CALL ME DAUGHTER:
A Collection of Poems and a Critical Examination of Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice in Contemporary Southern Poetry

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SUMMARY

"Call Me Daughter: A Collection of Poems and a Critical Examination of Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice in Contemporary Southern Poetry" is a practice-led critical and creative writing PhD thesis in two parts: a collection of poems, titled *Call Me Daughter*, and a critical commentary that precedes the poems. The critical commentary, consisting of six chapters, explores two significant literary concepts relevant to the book of poems: Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice. The critical commentary uses Hamilton and Jaaniste's "connective model" to define, contextualize, and analyze the two concepts in relation to both the wider field of Southern literature and my own poems, contextualizing the collection of poems as a new addition to an existing, if presently under-researched, milieu – contemporary Southern poetry by women. In attempting to fill the gap in research on Southern women poets, two chapters in the critical commentary put forth readings of poems by Natasha Trethewey, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Linda Parsons, Ava Leavell Haymon, situating the commentary as an original contribution to knowledge. The collection of poems includes three sections. The first and the third sections include autobiographical poems based on my experience of being a Southern daughter. The second section, composed of a series of centos, explores a wider scope of Southern womanhood and daughterhood as experienced by ten well-known Southern women writers.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father

Charles Francis Collins

with love and gratitude

INTRODUCTION

The condition of being a daughter, like that of being a son or a non-binary child, is fundamentally human. Our biology dictates that, barring continuing advances in science, every human must be created and reared by other humans. In fact, Katherine Henninger argues that this relationship "is one of the few genuine universals of human experience. At root, we are all somebody's (really two somebodies') child" ("What Remains" 56). And because the parent/child relationship – whether biological or adoptive – is often intimately connected to our first memories, be they positive or negative, as well as our sense of self, and our basic understanding (or misunderstanding) of love and connection, that relationship inevitably informs the subject matter of prose and poems across the world.

But while being a daughter may be a universal experience, different cultures have varying expectations of their daughters, and as such, women, both young and old, find themselves restricted to – and often at odds with – the particular familial and societal roles their cultures impose on them. This thesis, specifically, is focused on the American South, a region with a long history of expecting of its daughters a meticulous brand of womanhood. Traditionally, the ideal Southern woman must be pious, virtuous, chaste and serve "others – God, husband, family, society – showing in her submissiveness the perfection of pure sacrifice" (Jones 9). In 1920, Georgia writer and editor Lucian Lamar Knight outlined his vision of the elusive Southern Belle, which by his estimates is a dutiful descendent of "the Confederate woman" (qtd. in Jones 3-4). Knight muses that "Imagination cannot dwell too tenderly upon a theme so inspiring [as the Southern woman]. Reverence cannot linger too fondly at so pure an altar…her gentle spirit is the priceless heritage of her daughters. The old queen passes, but the young queen lives; and radiant, like the morning, on her brow, is Dixie's diadem" (qtd. in Jones 3-4). In her groundbreaking study, *Tomorrow is Another Day*,

Anne Goodwyn Jones highlights the inherent problem with Knight's sentimental depiction of Southern womanhood: "the image wearing Dixie's Diadem is not a human being; it is a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still" (4). But not only were the South's daughters seemingly predestined to wear the crown of Dixie with pride and to represent the supposed genteel (and white) class of the Old South, they also inherited a heavy burden: "More than just a fragile flower, the image of the [S]outhern lady represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection" (Jones 9). In particular, Jones claims that "historians agree that the function of [S]outhern womanhood has been to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex … and the white race"; in fact, in the past, the notion that Southern women need to be protected has been used in defense of slavery (10). Thus, the Southern woman has been not only bound by the expectations of her culture but has also existed as a kind of prop to uphold the South's racist and sexist agendas. In fact, Mary Weaks-Baxter finds that the South largely still places "women in a gender framework that traps them in identities intended to perpetuate racism and sexism" (105). As such, some of the South's daughters "dread the high cost of living and dying in Dixie and find they have to depart" (Weaks-Baxter 105).

However, not every daughter physically departs the South. Some stay close to home and create a necessary detachment from their homeland by turning to literary pursuits. As such, the Southern literary canon has a long, distinguished history of women writers,[1] even if many female writers of the region are really only starting to receive adequate critical attention. And while a prevalent theme apparent in the work of Southern writers is that of family ties, women writers of the region take on that theme with a particular intimacy and ambivalence. In fact, one need not look any further than the poets discussed in this thesis to

[1] Anne Goodwyn Jones claims that there is a long history of women in the South pursing the literary arts: "literature for many years constituted almost the only profession that a [S]outhern lady of good family not driven by dire economic necessity might pursue without being thought by her society to have in effect 'desexed' herself" (5).

see a pattern in contemporary Southern literature of women writers being consumed with a desire to remain a dutiful daughter, even as their parent/child relationships include significant tensions and concerns. Poets Natasha Trethewey, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Linda Parsons, and Ava Leavell Haymon have all either kept their maiden name or have left their maiden name present alongside a married name, thereby remaining connected to their parents and family post-marriage. Also, the collections by these poets discussed in this thesis are not only based on their own parent/child relationships; they are also each dedicated to at least one of their parents or caregivers.

The purpose of this thesis, however, is not to investigate the history of Southern womanhood or the history of Southern women writers; rather, it is to contextualize my poems within the tradition of Southern literature and, in particular, contemporary Southern poetry. My own experience as a woman – a daughter – from the South is the prevailing subject matter of the poems and ultimately informs the underlying basis of this project. In fact, I have felt the burden of being a dutiful Southern daughter for as long as I can remember, even though my parents are not necessarily traditional. For me, being a good daughter meant feeling immense pressure to care for my family, perpetuate and revere the past, in particular the lives of my ancestors and local histories, and maintain the Southern "way of life," including conservative, Christian values. However, once I became married, womanhood took on an additional set of expectations that I had only heard about but never experienced for myself: an obligation to household duties on the basis of my gender and the expectation that the woman should bolster her husband and sacrifice personal ambition.[2] Ultimately, some of the culturally prescribed duties expected of a Southern woman feel natural and comfortable to me. However, other aspects feel quite uncomfortable, tiresome, and antiquated, as no doubt

[2] Admittedly, my marriage experience echoes the concerns of women across the world and is not necessarily exclusive to the Southern experience.

they do to women elsewhere. Like the poets discussed in this project, I too seem to be perpetually absorbed in grappling with the tensions of the Southern experience, in particular the tension of trying to balance the compulsion to be dutiful daughter with the urgency to break free from the South's largely conservative – and at times quite troubling – ideologies.

This thesis is divided into two parts: a collection of poems, titled *Call Me Daughter*, which articulates my own experience of being a Southern daughter, and a critical commentary, focusing on two facets of Southern poetry that I feel are most relevant to the collection of poems and which contextualize my poems as distinctly Southern. *Call Me Daughter* is divided into three sections. Section One, titled "Genesis of a Farm Girl" details my childhood (birth to age 12) living on our family apple farm in Western North Carolina. The first section ends with our move from North Carolina to Mississippi, where I would live for the next fifteen years. Section Two, "Magnolias, Inflamed" is an exploration of the voices of ten notable Southern women writers, using the cento form. Section Three, titled "Call me Daughter," picks up with my return home to my parents' house in Mississippi from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, following my divorce. Whereas Section One details my childhood experience of being a daughter in the South, Section Three grapples with navigating the somewhat more complicated terrain of being an adult daughter. The critical commentary, which precedes the book of poems, is based on the practice-led thesis writing framework outlined by Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste called the "connective model," discussed and outlined in the next section. The commentary explores the two facets of Southern poetry I feel are most prevalent in my poems, Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice, and it defines these terms and provides an original, close reading and analysis of four Southern women poets whose work demonstrates these themes within the contemporary milieu. Finally, I explore and analyze Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice in my own

poems, making the case that *Call Me Daughter* is an original contribution to contemporary Southern poetry.

STRUCTURAL METHODOLOGY

In their study "Content, Structure, and Orientation in the Practice-Led Exegesis," Hamilton and Jaaniste define the practice-led thesis as one that "situates creative practice as both an outcome and driver of the research process" (1). In discussing this framework, they consider two antecedents of the practice-led exegesis: the "context model," in which the student-researcher "chooses a topic of discussion from one or more of the wider contexts of the creative practice," such as a "critical analysis of related practitioners," and the "commentary model," which is "a reflexive, personal, and subjective account [of the creative work] by the researcher" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 5-6). The researchers discuss the advantages of both models but also warn against the pitfalls of each used in isolation and in its "extreme form" (5). According to Hamilton and Jaaniste, a commentary model that excludes the context model will "not connect the research project and creative practice to the wider fields that precede or surround it" and will "not establish a case for any advances made by the researcher" (6). However, if a context model is used without a commentary model, "a parallel text" emerges that "does not discuss the researcher's creative practice at all" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 5). In this instance, the research might seem "tangential" or "irrelevant" to the creative work (Hamilton and Jaaniste 5).

A more effective practice-led structure, according to the authors, following their detailed analysis of over 60 theses, is what they call the "connective model," in which the student-researcher combines the context model with the commentary model. Hamilton and Jaaniste argue that an effective completion of this model will meet "the formal requirements of higher research" (7), providing evidence that an original contribution to knowledge had been made. They also observed that students who completed a thesis using this structure

overwhelmingly included three distinct parts: 1) "situating concepts," 2) "practical contexts," and 3) "researcher's creations" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 3).

