lynching beckons the comparison to “strange fruit” dangling from the trees, as Black bodies seem to float like ghosts between limb and ground.



Source: Compiled from census materials, gravestones, and interviews with the Barr Family.
 Note: Callie Barr's probable origins Lower Guinea ("Rice") Coast, Africa; Nottoway County, Va.;
 Barr's Landing, Lower All Saints Parish, Georgetown District, S.C.

Figure 19 Caroline "Mammy" Barr Genealogy⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Source: *Faulkner and Love* (28).

In her storytelling, Barr carried her life experience and stories with her to Faulkner. Her rich tapestry of stories later flavored his own fiction and blessed his writings with the cultural vitality of the shunned spaces that nurtured her youth. In *Faulkner and Love: The Women Who Shaped His Art*, by Judith L. Sensibar, Caroline “Mammy” Barr’s story blooms quickly and leaves a lasting impression. Her life is filled to the rim with indications that she was a cardinal influence on Faulkner’s writing. Judith L. Sensibar writes:

[Caroline Barr] was small and small-boned, and her skin was a deep blue-black; she was opinionated and passionate; she had a dry wit and told compelling stories but could not read or write; she was strong both physically and remained mentally acute until her death at 107;⁹⁷ she quilted or crocheted for pleasure; in Mississippi, she worked in both vegetable and cotton fields with her own family...She seems to have kept her family life separate from the lives of the adult Faulkners; she maintained her ties with her children’s families even when it meant traveling long distances, often on foot, to see daughters⁹⁸ with whom she quarreled constantly.

(35)

⁹⁷ Barr’s exact age at the time of her death varies from 100 to 107. However, given the imprecise nature of record keeping for enslaved children, her exact birthdate may remain a source of conjecture.

⁹⁸ Sensibar mentions that Barr’s daughters and their descendants are buried in the St. Peter Missionary Baptist Church cemetery in Hipps Hollow. This indicates that a substantial shunned space existed in Hipps Hollow for several generations (43).

Despite frequent quarrels, Barr maintained strong bonds with her family. She frequently journeyed to see her children in Hipps Hollow, Mississippi—a journey of approximately 30 miles she covered on foot (35-6).⁹⁹

By the time Barr nurtured William Faulkner, she was ready to furnish him with a plethora of stories from her shunned space experiences that almost certainly informed his writings, including *Go Down, Moses* (Sensibar 38).¹⁰⁰ I contend that Barr is one of the most, if not *the* most important influences on Faulkner's writing. Barr enjoyed storytelling, which simultaneously demonstrates her empowerment as a woman and shows her deep roots not only in Rowan Oak but in all the shunned spaces she inhabited throughout her long life. The spirit of her stories, rich with humanizing metaphor, passed to Faulkner, and from his typewriter, they reached out to the world.

Of all the individuals who lived in shunned space, none carried stronger agency with Faulkner than Caroline Barr. However, regarding other inhabitants of her shunned space, Faulkner appears reluctant to fully acknowledge the integrity of their families as equal to his own. Barr's headstone, depicted in Figure 21, is noteworthy more for what is missing than what is printed. We know that Barr maintained contact with her genetic family, whose conspicuous absence speaks volumes. Is Barr's gravestone yet another example of the larger society

⁹⁹ The concept of "Mammy" is stereotypical throughout Southern lore. However, as illustrated by Caroline Barr, each of these women was an individual with an assortment of individualized stories. Contrary to prevailing opinion, most of these women maintained contact with their biological children and also with their shunned spaces. Given the length of the journey, why didn't the Faulkners ensure that Barr made it safely to see her biological children by driving her?

¹⁰⁰ For example, in "The mammy, the mother, the wife" (2009), Adrian Frazier insists that "Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is her portrait. *Go Down, Moses* (1942) is dedicated to her" (1).

appropriating the cultural heritage of marginalized people? If so, then even an enlightened author such as Faulkner was not exempt from chattel-laden practices. No other marker appears at her gravesite, thereby hinting that Barr's children may not have fully participated in her burial arrangements. Barr is buried in the "colored" section of a mostly White cemetery along with William Faulkner's ancestors.