The critical commentary in this thesis can be termed "practice-led," as the original collection of poems it precedes is both the "outcome and driver of the research process" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 1). It is also based on Hamilton and Jaaniste's "connective model."[3] However, instead of using the three-part model once, I have presented it twice: once for Southern Ambivalence (Chapter One, Two, and Three) and once for the Adult Child Voice (Chapters Four, Five and Six). Chapters One and Four are both "situating concept" chapters, meaning that their purpose is to define and contextualize each term. In doing so, I aimed to provide both a broader definition of the terms as well as a more specific explanation of how they function within the fields of Southern studies, Southern literature, and/or Southern poetry. Chapters Two and Five are "practical contexts" chapters, in which I situate the two terms in relation to the "broader field of practice" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 3). In this case, that meant analyzing significant examples of Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice within the field of contemporary Southern poetry. I would claim that both of these chapters offer an original contribution to knowledge, as Chapter Two provides a nuanced reading of Trethewey's collection *Native Guard,* and Chapter Four applies Katherine Henninger's reading of the Adult Child Voice to poets Kathryn Byer Stripling, Linda Parson, and Ava

[3] It should be noted that Hamilton and Jaaniste say that their study is meant to be read only as "a description of what [they] have found" (4). They claim that it "should not be considered a prescription and neither should it be interpreted as a 'recipe,' either for the conduct of research or the process of writing an exegesis" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 4). Perhaps their reasoning for this is that they want to appear unbiased – to merely be presenting an empirical study of their findings. However, they go on to observe that the 'connective model' "Clearly...offers a substantial benefit" to the students (Hamilton and Jaaniste 7), and they also point to "the value it offers to the [student] researchers" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2). While I understand that the researchers may have wished to appear objective in terms of their study, I argue that it is rather short-sighted to discourage a student from using this study as a basis for constructing his or her own "connective model," particularly since they acknowledge the "value" and "benefit" of the model with regards to the practice-led exegesis. After all, this seems to be the only study that discusses this particular model, as the researchers themselves have coined the term. From my own experience, reading this article and implementing the "connective model" into my project had a tremendously positive effect on my thesis in terms of presentation and organization of the themes. Perhaps an additional paper needs to now be written which encourages the pedagogical benefits of the "connective model" regarding the practice-led exegesis.

Leavell Haymon, making the case that this voice is prevalent within the canon. Chapters Three and Six focus on the "researcher's creation," meaning that in these chapters I discuss my own poems in *Call Me Daughter* with regards to how the poems approach Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice and how the collection ultimately fits within the context of contemporary Southern poetry.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING AMBIVALENCE AND SOUTHERN AMBIVALENCE

In this first chapter, I will define "ambivalence" as it is employed by this thesis, and I will discuss its application to the Southern identity. I will also provide an original definition of "Southern Ambivalence," as there does not seem to be a standard definition of this term in use. In Chapter Two, I will analyze one significant way that poet Natasha Trethewey negotiates Southern Ambivalence in her collection *Native Guard,* providing an original contribution to the existing scholarship on her work. Finally, in Chapter Three, I will examine the approach I took when confronting ambivalence in my own poems, and I will discuss how this particular poetic approach to Southern Ambivalence situates my poems as an original collection within the field of contemporary Southern poetry.

1.1: DEFINING AMBIVALENCE

German psychoanalyst Eugen Bleuler originally coined the term ambivalence in his 1904 article "Die negative Suggestibilität."[4] Early work on ambivalence by Bleuler, as Kuhn explains, used concepts from physiology to apply similar ideas "to 'psychic activity,' i.e. 'opposing forces' to characterize the expression of affect[5] and associations" (363). By the time Bleuler presented his key paper on ambivalence at the University of Bern in 1910 called "Vortrag über Ambivalenz,[6]" he had laid out three types: "The emotional (or affective) type

[4] In English, "The Negative Suggestibility."
[5] Karen Simecek defines affect as the "felt stuff, which ranges from an intentional state (a feeling towards, about, or in relation to something other) to something that forms the background of felt experience, which shapes our subjective experience and engagement with the world" (419). She also explains that it is still disputed as to whether "emotion" and "affect" are distinct from one another but she argues "at the very least, there is significant overlap" and so "it makes sense to include the emotional within the category of affect" (Simecek 419).
[6] In English, "Lecture on Ambivalence."

in which the same object arouses both positive and negative feelings, as in parent-child relations; the voluntary (or conative) type in which conflicting wishes make it difficult or impossible to decide how to act; and the intellective (or cognitive) type, in which men hold contradictory ideas" (Merton 3). Today, when one looks up ambivalence in *The Oxford English Dictionary,* the definition one finds is the "coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing." This definition is reminiscent of Bleuler's "affective" and "cognitive" types of ambivalence, bypassing the "conative" type that makes it "difficult or impossible to decide how to act" (Merton 3). However, when prompted for synonyms, the *OED Thesaurus* offers such words as "ambiguity" and "indifference," which serves as a reminder that the term has other connotations, as well. This is an important distinction to address. How does ambivalence – "the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes" – differ from these specific, seemingly related terms?

In their 2017 study on attitudinal ambivalence, Schneider and Schwarz clarify this distinction: "Ambivalence is distinct from uncertainty, because each of the two conflicting evaluations can be held with great confidence. It is also distinct from ambiguity, where the attitude object cannot be interpreted due to lack of cues. Finally, ambivalence is explicitly distinct from neutral attitudes, [like] indifference" (39). While ambivalence may in some instances refer to "indifference" and other related terms, much of the research published on the concept defines ambivalence as the experience in which "two conflicting evaluations can be held with great confidence," which is also how I will refer to the term in this project.

But, can the normal human mind really experience two conflicting emotions toward one person, place or thing? Answering this question is one of the central aims for Hili Razinsky in her book *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration,* in which she argues against

the idea that "rationality excludes ambivalence"[7] (7). Razinsky admits that the concept lends itself to questions and skepticisms: "to the philosophical eye, ambivalence appears to be impossible, or at best to characterize only marginal human possibility, irrationality, and paralysis" (7). However, while she understands the uncertainty regarding the concept, Razinsky's central argument is that actually "ambivalence demonstrates the basically rational character of mental attitudes" and does not lead to "irrationality" or "paralysis" (7). She posits that ambivalence works, within the rational mind, as a kind of "unity in plurality" for even when "the emotional engagement is ambivalent" that is, the person experiences "two opposing attitudes to the object of concern," still "the conflicting emotions are themselves connected" (Razinsky 66). Razinsky's theories are influenced by Freud, who she claims "challenges the view that personal unity excludes ambivalence: personhood for [Freud] entails ambivalence, and in such ambivalence the person's unity is revealed" (145). Like Freud, Razinsky's ambivalence "consists in the interlinking of opposed attitudes…in other words, ambivalence is a mode of unity in plurality" (149). "Unity in plurality," then, refers to a condition of "unity" within the mind that can arise from the "plurality" of opposing emotions, rather than breaking the "person between sub-persons" (149). Overall, Razinsky's theory of ambivalence suggests that the rational human mind can negotiate two conflicting emotions toward one object and even has the potential of finding a sense of unity in doing so.

But what effect, if any, does ambivalence have on creativity? Razinsky defines ambivalence as consisting of "two opposed attitudes [or emotions] toward the same object" in an individual, who is capable of behaving "in functional and creative ways" (37), a definition which is further significant to this project because it allows for an ambivalent person to not

[7] Razinsky notes that Donald Davidson is one such philosopher who "shares with many others the view that rationality excludes ambivalence" (7). For Davidson, "the 'consistency' of attitudes is a part of the definition of basic rationality" (7) and so two opposing attitudes toward the same object wouldn't be possible for a rational person. Razinsky disagrees with Davidson, arguing that "Attitudes do not have to be consistent or harmonious to be understood in terms of the sense lent to them by their connections with the rest of the mind"; in her view, "ambivalence demonstrates the basically rational character of mental attitudes" (7).

only "function" normally but also to "create." In his 1987 article "Emotional Ambivalence," Philip Koch argues that there is "value and significance" to ambivalence: "Involved in ambivalence…is the ability to construct and feel different points of view. This constructive ability is clearly a crucial ingredient in objectivity" (278). Koch goes on to say "Now focus on ambivalence's ability to feel – and not merely conceive – alternate points of view. Here we have an essential ingredient in the ability to empathize, to feel what another person feels" (279). Finally, he explains it "is, arguably, because we can feel conflicting points of view that there is such a thing as moral dilemma" (Koch 279). Koch, like Razinsky, theorizes ambivalence as a state that can arise in the normal human mind and one that can even lead to new, valuable and productive ways of being, like honing one's objectivity and empathy. Since Koch, researchers have continued to study potential positive effects of ambivalence, including heightened creativity and innovative thought processes. In fact, several researchers have now found that ambivalence seems, in some circumstances, to even foster creativity.[8]

The term ambivalence, as it will be used in this project, does not refer to instances in which a person feels "ambiguous," "indifferent" or "uncertain" about the subject matter at hand, in this case the American South. Rather, I mean to use the term as Razinsky defines it: "two opposed attitudes [or emotions] toward the same object," such as love and hate, existent in one person capable of behaving "in functional and creative ways" (Razinsky 37). In particular, I am interested in the ways in which ambivalence crops up in literature born of the U.S. South over the twentieth century and how that tradition of Southern ambivalent writers

[8] Christina Ting Fong in her 2006 article "The Effects of Emotional Ambivalence on Creativity" presents her findings from two laboratory experiments she conducted to look at the effects of emotional ambivalence on creativity. Although Fong's study looks for instances of heightened creativity in workplace employees, her findings do seem to suggest that ambivalent states – defined by the author to mean the "simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions" (1016) – can, in fact, lead to an increase in creative output. Moss and Wilson, in their 2014 article "Ambivalent Emotional States: The Underlying Source of All Creativity?," extend Fong's research by reviewing a myriad of studies that also support the idea that "both positive and negative emotions [felt simultaneously] are vital to the creative process" (76). Moss and Wilson conclude that not only do ambivalent emotions promote creativity but that "ambivalent emotional states may underpin many, if not most, of the practices, conditions, or attributes that foster creativity" (90).

impacted poet Natasha Trethewey's collection *Native Guard*. This is where my investigation of Southern Ambivalence will be rooted in addition to analyzing how my poems, a series of centos, contribute to the same tradition.

1.2: AMBIVALENCE AND THE SOUTHERN IDENTITY

Before discussing ambivalence as a form of the Southern identity, it is important to first note that the broader Southern identity can itself be characterized by its two-fold nature. Tracy Thompson in her book *The New Mind of the South*, says "I've spent much of my life trying to come up with a definition of exactly what [her Southern identity] is. Southerners are Americans with an extra layer of identity" (2). This sense of an "extra layer" or a twoness, noted by Thompson, regarding a form of the American identity can be traced back to W.E.B. Dubois,[9] who in 1903 surmised an American "double consciousness" in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* or a feeling of "twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (3). In this case, Dubois was speaking of a kind of split identity felt by black citizens in the United States. As James C. Cobb notes, many of the members of the Harlem Renaissance who would later follow saw "the essence of black identity" as divided into three parts: "not only African and American, but 'Southern' as well" (150).