Figure 20 Caroline Barr's Headstone (Source: Author)

Of course, Barr's gravestone represents a contradiction for Faulkner, whose fiction clearly supports the expansion of civil rights for African Americans. How can an author who extols the virtues of Lucas Beauchamp ostracize Barr's family at her death? As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Faulkner's extemporaneous interviews with reporters are marked by such inconsistency and flaws. Reginald Martin addresses this conundrum in an article titled "Faulkner's Conflicting Views of the Equality of Color" (1989):

Perhaps the multitude of conflicting critical opinions concerning William Faulkner's stand on Black equality is so disparate because Faulkner so often reversed and modified his position. And perhaps a chronological retracing of

Faulkner's own words as quoted in a series of interviews may help to give a clearer and more balanced picture of the writer whom critics alternately cast as a liberal and beneficent southerner out of sync in his own place and time, and as a vicious racist who disguised his low opinion of Blacks with easily elucidated fictional tropes. (1)

The possibility that Faulkner is a disguised bigot strikes me as extreme given the intense focus of his writings in exploring the inner lives of Black people. This is coupled with the fact that a Black woman, Caroline Barr, touched him perhaps as deeply as any human being in his life.

The Rowan Oak Museum in Oxford, Mississippi features Caroline Barr and her influence on William Faulkner. It states:

Though she never learned to read or write, Callie shared stories of pre-Civil War and Reconstruction times from her own memories with the Faulkner children. She found her way into William Faulkner's writings as the inspiration for the character of 'Dilsey Gibson' in *The Sound and the Fury*, 'Cal'line Nelson' in *Soldier's Pay*, and Molly Beauchamp' in *Go Down, Moses*. (Rowan Oak Museum)

Barr's genealogy is noteworthy and provides a compendium of her family's journey through intergenerational shunned space. (Her family tree is rendered in Figure 20.) A close examination of her family's history reveals a great deal about this woman whose influence was so pivotal on Faulkner's life and writings. It also offers tantalizing clues about the impact of her family lore on his novels. Yet there is obviously an immense distance between a precocious young, White man born into privilege and the inner lives of African Americans he brings to the forefront of his

novels. Some bridge must exist to provide ligature and validity such that his literature does not dangle like an afterthought unhinged to the forces of racialized history around him. A few flights of fancy and a burst of empathy would not create the thundering triumph of Faulkner's canon and its remarkable insight into the challenges faced by Blacks and their undying quest to end injustice. Instead, Faulkner's insight is the kind of knowledge birthed within shunned space and told to him from childhood forward by his Mammy, whose storied life seeds the DNA of novels such as those discussed in this chapter.

Judith L. Sensibar asks a series of questions with a single answer that converges on the life history of Caroline Barr and her powerful relationship with young Faulkner. Sensibar asks:

Who is supposed to be in charge of the naming and touching in the American scenes that Faulkner's fiction evokes? What sacred Southern codes and laws is the 'black' daughter of her White master, Thomas Sutpen, violating here? Who taught these codes to William Faulkner? From whom did he learn the desire and skill to subvert them? Who taught him to perform his color, and that race could be either and sometimes both performative and performance? From whom did he learn the reciprocal nature of black-White racial identity and the inextricable relation between race and sex? Who first made him reel back in horror and grief and shame at the incredible toll that performative "Whiteness" and "blackness" would exact? (22-3)

No one knows when Caroline Barr decided to disclose the stories she learned from her life in shunned spaces to a White child. At some point, she transfigured into the great matriarch of his life, and taught him how to contextualize the burning racism of his society. At some moment, the

boy must have been terrified when the realization dawned on him that this beloved woman was rendered as fragile to Jim Crow as any of the stories she tells him. In a minute, she could walk down a road and be slaughtered by White rage. He understood that his Mammy's own children lived in the same uncertainty and, perhaps, he refused to allow her to return to that kind of risk. Perhaps Faulkner's greatest sin regarding Mammy was fear. It must have infuriated him and caused his pen to tremble to hear stories of rape and plunder committed against her family within the porous boundaries of her shunned spaces.