While Dubois and the members of the Harlem Renaissance were interested in black identity in particular, the idea of a "double consciousness" also works as an approach to understanding the two-fold Southern identity, as noted by Thompson and experienced by both black and white Southerners. In his book A*way Down South: A History of Southern*

[9] Katherine Henninger notes the distinction between double consciousness and American double consciousness: "double consciousness, the split between an acting self and an observing self, was, as [Holly] Blackford asserts, a modernist preoccupation. However, American double consciousness hinges particularly on race and class, as W. E. B. Dubois famously articulated it, and it is a profoundly alienating state" ("My Childhood is Ruined" 603-604).

Identity, Cobb explains that "traditionally 'identity' has been defined as the condition of being simultaneously both "one's self or itself *and not another*" (3). But, for the Southerner of any race, another kind of "twoness" often exists: "where southerners (regardless of race) have staked their claim to a distinctive regional identity defined in contrast with the North, northerners have been more likely to characterize their own identity as simply 'American' and define that in contrast with the South" (Cobb 7). Therefore, Cobb finds that it has become part of the Southern identity to – in effect – have a Southern identity in addition to an American identity; whereas, many people from the North or other parts of the country would be more likely to just call themselves "American." Further divisions, into a sense of "threeness" for instance, come to light once minority groups or subcultures are studied in particular, like for example, "African, American, and Southern," as Cobb notes of the argument made by members of the Harlem Renaissance. Cobb's discussion also makes evident that feeling "torn" or "split" is perhaps the very essence of the Southern identity.

A separation between "American" and "Southern" is not the only split in identity many Southerners face, however. A further layer of division can be traced within the already two-fold Southern identity. In his 1960 article "The Negro as Southerner and American," Southerner and critic L.D. Reddick says that "The Negro in the South is a study in attachment and alienation" (130). Here, we see a form of the Southern identity located in a paradox, in yet another two-fold definition. In discussing feelings of attachment, Reddick refers to Frederick Douglass, who said "we want to live in the land of our birth, and to lay our bones by the side of our fathers'; and nothing short of an intense love of personal freedom keeps us from the South" (qtd. in Reddick 132). But, while many black Americans called the South home, the segregation, violence, and racism of the South worked to alienate black citizens,

making them feel as though they were "a sort of anti-Southerner[10]" (Reddick 132). According to Reddick, "the conflict between embracing and rejecting the South has set up a war within the persons of Negro Southerners as well as in the social order. Most of them hate the South; others, despite everything, love it. Most, however, alternate their love and hate, while a few seem to be capable of loving and hating at the same time. It is a great and confusing frustration" (133-134). The language that Reddick uses "attachment/alienation" and "love/hate" reveals an ambivalent Southern identity, particularly regarding the black Southerner, who even today might be seen as harboring the most acute feelings of ambivalence towards the South and rightfully so, as the South has a long history of slavery and oppression towards its black population, as noted above. But while the black citizens have endured these horrific persecutions, the South's culture of racism has also alienated many white Southerners, and for this reason, ambivalence in the form of "attachment and alienation" and "love and hate" speaks to the identities of some white Southerners, as well, as Lillian Smith most notably reveals.

Smith's 1949 collection of essays, *Killers of the Dream*, is arguably the most comprehensive account of one person's Southern Ambivalence. In the first essay, Smith explains "We southerners had identified with the long sorrowful past on such deep levels of love and hate and guilt that we did not know how to break old bonds without pulling our lives down…change meant leaving one's memories, one's sins, one's ambivalent pleasures, the room where one was born" (26). Smith's personal account shows the Southern Ambivalent experience from the point of view of an affluent white Southerner, who poignantly tacks on

[10] As I discuss in the following section, Southern poet Natasha Trethewey locates her Southern identity as a combination of "love and hate," but she also at times uses the term "exile": "In dealing with my particular place, my South, my Mississippi, I have always felt exiled. It's psychological more than physical…I know that it's my place, but it's also not my place because of its history" ("Interview with Sara Kaplan" 43). Her use of the word "exile" is reminiscent of Reddick's "alienation." Trethewey feels both "love and hate" as well as "attachment and alienation." Both are forms of ambivalence, but the later explicitly denotes not only mixed feelings but also feelings of otherness and estrangement.

"guilt" alongside "love" and "hate" when defining her Southern identity.[11] Cobb argues that "no white southerner pressed harder than Lillian Smith" against the South's reluctance to change the racism and sexism embedded in the culture (194). In a letter to Richard Wright, Smith shared her view "about the responsibility of writers to their culture and its problems" (qtd. in Cobb 194). Smith saw confronting the South as well as her own ambivalence toward the region as a duty to her homeland in hopes of rendering much needed social reform.

Lillian Smith is by no means the only Southern writer to articulate this kind of narrative. Numerous Southern writers[12] have located their regional identity in a similar vein – a confidently held ambivalent mixture of love and hate, and Southern Ambivalence is also a common theme of Southern literature. In fact, C. Hugh Holman begins his discussion on "The Southerner as American Writer" by first pointing to the tradition of ambivalence within the canon, underscoring this particular theme of Southern literature as perhaps the single most significant: "you will find at the heart of Southern riddle a union of opposites, a condition of instability, a paradox. Calm grace and raw hatred. Polished manners and violence" (180). Although Southern writers and scholars have noted ambivalence as a key component to the Southern experience, no book, to date, fully explores ambivalence in the South, and a standard definition of Southern Ambivalence does not seem to exist. I hope to bridge that gap by applying Razinsky's definition of ambivalence – "two opposed attitudes [or emotions] toward the same object" existent in one person capable of behaving "in functional and creative ways" (37) – to the South and Southern writers, specifically in the sense that the "object" the writer/speaker feels "two opposed attitudes [or emotions] toward" is the American South, along with its troubled history and dominant ideologies. Furthermore,

[11] Razinsky notes that "multivalence" is the term for a person conflicted by more than two opposing attitudes. Razinsky argues that even when this is the case, the same basic principle of "unity in plurality" applies (19).
[12] Notable examples include William Faulkner's 1954 essay "Mississippi," the interviews of poet Natasha Trethewey, and most recently, novelist Jesmyn Ward's 2018 essay "My True South: Returning Home to a Place I Love More Than I Loathe."

although there is a rich literary tradition within the Southern canon wherein Southern Ambivalence is discussed and/or thematically referenced – a tradition that I see my own poems entering into – no anthology exists that highlights Southern literature born out of the experience of Southern Ambivalence. When Southern writers or their works are occasionally discussed critically in terms of ambivalence or related concepts, it is almost always with regard to fiction and fiction writers, like William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Katherine Anne Porter, but there's little, if any, critical response to Southern Ambivalence as a mode of contemporary Southern poetry. I hope to spark this discussion through a close reading of poems from Natasha Trethewey's 2006 collection *Native Guard* in addition to an analysis of my own poems.

CHAPTER TWO

HURT INTO POETRY: SOUTHERN AMBIVALENCE AND NATASHA TRETHEWEY'S APPEAL TO LITERARY FOREBEARERS

Natasha Trethewey articulates her Southern Ambivalence throughout her many interviews. In 2007, for instance, she told Pearl Amelia McHaney "…I can get really angry about my South. Though I love it, it has given me plenty of reasons to hate it" (50). Similarly, in her final speech as Poet Laureate of the United States, she reveals that Mississippi is a place she loves "because it made [her]" ("The Quarrel"). However, she then quotes the famous line from W.H. Auden in his memorial to Yeats: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," admitting directly after that similarly "[Her] Mississippi, [her] native land, with its brutal history of oppression and its terrible beauty, hurt [her] into poetry" (Trethewey, "The Quarrel"). With the publication of *Native Guard* in 2006, Trethewey's hurting – her deeply held Southern Ambivalence combined with the loss of her mother – begins to take shape in her poems. In *Native Guard*, the reader finds that Trethewey is no longer the young talent who won the 1999 Cave Canem Poetry Prize for her debut collection *Domestic Work*. She also no longer speaks through photographs or in the persona of mulatta prostitute as she does in her second collection, *Bellocq's Ophelia*. The poems in her third collection explore both the external, cultural world of the South with its plethora of concealed histories and her internal landscape, riddled with grief over the loss of her mother and feelings of geographic and racial displacement, having been born a mixed-race child in Jim Crow-era Mississippi. However, in crafting poems that speak to her profound sense of Southern Ambivalence, Trethewey, a scholar and historian in her own right, looks to the past for answers and for instruction, including not only historical events but literary histories as well. In fact, in *Native Guard*, the poet appeals to literary forefathers who, like her, had to negotiate what L.D.

Reddick has defined as a sense of both "attachment to" and "alienation from" the South (130). This chapter will discuss the three literary forefathers who Trethewey evokes in *Native Guard*: Langston Hughes, Robert Penn Warren, and William Faulkner. In doing so, I will explore each of the three canonical writers' particular history with regard to Southern Ambivalence. I will also analyze how Trethewey's poems engage with and evoke each writer as well as the influence each seems to have had on her work, making the argument that Trethewey reveals her own ambivalence in *Native Guard*, in part, through aligning her poems with literary work by writers historically known for their ambivalence toward the South.

2.1: NATASHA TRETHEWEY AND LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes' contributions to American literature cannot be overstated. In fact, Mark A. Sanders in his article "African American Folk Roots and Harlem Renaissance Poetry" credits Hughes as the "veritable icon of the Harlem Renaissance" (107), a movement that, as defined by Sanders, "bequeathed a legacy that would shape African American literature throughout the twentieth century"— and beyond (96). Similarly, Gerald Early argues that Hughes "made the whole business of modern [African American] literature possible" (qtd. in Sanders 107). Leaving behind a prolific multi-genre oeuvre, it was Hughes' poetry specifically, with its roots in folk music and Southern dialect, that perhaps most intimately worked to authenticate "under-class blacks as legitimate poetic subject matter," thus arguing that black citizens were "fully complex, fully human, and thus equals in the American experiment" (Sanders 107). In his work to legitimize black culture, Hughes' poems often focus on the American South and in so doing reveal ambivalence toward the region. His profound impact on African American literature coupled with his complicated feelings toward the South make him a key figure for Trethewey's *Native Guard*, a collection that, in

part, looks back to literary forefathers for influence and direction. This section will explore the influence of Hughes on Trethewey's blues sonnet titled "Graveyard Blues" in addition to discussing the significance of Hughes' influence as it relates to Trethewey's Southern Ambivalence.