Chapter Reflection

Eudora Welty once wrote about fellow Mississippian William Faulkner's towering presence in the literary world. Specifically, she addressed his strong bond to place: "Better than the rest of Southern writing,' she wrote, 'Faulkner's creation of Yoknapatawpha county stands for what I take to be a truth, that deeper than people, farther back than known history, is the Place.'"¹⁰¹ Welty observes the primacy of place in human affairs, and the fact that history collects within its margins. I build on this idea by arguing that William Faulkner addresses shunned space in *Go Down, Moses*, *Intruder in the Dust*, and *The Reivers* using a lens of privilege that distinguishes his interpretation of Jim Crow and America from those of black writers who were actual residents of shunned space. Faulkner's interpretation of racism, feminine empowerment, and environmental degradation sets him apart from either Ward or Wright and provides a unique perspective. His vision for the South is far more positive, despite the region's

¹⁰¹ Source: *Eudora Welty on William Faulkner* (2003) (Welty 12).

racialized, bloody underside. In an article titled “Mississippi” (1954), Faulkner writes about a massive flood and its disastrous consequences for all residents, regardless of race. He states:

Piling up the water while White man and Negro worked side by side in shifts in the mud and the rain, with automobile headlights and gasoline flares and kegs of whiskey and coffee boiling in fifty-gallon batches in scoured and scalded oil drums; lapping, tentative, almost innocently, merely inexorable (no hurry, his) among and beneath and between and finally over the frantic sandbags, as if his whole purpose had been merely to give man another chance to prove, not to him but to man, just how much the human body could bear, stand, endure... (255)

“Black” body and “White” body are indistinct in the passage, interlaced into a single, agonized “human” body. It is as though Faulkner is celebrating another tragic opportunity for Black and White humanity in the South to gather under a single banner in his beloved home state of Mississippi, to show the human spirit at its finest moment in resisting natural disaster. Faulkner’s description of the dynamics of flood management and recovery is diametrically opposed to Wright’s rendition of a racialized system that responds with escalating brutality against its minority residents in “Down by the Riverside” (See Chapter 2).

In reflection, Faulkner is a mass of contradictions. When reading his public statements, it is sometimes easy to forget that his writings were, at least in part, devoted to humanizing African Americans, and to cast light on some of the most poverty-stricken areas of the country. There, he finds Black faces and places them with Black voices. Although he falls somewhat short in granting a full stage to African American women, Faulkner nevertheless occasionally takes the reader on a journey through their struggles, such as when he draws out the confusion and agony

of Eunice. She faces a choice that overcomes every part of her and succumbs through suicide before revealing the full truth to her child.

I propose that Faulkner's stage for his writing has many actors, and he is the most important—an amanuensis at the center of the stage recording everything about the characters swirling around him. We see the world through his eyes, and I can almost imagine him craning his neck to view his neighbors, or a Black man passing down the street. No doubt, he encountered many Lucas Beauchamps in his life in Oxford—men whose power was not determined by the weight of their billfolds or the number of guns they could harness to match a White mob bullet for bullet. Instead, Faulkner was frequently the quiet actor, and the stage was Rowan Oak.

The South's beauty and bile found a home inside Rowan Oak's old, White walls, and Faulkner could certainly perceive the contradiction. His own home provides a snapshot of the South's promise and discontent. Consider the following scene that Joseph Blotner describes in *Faulkner: A Biography*:

Meanwhile, almost unbidden, the staff was beginning to gather. Uncle Ned Barnett, who claimed he could remember the day the Yankees burned Ripley, took over as general factotum. As butler, he served at the table. As yard man, he milked and also cared for Faulkner and Malcolm's horses. A man with a feeling for proper dress, he wore a tie when he milked or chopped kindling, and on other occasions he would appear in frock coats inherited from the Young Colonel. Mammy Callie was his opposite number, helping to look after the children and, when she felt like it, creaming butter and sugar for the cakes Estelle would

bake.... [In turn,] he was responsible for their food, shelter, clothing, health care, and pay when he could afford it. That he should do this was exactly what Mammy Callie and Uncle Ned expected. (261-2)

This passage is more than a snapshot of life in the Faulkner home in the early 1930s. Instead, it is a layered scene that says a lot more than the words placed there. The African American staff's loyalty is mystifying, for they are not only loyal to Faulkner and his immediate family, but to Faulkner's ancestors as well. (Hence, the comment about the Young Colonel.) However, not everything is as it appears.

There is a sinister side to explore in the outwardly pleasant, home-and-hearth scene. In his article titled "In Praise of the Black Mother: An Unpublished Faulkner Letter on 'Mammy' Caroline Barr" (2001), Bart H. Welling explores "Faulkner's significant but understudied attempts to define her influence on his life and art, and of the conflicting imperatives that drove him both to memorialize and to circumscribe her memory" (537). Barr's death set Faulkner in a tailspin of grief and self-reflection, and he never fully confesses her influence on his writing, although she obviously provided a considerable collection of oral narratives. Faulkner insisted on holding her wake in the parlor at Rowan Oak, and he both wrote and delivered Barr's eulogy.¹⁰² I surmise that Faulkner's grief was rivaled by guilt. His family had taken Barr away from her own children, and kept her in motion around themselves, fulfilling their needs.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Joseph Blotner records that Faulkner delivered the eulogy at Barr's request (413).

¹⁰³ In a show of great respect for Barr, he wrote to his editor shortly after her death: "[the] matriarch who raised me died suddenly from a stroke last Saturday night...so I have had little of heart or time for work" (Welling 538).

From a contemporary perspective, Faulkner's incremental view of appropriate progress in the American Civil Rights Movement has been proven wrong by the sweep of history. He viewed the world through a privileged, White lens framed by wealth and status extending back generations. For Faulkner, although the South bore the dual sins of American Slavery and Jim Crow, he nevertheless granted himself the liberty to feel perfectly at home in its verdant expanses.¹⁰⁴ He did not perceive the holistic power of seeing shunned space as an integral representation of the homes and communities occupied by marginalized residents. He therefore lacked Jesmyn Ward's insight into the unpredictable violence hanging over shunned spaces, the communities they incubate, and the human residents they are designed to protect. Since he could not see the dynamics at play between individual homes and the overall shunned space, he failed to comprehend the collective power of such spaces to assemble a response to racialized institutions. (Hence, he misinterpreted the urgency of the American Civil Rights Movement.) Furthermore, even with Caroline Barr as his personal example, he did not perceive the cardinal role that women played throughout such spaces. He did not hear the collective wailing inherited from one generation to the next, forever lamenting the loss of loved ones, homes, and farms, or the image of a row of innocent young men dangling from a limb. Faulkner therefore never fully understood that, by his day, the time for patience had long since passed. The inhabitants of

¹⁰⁴ Faulkner's "easy" identification with the Southern landscape and its multitude of Confederate monuments was not available to Barr and other African Americans during the Jim Crow. Instead, she and the remnants of her family who had survived slavery were forced to migrate. Given the Klan's penchant for confiscating land and resources belonging to Black inhabitants, the formation of shunned space is impossible for Barr and her family until they reach Arkansas and Northern Mississippi.

shunned space never forget, and they were ready to bring the full force of their cultural power to bear on removing racial obstacles and launching the American Civil Rights Movement.

However, Faulkner's uncanny insight into African American life has no equal in the annals of 20th century American letters written by White men. It may well be that Faulkner, like Richard Wright, never fully appreciated the pivotal role of African American communities for the same reason. We may therefore safely conjecture that the tide of history might have lifted both Faulkner and Wright to a more progressive understanding of shunned spaces and the cultural productivity of their inhabitants.

To borrow a trope from Harper Lee's canonical *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb in his skin and walk around in it”” (30). The empathetic axiom of capturing someone else's perspective is limited, but helpful. Although Faulkner confesses that he can never be a “Negro,” he nevertheless admirably approximates the point of view of his marginalized heroes. That takes hard work and heart from a man who was born into intergenerational privilege and reveals that, despite his vivid contradictions, Faulkner stays the course in crafting his books to reflect the humanity and obstacles facing Blacks who inhabit shunned spaces throughout his beloved Mississippi. Novels such as *Go Down, Moses*, *Intruder in the Dust*, and *The Reivers* clearly illustrate that Faulkner's towering genius as a writer gave him astonishing insight into the lives of marginalized people around him who called shunned space home. I believe that Faulkner's compassion both as a great man and as a chronicler of the human condition prevented him from looking away.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