Although Hughes' work very much belongs in conversation with Trethewey and, in a broader sense, Southern literature as a whole, he is the only literary forefather discussed in this chapter who did not consider himself a Southerner. Born in Joplin, Missouri, an area of the U.S. that borders both the South and the Midwest, his earliest recollections were of Lawrence, Kansas, where he lived, mostly with his grandmother, for the first thirteen years of his life (Rampersad 5). Though his grandmother was born a free black woman in the Southern state of North Carolina, it seems that Hughes' earliest connections to the South were more ancestral than personal (Rampersad 5). Hughes was also adamant that he didn't identify as a citizen of the American South: "I'm not a Southerner. I've never worked on a levee. I hardly ever saw a cottonfield except from the highway," he said (Hughes, "Jazz" 492). However, what Hughes seems to be saying is that he did not identify with the toil of forced labor or poverty commonly associated with the South. In fact, he goes on to say "Life is as hard on Broadway as it is in Blue-originating land [Mississippi]" (Hughes, "Jazz" 492). Hughes suggests here that hardships are not exclusive to the South, nor indeed racial struggles. In fact, it could be argued that since Hughes knew about racial prejudice in America firsthand as a black man, he actually understood quite intimately something of the Southern experience, particularly that sense of "twoness" that Dubois notes as being indicative of the black experience in America. His work certainly discusses and grapples with feelings of Southern Ambivalence with a knowing authenticity, for example, in his poem titled "The South":

The magnolia-scented South.
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
Passionate, cruel,
Honey-lipped, syphilitic –
That is the South.
And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face. (173)

Just as Hughes describes the South in this poem as both "magnolia scented" and "beautiful" so too is it "cruel" and "syphilitic," underscoring a profound sense of both ancestral connection as well as mythic reverence; yet the poem also highlights the region's dark history and the understanding that he could never realistically call it home, revealing conflicted perceptions of the South.

Though Hughes was not raised in the South, he traveled there in his adulthood for the purpose of experiencing his black heritage for himself. A significant portion of David Chinitz's chapter titled "Becoming Langston Hughes" discusses Hughes' "Southern Exposure," particularly the fact that Hughes himself knew that his authenticity as a black writer was "partly a matter of geography" (31). Just as Hughes had sailed to Africa to discover the native lands of his racial ancestry, he ventured south because he and his Harlem Renaissance peers knew that the region "represented indispensable cultural capital…one's relation to the South depended in good measure on one's authority to speak from the position of an authentic racial subject" (Chinitz 31). Hughes was also "conscious that his secondhand knowledge of the South and its people was inadequate" (Chinitz 35).

During the summer of 1927, Hughes, accompanied by Zora Neale Hurston, visited the American South, passionately observing and taking note of such cities as Memphis and New Orleans. He would return again over 1931-32 giving lectures and readings. Chinitz notes that "this extended encounter [with the South] brought him an understanding of a part of the African American experience to which he had not been born and to which he felt that he needed exposure. Hughes could now afford to admit: 'I feel that for the first time, I have met the South'" (qtd. in Chinitz 39). While Hughes may be the only male writer discussed in this chapter who was not actually raised in the South, he still proves relevant to a discussion of literature born out of feelings of Southern Ambivalence, not only because he writes about conflicted Southern experiences in his prose and poems but also because he sought to study the region in depth and to experience that ambivalence for himself.

Before turning to Trethewey's poem in *Native Guard* that evokes Hughes, it is important to note that Southern Ambivalence for both Trethewey and Hughes is inextricably bound to matters of race, which forms a major distinction to the way Trethewey's work interacts with Warren and Faulkner. An important theme in Hughes' work is that of the "tragic mulatto"; for example, his poem "Mulatto" begins *"I am your son, white man!"* (160). As Rampersad notes, the mulatto is often torn between two races, having one parent black and the other white, but this was not the case for Hughes, as both of his parents were black. However, Rampersad finds it likely that Hughes' troubled relationship with his two parents left him feeling alienated in much the same way a mixed-race child might feel (3). Tied to this idea of Hughes' familial alienation, Rampersad argues that by the time he was 13, "Hughes probably already viewed the black world as an insider and, far more importantly, an outsider" (22). By Rampersad's estimation, it was Hughes's "view from the outside" that would "drive him back toward seeking the love and approval of the [black] race, which would become the grand obsession of his life" (22). This theory might reveal certain

psychological insights into Hughes' creative obsessions, but perhaps a simpler explanation might be that while Hughes' parents were both black, his ancestry proves more racially complex, which itself might explain his interest in the mulatto experience. Of his own racial heritage, Hughes says "on my father's side both male great-grandparents were white…On my mother's side, I had a paternal great-grandfather named Quarles - Captain Ralph Quarles - who was white…On my maternal grandmother's side, there was French and Indian blood" ("Negro" 36-37). In addition, he notes that several of his white ancestors were slave owners (Hughes, "Negro" 36-7). Hughes was obviously aware of his diverse ancestral background, which no doubt informed, and perhaps complicated, his self-image regarding his race and his identity as well as his feelings toward the South.

For Trethewey, the liminal experience of being a mixed-race daughter factors into her poems, interviews, and prose, as she herself was born of a black mother and a white father. In fact, her collections *Bellocq's Ophelia* and *Thrall* take on the mixed-race experience directly. Like Hughes, feelings of being both an "insider" and an "outsider" inform her poems. In a 2007 interview with Jonathan Fink, Trethewey discusses the complications of her racial identity in relation to the South: "the very fabric of government…in my home state [Mississippi] wanted to do things to prevent me from existing [because of her mixed-race status]. I can't imagine a greater sense of exile from the very beginning of your life…you're always an outsider to something, no matter how 'inside' you are" (82). For both Trethewey and Hughes feelings of regional and national ambivalence are, at least in part, inextricably bound to the biological circumstance of their race and the societal and historical circumstances that inform and govern race relations. While white Southerners seem to grow into regional ambivalence through experience and/or education, Southerners who are black or otherwise a racial minority seem to inherit what Dubois calls "a double consciousness," (3) a

two-fold identity that sets them up to inevitably always feel, to some extent, like an outsider, to feel "alienation" despite how "attached" they may also feel (Reddick 130).

Given Hughes' Southern Ambivalence, his interest in racial liminalities, and his profound impact on African American literature, it is perhaps no surprise that Trethewey would study him and emulate certain aspects of his poems, which she does in *Native Guard* with her blues sonnet titled "Graveyard Blues." To look more closely at the blues sonnet form, one must begin by examining the genre of music from which it originates. Becoming popular in New Orleans after 1900, Jazz and the Blues are two forms of music that can be characterized, according to Edward Brunner, as "a record of black Americans talking among themselves about what matters to them, including whether they really need the white culture that oppresses them – but talking in a way that they know they will be overheard by whites" (216-17). A distinctively black form of expression, the blues remains a world closed off to outsiders (non-blacks). But, when transferred into a poetic form, the blues, characterized by its refrains and its history of expressing hardships related to the black experience, becomes "the site where a black voice finds expression with an emotional resonance that can be heard beyond the black community and thus becomes a space where anyone may confront suffering" (Brunner 230). While the fusion of the blues and poetry, according to Brunner, makes the blues more open and democratic to white readers, Hughes stylizes this hybrid form specifically as a way to legitimize representations of authentic black culture within the literary canon by leaning deeper into black culture rather than trying to whitewash it with Western verse.[13]

[13] In his 1985 essay "The Blues as Poetry," poet and critic Hayden Carruth makes the claim that blues poetry is "the only major kind of poetry invented in our own country and our own time" (298). "The blues are not only expressive," he continues, "they are ours" (298). Carruth argues that the use of the blues form in poetry is the only verse form distinctly American. But, his argument begs the question as to whether or not all Americans can claim blues poetry as *theirs*, given the history of the blues as a form of expression for black citizens to confront the suffering inflicted on them by the dominant white culture.

As Timo Müller notes, Hughes was the one who "revived the sonnet [within the tradition of African American literature] by synthesizing it with the vernacular," effectively creating the vernacular sonnet or blues sonnet (254). In fact, Müller argues that Hughes' vernacular sonnets "provided a generative matrix for the [broader] Afro-modernist project" (254). Hughes' blues sonnet can be characterized formally as "AAB verse form: first line as statement, second line as repetition of statement with slight variation, and the third line as response or resolution relative to the problem posed by the statement," a similar structure to the blues in music; however, "Hughes often changed the form slightly, breaking each line into two, making six lines rather than three" (Sanders 108). A stanza from his poem "Midwinter Blues" shows Hughes' six-line stanza using the blues rhetorical strategy of (i) statement, (ii) repetition of statement with variation, and (iii) resolution:

> He told me that he loved me
> But he must a been tellin' a lie.
> He told me that he loved me.
> He must a been tellin' a lie.
> But he's the only man I'll
> Love till the day I die. (151)

This excerpt also shows another key element of Hughes' blues sonnet: the inclusion of the vernacular phrasing within the poem's language, such as the omission of the "g" at the ends of the verbs and the use of "a"-prefixing. Sanders argues that, in a time of extreme racism, racial violence, and a national denial of the existence or merit of black culture, the "vernacular reclaim[s] black English from the dialect tradition, presenting black voices fully capable of expressing the range and depth of their humanity" (109). For Hughes, therefore,

infusing the sonnet with elements of the Blues and African American vernacular was his way of authenticating and championing the black race while also emphasizing their profound struggle for equality. However, the blues sonnet is also, according to Müller, an "ambivalent aesthetic" (253) as the use of the vernacular "reflects on the linguistic level the position of his sonnets in between the African and the European heritage, and more importantly, it activates the subversive potential of this in-between position" (261). Hughes' blues sonnets, then, articulate through poetry what Dubois' calls a sense of "two-ness." For Hughes and the members of the Harlem Renaissance, that "two-ness" manifests within their creative works, in part, as an ever-conflicting tension between the traditional white establishment and the innovation of black popular culture (Müller 255).