America and the world are pockmarked with areas that are often inhabited by people who have been historically swept to the sidelines of history, unable to fully access the rights and resources available to the larger society. I refer to these venues as “shunned spaces” because they are created by the dominant culture and deemed unfit for its direct occupation and therefore allocated to marginalized populations. While these shunned space communities experience scarcity and violence out of proportion to other areas, they are also cauldrons of cultural and creative productivity. My goal in conducting this research has been to introduce Shunned Space Theory as a practical tool for uncovering cultural contributions, including literary achievements, by individuals who inhabit these spaces and are typically overlooked by the larger society. Since shunned spaces exist both in the real world and in literature, it is tempting to cast too wide a net when focusing on a thesis. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on selected fiction and memoirs written by three pivotal Mississippi authors: Jesmyn Ward, Richard Wright, and William Faulkner. Since the Mississippi landscape acts as a backdrop for many of these authors’ stories, it is appropriate to examine their writing in detail and hunt for clues regarding similarities and differences both in how they portray shunned space in their writings and, conversely, how shunned space is expressed in their personal development. I argue that Shunned Space Theory requires a holistic examination of how Ward, Wright, and Faulkner create their literature with

uncanny adherence to the basic requirements of shunned spaces, which shape them as authors and human beings.

Moreover, shunned spaces must continually enact healing so that their residents can fuse identities broken by destructive interactions with the larger society. In many cases, the intergenerational, external violence inflicted on shunned spaces blends with perennial scarcity and causes in-fighting among residents, thereby accounting for the higher rates of violence within shunned space. Thus, shunned space is often fragile, subject to a complex array of forces, internal and external, that must be kept in balance to prevent an escalation of violence and the fleecing of limited resources which the community needs to survive. Within shunned space, individual vitality depends strongly on community vitality.

Shunned Space Theory amalgamates bits and pieces of existing literary scholarship into a holistic framework that fills some gaping holes in the analysis of literature that evolves within marginalized communities. It also offers a predictive model for locating hitherto lost oral and written narratives. Unlike Yoknapatawpha and Bois Sauvage, which are subject to an author's interpretive imagination, real-world shunned spaces such as Uniontown, Alabama and Memphis's Hurt Village may contain hidden treasures of stories yellowing in dusty church attics or kept in shoeboxes that house the memories of long-dead relatives. More often, the stories are found in the minds of elder generations and, through natural attrition, are passing into the ash heap of history. Future research that seeks out hidden oral and written narratives will almost certainly bring to light stories worthy of intense literary scrutiny for generations to come.

This dissertation barely scratches the surface of applying Shunned Space Theory to African American literature. Many types of shunned space exist, and each configures a unique

arrangement for interaction between the races. In all cases, African Americans innovate a new approach for communicating with Whites by expressing a complex array of fiat humility. In other words, the trickster motif is frequently used to stave off White violence. Formerly enslaved Blacks and their descendants have long since learned the careful dance of appearing to give Whites the respect they demand while working to benefit the shunned community that houses their families. I propose research to explore various arrangements for shunned space with respect to privileged, predominantly White neighborhoods. For example, Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) depicts a shunned space in Bayonne, Louisiana reserved for Blacks who must live close to Whites:

The courthouse was there; so was the jail. There was a Catholic Church uptown for Whites; a Catholic church back of town for colored. There was a White movie theater uptown; a colored movie theater back of town. There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for Whites; and the same back of town for colored. (25)

Although this passage references a small Louisiana town during Jim Crow, such parallel spaces, White and black, are still found throughout the South, and are frequently located within a stone's throw of each other in the same town. Invariably, the nicer, more "uptown" districts are reserved for Whites, while less desirable areas ("back of town") are reserved for marginalized Blacks.

Living so close to White communities delivers both advantages and problems to nearby shunned space residents. Employment opportunities, although limited, are available, including domestic work, and labor-intensive jobs usually reserved for Black men during Jim Crow. On the other hand, frequent interaction with Whites carries its own burden. A system of racialized apartheid

that evolved over centuries requires that African American men, women, and children pay homage to social customs that benefit Whites. Blacks are required to yield to Whites on sidewalks, display a pleasant demeanor at all times, and avoid direct contact with the opposite gender (especially Black men with White women). Even when Whites confiscate property, only a fraction of legal protection is available to Blacks. Of course, when Blacks did occasionally fight back, the consequences were often disastrous or fatal for them. Further research could reveal a more vibrant tapestry of subtle responses available to African Americans in the face of such oppression. These prescribed or covert interactions affect people both in privileged and shunned spaces and substantially inform the African American literature that evolves to reflect such complex racial interaction.