Trethewey revives the blues sonnet in *Native Guard*, a collection celebrated for unearthing a culturally suppressed narrative – the existence an all-black regiment of Union soldiers, the 2nd Louisiana Regiment Native Guard Infantry, which was stationed in Mississippi and Louisiana during the American Civil War. Her blues sonnet, "Graveyard Blues," however, mourns the personal as well as the cultural, as she crafts her poem as an elegy to her deceased mother, specifically describing her funeral. Her mother's violent death at the hands of her stepfather became for Trethewey, who was 19 at the time, yet another immensely negative association with the South, and she calls upon Hughes' form to help her express her grief. Just as Hughes uses pre-established poetic and musical forms to create a new hybrid form so too does Trethewey substitute Hughes' form to create a new variation, one that returns both the blues and the sonnet to their more standard modes. Like Hughes, she uses the three-part blues strategy (statement, repetition of statement with variation, and resolution), yet her version differs from Hughes by using three lines rather than six, as is typical in the blues AAB blues verse form; whereas, Hughes breaks his lines in two, creating six line stanzas and twenty-four line sonnets. For instance, here is the first stanza of

"Graveyard Blues," which shows her reverting the blues form back to three lines within the sonnet form:

> It rained the whole time we were laying her down;
> Rained from church to grave when we put her down.
> The suck of mud at our feet was a hollow sound. (8)

"Graveyard Blues" concludes with a turn placement associated with the Shakespearean sonnet – fourteen lines with a turn after the twelfth – which she accentuates by indenting the final two lines. In returning her blues sonnet's structure to a more traditional, Western variation while including the repetition and style of the blues, Trethewey's blues sonnet articulates her sense of two-ness slightly differently from her predecessor, emphasizing the traditional variation more than Hughes, perhaps to reflect her identity as both equally white and black. The turn in the final two lines reads:

> I wander now among the names of the dead:
> My mother's name, stone pillow for my head. (8)

The poem's turn has further significance, as well. As she notes in a 2007 interview with Pearl Amelia McHaney, it was while grappling over this poem's final two lines that she came to "realize exactly why those elegies to [her] mother should be in the same book with the Native Guards. Like them, she had no [grave] marker" (48). At the time Trethewey wrote this collection, these Civil War veterans – the Native Guards – had no formal monument erected in their honor. Although Trethewey felt compelled to retell these soldiers' stories, she realized through the process of writing the collection, and the blues sonnet "Graveyard

Blues" in particular, that the act of leaving a part of history unmarked was pertinent to her own life, as well, as her own mother's grave at that time remained unmarked, the poet refusing to have her mother's married name (and thereby the name of the man who killed her, Trethewey's stepfather) on her gravestone. The success of this collection of poems can, at least in part, be attributed to the book's poignant and well-crafted mixture of both unclaimed personal history alongside suppressed cultural history, and it was through writing a blues sonnet – a form connected to and connecting her to Hughes – that Trethewey made her poetic breakthrough, underscoring the profound impact that Hughes has on her work.

Both forms of the blues sonnet – Hughes' and Trethewey's – also carry the legacy of the traditional sonnet form in addition to the blues. Although the form has European origins, the sonnet now has firm roots in African American literature. In her article "Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry," Antonella Francini discusses the sonnet as an "invitation to converse," a phrase from Gugliemo Gorni based on his understanding of how the sonnet would have been received during the time of Dante (qtd. in Francini 37). Francini applies the understanding of the sonnet as an "invitation to converse" to a discussion of the long history of African Americans writing in the sonnet form, noting that when the Harlem Renaissance writers, like Hughes, made use of the sonnet, the form "appears to be a vehicle of communication rather than a mere display of a poet's technical skills or a conventional replica of European aesthetic manners…the fourteen line structure turns into an ideal forum, a public space for the dynamic argumentation of social and political themes" (Francini 37-8). Francini also notes that part of the long history of African Americans using the sonnet as an "innovative mechanism of resistance against cultural hegemony" (60) is that they do so by substituting elements of the fourteen line traditional form, creating various hybrid forms, such as can be found not only in the work of Hughes and other members of the Harlem Renaissance but also in the works of other African American

poets throughout the twentieth century such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Yusef Komunyakaa, and most recently, Terrance Hayes in his 2018 collection *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin.* However, this tradition starts well before the twentieth century. Phyllis Wheatley, who was sold into slavery as a child but learned to read, write, and compose poems, is considered the first poet to input "racial motifs [into] European-derived metrical constructions" (Francini 44).

Speaking of forms used in *Native Guard*, Trethewey comments in a 2010 interview with Daniel Cross Turner that the "types of form [she] uses in *Native Guard* have everything to do with the idea of historical memory and reinscription. [She] decided that it was necessary to invoke forms that had repetition or refrain in order to reinscribe those things that had been erased or forgotten" (157). At the core of the collection *Native Guard*, the intended purpose, as is the case in many of Trethewey's poems and collections of poems, is to unearth forgotten histories, and as the above excerpt from the interview notes, she brings those lost histories to the surface of today's communal consciousness by making careful formal and content-based choices in her poems. In this regard, the blues sonnet with its heavy emphasis on repeat and refrain works well to emphasize forgotten legacies. However, not only is Trethewey using the form to "repeat" and "emphasize," she also employs the sonnet form to work as an "innovative mechanism of resistance against cultural hegemony" (Francini 60).

In his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes encourages black writers to lean into their heritage, not whitewash or hide from it. In writing a collection that purposefully uses traditional black forms of expression in addition to crafting poems that speak of her own racial struggles and Southern Ambivalence, Trethewey heeds the call that Hughes set before her. The blues sonnet, in particular, is a fitting form for her to use when reaching across time to converse with Hughes, as the sonnet has a long history of serving as an "invitation to converse." Furthermore, Brunner says that the "Blues form is a house

haunted by other voices" that "enacts a transmission across generations in a form that retains ancestral voices" (242). In writing "Graveyard Blues," Trethewey crafts a poem that, through its form, is "haunted" by Hughes' voice as well as the voices of numerous African American poets and musicians who came before her. Trethewey infuses her own style onto the blues sonnet, leaving the trace of her own distinct voice on the form's ever-growing tapestry within African American literature, a new voice to haunt future generations. However, Trethewey's "Graveyard Blues" is haunted by a history of ambivalence, as well. Through reviving the blues sonnet, Trethewey places herself in conversation with Hughes, who also negotiated ambivalent feelings toward the South and a Duboisian sense of "two-ness," an on-going feeling of being split between "black" and "American." As previously noted, Hughes' blues sonnet in particular has been called an "ambivalent aesthetic" (Müller 253) for attempting to meld Western verse with black expression, underscoring the profound racial and artistic tension of his time. While "Graveyard Blues" mourns the death of her mother, Trethewey's own sense of two-ness as a mixed-race woman and her feelings of national and regional ambivalence are also embedded within her blues sonnet, a move she inherited from Hughes.

2.2: NATASHA TRETHEWEY AND ROBERT PENN WARREN

Robert Penn Warren, born in Guthrie, Kentucky, achieved notoriety as both an American poet and novelist – in fact, he is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes in both fiction and poetry – and as a literary critic, who alongside Cleanth Brooks helped to establish the New Criticism movement in literature with their texts *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*. He is also a canonical, Southern male writer who understood

firsthand the experience of harboring mixed feelings toward the South,[14] his own life story revealing a man who began his career defending myths of the Old South but whose perception changed over time. This chapter argues that one of Trethewey's poetic preoccupations through her collection *Native Guard* is to place her poems in conversation with literary forefathers who also had ambivalent feelings toward the South – even those from privileged, white backgrounds – as a way to grapple with her own Southern Ambivalence. To this end, Warren's significant influence on Trethewey is evident in the poem "Pastoral" as well as in her final speech as Poet Laureate.

"Pastoral" also belongs within the sonnet tradition of African American literature, a tradition that, as Francini argues, has facilitated an "invitation to converse" for African American writers. In "Graveyard Blues," the sonnet discussed in the previous section, Trethewey mourns her deceased mother while also "inviting a conversation" about historical suppression, race, and ambivalence through infusing the sonnet with the blues, a move that I argue connects her to literary forefather, Langston Hughes. In "Pastoral," however, Trethewey creates a very different kind of conversation with a specific group of white, Southern, literary figures, and Robert Penn Warren, in particular. In this instance, that conversation takes place within the flexible construct of a dream, as the poem begins:

> In the dream, I am with the Fugitive
> Poets. We're gathered for a photograph. (35)

[14] In an interview conducted by Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walters for *The Paris Review,* Warren says that many Southern writers of the modern era "had some important experience outside of the South, then returned there – some strange mixture of continuity and discontinuity in their experience – a jagged quality." Though Warren speaks of these Southern writers in the third person, he undoubtedly means to include himself in this category, which is why he is able to speak of the period and its writers with such knowing authority and insight. His language – "some strange mixture of continuity and discontinuity…a jagged quality" – seems to also articulate a form of Southern Ambivalence as he understood or experienced it, one that manifested as a byproduct of leaving the South and later returning with a new perspective.

Within the dream, the speaker finds herself transported back in time to the 1920s with a group of young Vanderbilt University students and faculty members who became known as the Fugitive Poets, including Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. However, not only does the speaker locate herself among these now-deceased Southern poets and critics, she has also been accepted as one of them, even lining up with them for a photograph. The next five lines begin to illustrate the rhetoric of the Fugitive Poets from that time, as Trethewey envisions it:

> Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta
> hidden by the photographer's backdrop –
> a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows,
> lowing, a chant that sounds like no, no. Yes,
> I say to the glass of Bourbon I'm offered. (35)

In this section of the poem, the skyline of Atlanta, the South's largest city, has been covered up by the "photographer's backdrop" (35). The design on the backdrop warrants close inspection: "a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows," (35) a scene that depicts the Agrarian ideal of the Old South and is significant because, as Lucinda H. Mackethan notes, the Fugitive Poets "were drawn together…by similar attachment to artistic principles that included the belief that a society operating by agrarian standards was in every way superior to the industrial culture that prevailed in the United States." Bearing in mind the beliefs of this group of poets, the seemingly innocuous design of the backdrop reveals a more sinister meaning; that is, the backdrop literally covers the city skyline, attempting to block the view of urban progress in favor of the rural, pastoral ideal. Furthermore, the chant the speaker envisions from the cows on the backdrop – "no, no" – seems to echo the Fugitive Poets'

distrust of the country's rapidly growing urbanization, the "no, no" effectively serving as the voice of their objections to that urbanization. However, the speaker ends the line on "yes," which, although syntactically belongs with the sentence on the following line (saying "yes" to the Bourbon), also works as a kind of opposition to their ideals, encouraging the end of Old South ideologies and traditions that hinder much needed social progress (Trethewey, "Pastoral" 35).

The next section names Robert Penn Warren specifically as it also points to the future:

> We're lining up now – Robert Penn Warren,
> his voice just audible above the drone
> of bulldozers, telling us where to stand. (35)

Even as Warren attempts to direct the position of the poets (albeit in this instance their physical position for the photograph), the "bulldozers" of the industrializing world drown him out, pointing to a changing South despite his opposition to that change. However, the speaker cleverly says that Warren "tell[s] them where to stand" (35), no doubt referring to the book *I'll Take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, a collection of essays to which many members of the Fugitive Poets, including Warren, contributed, a book that promoted at its time the notion that the South should remain an agricultural hub, thereby thwarting urbanization and subsequent social progress and racial integration.

Finally, the next section presents the poem's turn:

> Say "race," the photographer croons. I'm in
> blackface again when the flash freezes us.
> *My father's white,* I tell them, and *rural*.

You don't hate the South? They ask. *You don't hate it?* (35)

Just before the photographer snaps the photo, the speaker ends the eleventh line with "I'm in," poignantly and privately rejoicing that she has managed to pass as an equal, that is as a white, educated fellow poet – a new member of the Fugitive Poet milieu. But, just as the camera snaps the photo, the speaker's mixed race is revealed, even unsettlingly performed, as suggested with the term "blackface." In an attempt to appeal to the group and their agrarian values, she offers that her "father's white…and rural" (35). Their imagined response is not what the reader might expect, just as the speaker is not what the other poets expect. Using a revised Faulkner quote from his novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, the speaker's dream imagines that their response is "you don't hate the South…you don't hate it?" which seems to suggest a kind of knowing sympathy. Rather than turning her away, they prompt her with a question, opening up a dialogue that mirrors the change in Warren's attitudes regarding black Americans over the span of his life. It also puts the past into conversation with the present, a cornerstone of Trethewey's poetry as well as Warren's, emphasizing a shared preoccupation of the two poets, and I would argue, highlighting Warren's influence on Trethewey's work.

Before discussing how Trethewey emulates Warren in her writing of "Pastoral," it is important to note that several members of the Fugitive Poets, referenced in Trethewey's poem, would decades later become the New Critics. Thomas Daniel Young explains that John Crowe Ransom argued in 1937 "that no one had defined what the critics' responsibilities were" (101). Ransom concluded that criticism "must be precise and systematic" (Young 101). The following year Warren and Brooks, two of Ransom's former students, heeded his call, publishing a new approach to analyzing poems in their book *Understanding Poetry*, the basis of which argued for close reading of the poem and that "if a poem is to reveal its unique quality, it must be read purely as poetry and not as history,

biography, philosophy, or anything else" (Young 101). Although New Criticism had a profound impact on literary theory through the twentieth century, not all tenets of their methodology have stood the test of time. It would be nearly impossible to read Trethewey's poetry for instance – and indeed much of Southern literature – without also studying its historical connections and insights. Also, much of Trethewey's work is bound up in autobiography. Such readings would not be permissible if one were to staunchly follow the tenets of New Criticism. However, the New Critics do offer valuable insight into the Southern ambivalent experience, rendering their presence in Trethewey's poem even more apposite to this discussion. In fact, according to C. Hugh Holman, the New Critics' innate understanding of "the Southern riddle" as a "union of opposites" radically influenced their criticism[15] (181). Holman argues that "this is a group of writers [the New Critics] who are not only able to live at ease with paradox; they are able to value paradox as a primary element of art…These writers have presented the paradoxes and the dilemmas of [S]outhern life," rendering them "high art as well as accurate statement" (181). When Trethewey alludes to New Critics in her poem, she calls attention to the fact that ambivalence is so tied up in the Southern experience that it even influenced the way Southern critics read, analyzed, and interacted with all literary works.

However, not only does "Pastoral" reference Warren and the Fugitive Poets, and by extension the New Critics, it also emulates Warren, suggesting that Warren's influence runs deep in Trethewey's work. Steven D. Ealy in his article "Robert Penn Warren's Encounter

[15] Regarding this "union of opposites," Holman refers to Coleridge: "If these [Southern] contradictions are to be brought into focus, if these ambiguities are to be resolved, it must be through a 'reconciliation of opposites'" which according to Coleridge "is the function of the poet" (180). Coleridge's "reconciliation of opposites" differs from Keats' theory of negative capability, which Keats defines in an 1817 letter as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In fact, Keats was critical of Coleridge for being "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge" (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham 235). The two theories could be considered differing approaches to ambivalence: Keats' negative capability would have the poet "capable of being in uncertainties"; whereas, Coleridge would have the poet attempt to "reconcile" the two opposing forces. Holman chooses to reference Coleridge regarding Southern literature, suggesting he sees the Southern writer and the Southern critic as being preoccupied with reconciling the contradictions inherent in the Southern experience.

with Thomas Jefferson in *Brother to Dragons*," notes four key characteristics common in Warren's longer poems, using his book length poem *Brother to Dragons* as the basis for the discussion, a poem Trethewey unpacks in her final Poet Laureate speech. The four features of *Brothers to Dragons*, as identified by Ealy, include:

> 1) Each poem has, as its title character, an archetypal American…. 2) Each poem features the layering of time, with aspects of the contemporary American landscape or map overlaying that of the earlier period. 3) Each poem includes among its cast of characters the author of the poem…who interacts with…the poem's title figure. 4) Each poem contains a meditation on history, identity, and time (95).

Applying these four features to *Brother to Dragons*, the reader finds that Warren uses Thomas Jefferson as its central figure at the particular point in history when a murdered slave is found to be the victim of Jefferson's nephews. Ealy claims that "Warren is especially interested in understanding how the murder committed by Jefferson's nephews affected Jefferson's understanding of human nature" (97). However, Ealy finds that "while this brutal murder and the bizarre series of events that flow from it provide the backdrop for Warren's poem, the real action of the poem is the encounter between the principals of the historic events and 'R.P.W' the 'writer of the poem,' who serves as interlocutor" (96). For Ealy, "Warren's presence is crucial, for it is his presence that represents the possibility of dialogue with the past" (111). Ealy notes that for Warren, placing himself within the poem and

creating a dialogue between past and present[16] "help[s] us [the readers] to understand the complexities of American life and history" (109), and Trethewey uses a similar technique in her poem "Pastoral" fifty years later, with a similar goal in mind.

On a considerably smaller scale (one sonnet as opposed to a book length poem), Trethewey crafts her own poem in a similar manner to Warren's *Brother to Dragons*. In fact, the four common features that Ealy outlines in his article can be directly applied to Trethewey's poem "Pastoral." For one, "Pastoral" makes use of Robert Penn Warren as the "archetypal American" in a similar way that Warren uses Jefferson; that is, Warren characterizes Jefferson as a kind of disillusioned godhead of America, having eloquently written the great promises of freedom and equality found in the country's Declaration of Independence only to later learn that his nephews murdered a slave over a broken water pitcher. That disillusionment can be read near the end of the book when Jefferson says "we have been lost in / the dark / And I was lost, who had dreamed there was light" (Warren, *Brother to Dragons* 194). Just as Warren does with Jefferson, Trethewey also conceives of a man disillusioned by former beliefs, except her "archetypal American" is a godhead of the literary canon, Warren himself. In a 2009 interview with Christian Teresi, Trethewey explains her interpretation of Warren's change in perspective over his career. Of his 1956 book *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South,* she says the work "represents a kind of reporting and interviewing based on Warren's journey back to the South after the Brown decision to rethink his earlier position on the South from *I'll Take My Stand*" (118). Just as

[16] Ealy's observation that Warren creates a dialogue between past and present extends beyond Warren's *Brother to Dragons* and Trethewey's *Native Guard*; in fact, it is a significant theme of Southern poetry throughout the twentieth century. Other notable examples of collections of Southern poetry that focus on conversing with the past include Charles Wright's *The Southern Cross* (1981), Kathryn Stripling Byer's *Black Shawl* (1983), Robert Morgan's *At the Edge of Orchard Country* (1987), Fred Chappell's *Family Gathering* (2000), Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), and Maurice Manning's *The Gone and the Going Away* (2013). Manning's latest collection, *Railsplitter* (2019), is comprised of persona poems in the voice of Abraham Lincoln. Within my own collection of poems in this thesis, the "Letters to the Living" persona poems create a dialogue with the past by imagining the voices of my ancestors, allowing them to once again speak with the living.

young Warren begins his career with a borderline racist essay in *I'll Take My Stand* and yet later publishes a book of open-minded interviews, so too does the poem "Pastoral" show at first a Warren figure "telling them where to stand" but by the end interviewing and questioning the guest, seeking a more comprehensive understanding of history and race, instead of blindly clinging to his young, provincial sensibilities. Just as Warren seeks to understand Jefferson in greater depth, so does Trethewey with Warren.

"Pastoral" also "features the layering of time" (Ealy 95), specifically within its dream structure, where the present (the speaker) has been fused with the past (the Fugitive Poets), the city of Atlanta becoming overlaid with the backdrop of an older, more rural South. Third, "Pastoral," like *Brother to Dragons*, "includes in its cast of characters the author of the poem…who interacts with…the poem's title figure" (Ealy 95). Specifically, the poem includes both the poet-speaker – no doubt a version of Trethewey herself – and the Fugitive Poets, the group of them interacting with one another, including the poet-speaker and Warren, the title figure. Finally, "Pastoral" can certainly be considered a poem that "contains a meditation on history, identity, and time," (Ealy 95) as its fourteen lines manage to meditate on the history of the South, the growing and changing attitudes of the Southern literary elite during the twentieth century and the fluid passing of time between past and present. If Warren's goal in *Brother to Dragons* is, as Ealy says to "help[s] us to understand the complexities of American life and history" (109), so too can Trethewey's "Pastoral" be seen as a poem that creates a powerful conversation with the past, underscoring Warren's influence on her craft and highlighting Trethewey's poetic voice as a kind of re-interpreter of Southern history.