Shunned spaces are cauldrons of innovation with accomplishments that spread across all major community endeavors, including food production. Sometimes, shunned residents enact this ingenuity in order to convert a barren landscape into harvest. I find it equally compelling to research the unique cultural accomplishments that enabled shunned residents in more isolated enclaves to survive and even thrive. Although interactions with Whites is not as frequent as in coterminous settings, small shunned spaces must often deal with greater scarcity. For instance, Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) offers insights into how residents of the rural, fictional town of Lotus negotiate in an environment of limited resources. First, they must incorporate special planting techniques to salvage as many of their crops as possible. For example, in Lotus, garden vegetables are protected from both disease and predators by planting flowers throughout the same field. Furthermore, given the absence of formally trained doctors, shunned residents must

evolve their own pharmacology and administer treatments. As an example, the women of Lotus must resort to herbal remedies and folk medicine to heal Cee.

Despite the many elixirs offered by shunned spaces, writers such as Toni Morrison outline vulnerable shunned spaces, including 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved* (1987) and slowly dying shunned spaces that include The Bottom in *Sula* (1973). Further research is required to identify a spectrum of causes for the death of a shunned space. I postulate that literature sometimes indicates that the human community in shunned space can inadvertently engineer its own demise. This is surprising, given the brilliant methods deployed by shunned communities to effectively maximize the production of food and other essential items in a scarce landscape. However, as Morrison shows in *Sula*, whole communities can be driven to atrophy when they lose a common vision. I would like to explore research into this phenomenon and find out whether literature offers a more positive alternative for some shunned spaces (that is, shunned residents embrace a fresh vision that wards off decline and fragmentation).

I have already demonstrated that the environment is one of the most important avenues to explore in Shunned Space Theory because the community is already under stress from scarcity, violence, and other stress that leave it vulnerable to environmental catastrophe. Two books I have already examined offer valuable insights into what happens at the beginning of a natural disaster. As discussed in Chapter 2, Ward illustrates the environmental degradation that many residents must face in *Salvage the Bones* (2011). In Chapter 3, Wright illustrates the impact of pollution on a shunned community in *Black Boy* (1945). In many cases, playgrounds harbor festering filth and poison that children see, smell, and even physically handle. Future research opportunities are abundant to explore how marginalized communities are impacted by

environmental contamination, both in the United States and abroad. In many cases, shunned residents must choose whether to remain in their ancestral homeland, risking the health of every man, woman, and child in the community, or relocate to another venue.

The LGBTQ+ community represents one example of doubly-shunned individuals residing in a shunned space, and a target for considerable future research. Authors such as Randall Kenan in *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) explore themes of homosexuality within the context of an intolerant, religious culture that is itself targeted for exclusion by the larger society. A double consciousness is imposed that conflates racism with homophobia such that, without the healing and protection offered by their shunned space, members of the LGBTQ+ community are exposed to the full brunt of exclusion and even hostile attacks, both within the shunned space and outside of it. In *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (2010), Horace L. Griffin highlights the harmful effects of religious bigotry on Black LGBTQ+ development both within and outside of shunned space. On the other hand, *By My Precise Haircut* (2016), by Cheryl Clarke, presents a collection of poems dealing with Black LGBTQ+ issues.

Far more research is required to show the role of Whites in the establishment and destruction of shunned space. For many Whites, shunned spaces remain out of view with obscure origins. Hence, many White readers often recoil from confirming that shunned spaces are designed to separate marginalized residents from opportunities Whites have historically reserved for themselves. For example, the Tulsa Riots of 1921 inspired the creation of novels such as Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah* (2001) and Jennifer Latham's *Dreamland Burning* (2017). Although these novels present significant detail about the riot, both authors are White. However, the most

compelling read I have found is a first-hand account of the carnage presented through the eyes of Buck Colbert Franklin, a Black lawyer who witnessed the events unfold from his nearby office. Further research may uncover novels by African American authors who seek to clarify the inner lives of those impacted by this tragedy and others like it. One of America's worst race riots ended one of Black America's greatest success stories: The Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa. Latham deploys a plot that resembles Octavia Butler's time travel motif in *Kindred* (1979). Time travel introduces an immediacy in which readers can encounter authenticity. I speculate that Octavia Butler captures the essence of shunned space and propagates it into the distant future in some variant form. A deeper examination of Butler's work will confirm that a cautious optimism is taking root in the ways African Americans view themselves and their prospect for securing a lasting home on American soil that overcomes the lingering effects of Jim Crow. Furthermore, authors such as Latham also discursively generate fresh opportunities for a dialogue on race relations based on shunned space.