Given Warren's role as one of Fugitive Poets and one of the writers of *I'll Take My Stand*, it might, at first, seem hard to believe that Trethewey should want to study him, emulate his craft, and hold him in such high regard, especially since the rhetoric of *I'll Take*

My Stand was wholly incompatible with the much-needed progress to modernize the South, including progress that would give African Americans more fundamental rights and privileges. In fact, Mackethan finds that a central theme of *I'll Take My Stand* is that "many of the essayists seemed to back away from their knowledge of the South's actual past in order to restore a mythical past." Such assessment proves true when looking at Warren's essay "Briar Patch," in which he says the "Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs, by temperament and capacity" (260). Here, Warren grossly minimizes the Southern black man in his efforts to promote a pastoral, picturesque Old South that likely never existed to begin with. It would seem hard to believe that Trethewey should find herself invested in a writer with such a past. But, given that her final lecture as Poet Laureate focuses almost entirely on Warren, it would seem that his impact on her work has been immense. Her lecture acknowledges Warren's past blunders while at the same time articulating why he still matters to her work and to American literature at large: "It might seem odd to those who think of Warren as simply an unreconstructed Agrarian and a poet who expressed notions of black inferiority in [some of his] poems…that I would look to his work as a model of evolving enlightenment and as an example of poetry's way of showing us the possibility of justice and equality" (Trethewey, "The Quarrel"). However, she continues by saying that "we miss something of the transformative power of language across time and space when we consider only certain works in isolation and not a writer's body of work across a lifetime with its revisions and repudiations" (Trethewey, "The Quarrel"). Indeed, Trethewey is deeply moved by Warren's ability and willingness to revise old ideals over the span on his literary career, and she is not the only critic to note such a transformation in Warren's work. In a 1957 interview for *The Paris Review*, interviewers Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walters share with Warren that for them there was "an exciting spiral of redefinition in your [Warren's] own work from *I'll Take My Stand* through the

novels to *Segregation*. It would seem that these works mark stages in a combat with the past."

Furthermore, Trethewey admires Warren for not glossing over or erasing his inconvenient former choices, stylistic or otherwise, in order to improve his self-image. Trethewey explains that the revised edition of *Brother to Dragons* in 1979 could have offered Warren the opportunity to alter some of the racially charged language, including language on the part of the poet-speaker, but he does not, and of this choice, Trethewey says "he [Warren] was concerned with creating a true record of man, that is, of his quarrel with himself, by avoiding a revision that would amount to erasure of the past and would present his current self in a tidy, more positive light" ("The Quarrel"). In several interviews, Trethewey mentions many times that she sees her role as a kind of poet-historiographer, a poet committed to unearthing forgotten, lost, or buried histories, and this quest comes to the forefront in her collection *Native Guard*. Thus, despite the racially charged language in *Brother to Dragons*, Trethewey appreciates that Warren refuses to gloss over or minimize the past, even in revision.

Finally, near the end of her final Poet Laureate speech, she explicitly discusses the impact he has had on her work and her thoughts on poetry as a way into history:

> Reading Warren showed me how to contend, in my collection, *Native Guard*, with my own history of race and the struggle for justice in the American South and in the nation as a whole, and how to make the quarrel I had with my county – about our collective forgetting and cultural amnesia – a struggle ultimately with myself over the responsibility of remembering and memorialization. Reading Warren, I see the scaffolding of a tradition in American poetry of turning to history in order to deal with difficult knowledge, to grapple with ongoing issues of justice, to reflect upon how and what we remember, how the images of our

> history – that knowledge – rooted like blood in the body, must be contended with again and again, to keep us ever vigilant lest we forget. (Trethewey, "The Quarrel").

In this passage, Trethewey explains Warren's significant impact on *Native Guard,* but she also notes that his legacy underpins a "scaffolding of a tradition in American poetry of turning to history in order to deal with difficult knowledge" ("The Quarrel"). Her choice of language locates the "tradition" of "turning to history in order to deal with difficult knowledge" as not only a feature of Southern poetry but also of American poetry and, in fact, the very "scaffolding" that holds the whole of American poetry upright.

In "Pastoral," Trethewey emulates Warren's *Brothers to Dragons* and evokes Warren and the Fugitive Poets, placing herself again in conversation with a writer – and a literary movement – known for grappling with Southern tensions and complexities. Like Warren, she also studies the past for answers, for ways of expressing and dealing with racism and "cultural amnesia" and for ways of grappling with regional ambivalence. In so doing, Trethewey discovers that poets must make use of the quarrel they have with their regions or countries. Ultimately, through embracing that quarrel with the South and America at large, she points the finger at herself, taking on the responsibility of enacting change through the writing of poems, a lesson learned from reading Warren.

2.3: NATASHA TRETHEWEY AND WILLIAM FAULKNER

In 1939, *Time* magazine called William Faulkner the "central figure in any investigation of Southern literary life" (qtd. in Cobb 137), following the publication of such groundbreaking novels as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light In August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Almost a century later, his legacy has not diminished. Understanding the significance of Faulkner's work has much to do with considering the time and place in which he lived. Considered the primary figure of the Southern Renaissance, or "the upsurge of Southern literature which began after the First World War" (Fowler vii), Faulkner's novels show remnants of the old, rural South decaying in the new, modern world.

In her introduction to *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance,* Dorren Fowler discusses the "historical and sociological causes"[17] (vii) of this literary movement that Faulkner's work helped to establish: "the Southern Renaissance was the result of a long overdue, head-on collision of cultures. In the 1920s the Southern states…attempted to rejoin a modern, industrial nation. This reentry changed the face of the South and gave rise to a dislocated sensibility" which was "articulated by Southern writers" (viii). Faulkner's depiction of the South's "dislocated sensibility" at this crucial moment in history aided the emergence of a rich Southern literary tradition, and his novels are still considered to epitomize the very essence of Southern literature. As a result, Noel Polk finds that most Southern writers after Faulkner will inevitably have their work compared with "the tradition of '[S]outhern' letters that Faulkner so forcefully defined" (4).

However, not all writers to follow would appreciate the weight of Faulkner's overbearing legacy. For example, Flannery O'Connor famously said that the "presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (45). In this analogy, the "mule and wagon" represent the new Southern writer, who stands to be overshadowed or even run over by the colossal Dixie Limited locomotive, intended to represent Faulkner's legacy. When Trethewey references Faulkner in her poems, she affirms her awareness of his presence within the same literary tradition as her

[17] Here, Fowler references theories of Louis Rubin and Allen Tate.

own, and she places herself in conversation with another literary forefather who grappled with Southern Ambivalence. The preceding two sections detail, in part, how Trethewey emulates the poetic forms of poet-forefathers. As Faulkner's predominate genre is fiction, however, Trethewey does not emulate his form in her poem "Miscegenation" but rather chooses a poetic form – the ghazal – that allows her to evoke and engage with Faulknerian preoccupations.

Cobb claims that Faulkner's "ambivalence about both the Old South legend and the New South identity permeated both his personal and literary world" (137), but these two worlds certainly were not independent of one another. In fact, Faulkner's personal ambivalence seeped into and shaped his literary achievements. In his 1954 essay "Mississippi," Faulkner articulates his personal ambivalence about the South. Although the essay is written in the third person and uses both real place names in addition to character names from his novels, critics[18] agree that this essay provides autobiographical insight into Faulkner's relationship with Mississippi and the South at large. In one instance, Faulkner discloses that "most of all he hated the intolerance and injustice: the lynching of Negroes not for the crimes they committed but because their skins were black" ("Mississippi" 716). Later in the essay, Faulkner continues to flesh out the specifics of the racial injustice that he abhors, but he also expresses that his feelings are double-sided. He says of himself, "But he loves it [the South], it is his, remembering" (Faulkner, "Mississippi" 724). He mentions holidays with his family and other foundational childhood memories that endear him to the region. In the end, Faulkner summarizes the experience as "loving all of it even while he had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don't love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults" (Faulkner, "Mississippi" 789), revealing that Faulkner's Southern

[18] One such critic is Noel Polk in "Faulkner and Welty and the Southern Literary Tradition," though Polk does make the distinction that "the protagonist of 'Mississippi' is Faulkner the citizen, not Faulkner the artist" (9).

identity – much like Trethewey's – was characterized by some degree of both love and hate. Faulkner inserts his personal ambivalence into his fiction, as well. Cobb suggests that even instances of ambivalence expressed by fictional characters in his novel may in fact be speaking for the author himself (139), for instance at the end of *Absalom! Absalom!:* when asked "why do you hate the South," Quentin Compson repeats over and over "I don't hate it," as if trying to convince himself (Faulkner 304), a quote that Trethewey includes in her poem "Pastoral," discussed in the previous section.

Faulkner's particular struggle with Southern Ambivalence reveals his wider views regarding the role of the individual in a chaotic world. Polk finds that, for Faulkner, humans only exist "under the terms of existential combat…in an irresolvable universal conflict whose antagonisms are permanently fixed in the nature of things" (11). One can hardly dispute that the world in which Faulkner lived could have facilitated such a nihilistic worldview, which he voiced in his 1950 Nobel Prize speech when he said that for this generation "there is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Having been born in Mississippi in 1897, Faulkner lived through World Wars I and II in addition to witnessing violent racism in the slowly modernizing South, a place that he loved as his home but also despised. It is no wonder that he might have developed the notion that life itself was a matter of "irresolvable conflict." But although the conflict may not have been resolvable, that did not mean it was without purpose or meaning:

> In Faulkner the best we can hope is to turn the tension itself into part of our weaponry, to counter force not with reason but with superior force: you don't love *because*, you love *despite;* you choose what you will struggle for and against and you wrestle to the ground those opposing forces that would have you doubt the meaning or validity of your choices. For Faulkner, then, even

> love is a matter of will, of main strength, a test of himself against the cosmos (Polk 12).

Polk seems to argue that Faulkner's tension – his ambivalent struggle between love and hate – becomes the very weapon he uses to combat doubt, nihilism, or inertia. However, he also finds that for Faulkner this solution is "the best we can hope" (Polk 12) with no guarantee of success. Still, in his Nobel Prize speech, Faulkner offers young writers the advice that "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" is the only thing "worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." Throughout his career, he seems to follow his own advice. Faulkner didn't stop loving the South; he chose to love it despite what he hated about it, and he wrestled "to the ground those opposing forces" (Polk 12). This constant tension enables Faulkner to craft his haunting portrayals of the Old South at odds with the modernizing world. Faulkner's harnessing of his own ambivalence to fortify his craft resembles that of Trethewey who, as discussed in the last section, chooses willingly to "take the quarrel" she has with America and the South in particular and make it "a struggle ultimately with [herself] over the responsibility of remembering and memorialization" (Trethewey, "Quarrel"). She, like Faulkner, chooses to lean deeper into her ambivalence, to stay in conflict with herself. For her, the tension becomes a weapon she uses to fight cultural and historical amnesia. Although she pinpoints Warren as the literary forefather who showed her how to effectively use the "quarrel [she] had with [her] country" ("The Quarrel"), her treatment of Faulkner in the poem "Miscegenation" aligns her with him, as well.