How does African American literature that centers on shunned spaces qualitatively compare with novels that do not? For example, how does Zora Neale Hurston deal with scarcity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)? Moreover, how does Hurston's approach differ from that of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), which was also saturated with shunned space experience? Zora Neale Hurston catalogs a vast swath of African American folklore when profiling residents of Eatonville, Florida—her hometown. Unlike most other shunned spaces, Eatonville was founded by African Americans and policed by Black residents. Nevertheless, a modicum of self-government did not inoculate the town from White violence. Scarcity remains a defining characteristic, even in Eatonville. In a larger context, the

question I am proposing becomes this: Do different types of shunned space produce varying experiences of Jim Crow among shunned residents?

I propose another idea for future research into shunned space that centers on a timely topic: mass incarceration. Given the disproportionate number of Black male residents incarcerated in America's prisons, the effect on shunned space communities cannot be overstated. Therefore, it is almost impossible to examine contemporary African American literature without addressing incarceration and the national crisis facing Black men. Profiling and imprisonment have deleteriously impacted African American communities, which are already under duress. When whole swaths of Black men are convicted of non-violent and trivial offenses, they are subsequently removed from participating in raising children, and disenfranchised into electoral silence, the incubating power of their shunned spaces approaches collapse. Nonfiction books, such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), represent authorial attempts to summon attention to the social blight produced by racial profiling and the disenfranchisement of an entire generation of African American men. In other words, America's unfortunate career in profiling African American men is making shunned spaces even more shunned.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, novels, such as Ernest J. Gaines's *The Tragedy of Brady Sims* (2017), explore themes of racial injustice and the conditioning of broken men, too fragmented to reenter society. In some small way, I hope that future discussions

¹⁰⁵ Forrest Stewart and Ava Benezra address the emasculating influence of police profiling on African American men in their 2017 article titled "Criminalized Masculinities: How Policing Shapes the Construction of Gender and Equality in Poor Black Communities."

of shunned space in contemporary American cities prompts conversations to reverse this injustice.

Finally, I propose that lynching must be examined in terms of Shunned Space Theory. The most sinister element of shunned space involved the brutal murder of thousands of African Americans to fulfill a racialized bloodlust. Did residents of certain types of shunned space witness this barbaric practice more than others? Are memorials present in shunned space to remember the victims and call out the White mobs who committed murder? The answer to these questions may be distributed across both literature and scholarship. In fact, most neo-slave narratives present at least some reference to lynching. I feel that such research contextualizes this brutal practice by more thoroughly explicating the shunned spaces in which it took place.

My dissertation, as noted, marks only the beginning of an attempt to present shunned spaces as humanizing portals of creativity featuring accomplishments that should be widely celebrated. Future research into shunned space will confirm that such venues always materialize with an asymmetrical distribution of rights and privileges that advantage one group over another. Hence, shunned spaces are found throughout the world, and evidence of their existence punctuates human history and culture. Perhaps the creativity of shunned space is borne from necessity: the need to generate sufficient food stocks in scarcity-laden environments where the ground reluctantly yields to agriculture. Or, the creativity of shunned space originates from the human need to stand outside of a routine of unending labor and oppressive violence, and to allow the human soul to perceive itself in terms of a larger world, and to generate works of beauty, written or sculpted, or passed across generations from old lips to new ears. I propose that carefully studying the literature of shunned space brings to light the greatest proof of the full

humanity of marginalized people. Shunned Space Theory opens a portal into marginalized communities that requires literary analysts to celebrate the cultural achievement of these venues while deploring the racialized systems that created them. Equally important, it reminds those who merely visit such venues that scarcity, violence, and political exclusion are no match for the human spirit, and that shunned space represents an opportunity for the larger society to work with shunned residents to reverse the cumulative injustice it has created.

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