It is important to note, however, that the exact contours of Faulkner's and Trethewey's Southern Ambivalence are not identical. Polk finds a certain "tragic heroism" to Faulkner's "test of himself against the cosmos" (12). He draws attention to the specific language in Faulkner's "Mississippi," particularly his need to "love despite," arguing that his

"victory [over hatred] thus requires him to suppress his own powerful emotions of despair and frustration in favor of the communal mandate that love is better than hate, reconciliation better than alienation" (12). Polk asks crucial questions about Faulkner's insistence on "loving despite": "how and why love is better than hate, reconciliation better than alienation: for whom are they better, and at what cost are they bought?" (13). For Polk, the matter seems gendered.[19] Faulkner, as a man, has the privilege to "choose what he wants to love and be reconciled with. Women traditionally don't have that freedom: to them falls the dailiness of love and reconciliation, of cohesion…" (Polk 13). In contrast to Faulkner's "Mississippi," Polk discusses a short story by Southern writer Eudora Welty, who was a contemporary of Faulkner, called "The Wanderer." The story's central character, Virgie Rainey, has just returned to her Southern home at the beginning of the story to care for her dying mother, and she must face the monotonous, provincial community that she ultimately detests. When her mother finally dies, Virgie is at last free to hate her mother, the town of Morgana and its inhabitants, and perhaps the South itself. In so doing, she "overcomes the cultural mandate to love her family and friends by giving herself permission to hate them" and "that hatred purges and liberates in ways that love never can" (Polk 18). Regarding ambivalence, the difference then between Faulkner and Welty is that in the latter the "freedom to hate can thus bring us closer to the things we love because in the free exercise of both emotions we can come closer to our own true terribly complex selves: as Virgie comes to understand, hate and love, hope and despair, are not antagonists at all, as in Faulkner's vision, but closely connected, intimate, and essential to our human wholeness" (Polk 18), a perspective that

[19] Polk is not the only scholar to note the gendered forms of ambivalence. Lisa Mendelman discusses "the gendered politics of irony and ambivalence" (45), explaining that "in interwar America, men are ironic; women are ambivalent…what we would now call 'ambivalence' reflects a man's astute intellectual ability to appreciate nuanced contradiction, tolerate ambiguity, and entertain shades of grey; women are simply indecisive" (24). However, Mendelman argues that works by Wharton and Fitzgerald "overturn such theories" (31) while also emphasizing "ambivalence's unique purchase on modern consciousness" (45). Polk and Mendelman, though discussing different topics, show that traditionally men and women are met with a different set of expectations regarding ambivalence.

mirrors Razinsky's notion of ambivalence being a kind of "unity in plurality." Polk also laments that Faulkner's work often overshadows Welty's because hers tends to dwell in the domestic sphere while Faulkner's "epic struggles are larger, more cosmic" (8). Yet to dismiss Welty's work because of its subject matter would be to overlook its singular genius. "She has opened up the atom of the domestic and found there another universe, her own," Polk says, one in which "the enemy is terrifyingly close; it resides permanently in and is inextricable from those structures of family and community" (Polk 8-9).

Trethewey can be read as a kind of middle ground between Faulkner and Welty. Faulkner's author-personae in "Mississippi" grapples with a "love despite" kind of ambivalence; Welty's Virgie Rainey fully embraces hatred. When Trethewey describes her Southern Ambivalence, however, she seems to always speak of both "love and hate"[20] never emphasizing one over the other. Also – and in this way she resembles Welty – her poems are far more domestic in subject matter, often composed in the first person and often based on personal/familial matters as opposed to Faulkner's epic struggles between good and evil. Still, it is Faulkner she places herself into conversation with in *Native Guard* along with other male literary forebearers. Southern Ambivalence may look slightly different for Trethewey and Faulkner, but she, like him, chooses to wield tension "into part of [her] weaponry" (Polk 12). In her poems, that tension manifests, in part, through choosing to write openly about the very intimate ways that racism has touched her life and the lives of her family. In so doing, she attempts to make that racism personal for the reader, as well.

In *Native Guard*, Faulkner is referenced twice, once in the previously discussed poem "Pastoral" and once in "Miscegenation," a ghazal that begins by narrating the marriage of her parents:

[20] Refer to the introduction of Chapter Two for one such example, where I note an interview with Wendy Anderson in which Trethewey speaks of "love and hate" in relation to the South.

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi;
They went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like sin, the sound of wrong - mis in Mississippi.

A year later they moved to Canada, followed a route the same
as slaves, the train slicing the white glaze of winter, leaving Mississippi. (36)

The repetition of the word "Mississippi," the poem's refrain, denotes even from the outset the speaker's preoccupation with the place. The poet-speaker attempts to narrate one story - her parents leaving the state to marry, followed by a move to Canada - but Mississippi, the very place her family tries to leave, is the detail that's repeated over and over: "returned to Mississippi," "mis in Mississippi," "leaving Mississippi" (Trethewey, "Miscegenation" 36), a repetition that because of the form will continue until the poem's conclusion.

Faulkner and one of his characters are then referenced in the fourth couplet:

Faulkner's Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name
for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi. (36)

Both references – Faulkner and Joe Christmas – are equally compelling. As previously discussed, Faulkner's widely acknowledged ambivalence toward the South makes him an obvious choice to serve as a literary forebearer to Trethewey. Joe Christmas, the protagonist of Faulkner's novel *Light in August*, also makes for a meaningful comparison. He was born

mixed race in the South, like Trethewey; however, he is a violent, tragic character and can only really be viewed as a foil to the poet-speaker because they differ in one crucial way: Christmas was born an orphan and though defined by the color of his skin exists as a man without a past, without a lineage to direct and guide him. Though much of Southern literature references the burden of the past, for Christmas a burden of not knowing also shapes him into a social enigma. Trethewey, on the other hand, was born into a loving, if occasionally problematic household. Through literary research and the crafting of her poems, she also continues to learn about the collective past of the South and stakes her poetic practice on this kind of historical and personal excavation. This knowing of one's familial and communal past serves as the key to overcoming adversity and to surviving, even as the past continues to haunt and hinder. The final couplet reads:

> I know more than Joe Christmas did. Natasha is a Russian name –
> Though I'm not; it means *Christmas child*, even in Mississippi. (36)

Jee Eun Kim finds the phrase "I know more than Joe Christmas did" to be a kind of disassociation from Christmas, showing that unlike the Faulkner character "she has a control over literary and historical stereotypes that have victimized the mixed-race" (94). However, such a reading glosses over the complexities embedded in the poem. For one, the final couplet serves as a declaration of her knowledge of who she is and who she is not. Both her first and second names link her to her father. Mississippi links her to her mother. Her first name is of Russian origin, though she is certain that is not her heritage. Though she may differ greatly from Christmas, she mentions the definition of her name as being "Christmas child," which seems hauntingly to signal another kind of knowledge, too. Rather than disassociating from Christmas, the poet-speaker seems to willfully acknowledge that Joe

Christmas is yet another kind of forefather: someone who struggled with his mixed-race identity in the South and the social stigma of his very existence. He is who she might have been in another time and place. Trethewey asserts agency in the final couplet, as Kim suggests, but does so through unflinchingly drawing a would-be comparison between herself and Christmas rather than distancing herself from him or the all-too familiar racially preoccupied world that shaped him.

In his discussion of the ghazal, Agha Shahid Ali says "once a poet establishes the [rhyme and refrain] scheme – with total freedom, I might add – she or he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master" (3). Although Trethewey omits the rhyme scheme[21] in her ghazal, Ali's description of the form offers fascinating insight in how "Miscegenation" might be read. Through choosing "Mississippi" as the poem's refrain, Ali argues, the poet-speaker freely enters into a battle with the state as a "slave trying to master the master" (3), which is particularly poignant given Mississippi's history of slavery and Trethewey's black heritage. When considered alongside Ali's description of the form, "Miscegenation" becomes less about her parents' marriage or their journey north and less about her own identity or Faulkner and Joe Christmas. The battle becomes a match between Trethewey and Mississippi, the place that negatively impacted all the other characters in the poem, including the speaker. Her fight is with Mississippi. Through choosing to craft this poem as a ghazal, Trethewey enables that battle to take place. From Faulkner and Warren, she has inherited a desire to exercise her ambivalence, to write of her "heart in conflict with itself" (Faulkner, "Address") regarding the very place she was born, and the fight between Trethewey and Mississippi unfolds between the lines of "Miscegenation."

[21] Agha Shahid Ali objects to poets omitting the rhyme scheme in the ghazal, calling an unrhymed ghazal "a contradiction of terms" that misses out on the "breathless excitement the original from generates" (8). While Ali makes a valid argument, particularly regarding the way that the form operates in its original Urdu and Persian languages, it could be argued that all poetic forms face substitutions by the poets who use them.

The poet-speaker is not wrestling the place in and of itself, however, but rather the state's history – its past – a past which haunts her and her poems. In this way, her battle again aligns with Faulkner. Harold Hungerford argues that in Faulkner "the past determines the present" (183). For example, in his novel-play hybrid *Requiem from a Nun,* the character Gavin Stevens says "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (85). The past in Faulkner's fiction is not an inaccessible entity but rather ever-present, continuing to haunt and shape the characters.[22] The South's past, in particular, is a villain that both Faulkner and his characters must constantly battle. The same is true for Trethewey. In "Miscegenation," the past haunts the poet-speaker, both her family's own past - her parents' struggle to marry, their journey out of Mississippi – and the cultural past that Faulkner and his characters represent. In an interview with Sara Kaplan, Trethewey says "I know that it's [the Deep South] my place, but it's also not my place because of its history. There are things that would seek to make it not mine. But, the poems allow me to own it. To call it mine" (43). For her, poetry creates the space in which she can wrestle the past that haunts her and to reclaim her birthplace. Of the ghazal in the twenty-first century, Ali says that "especially among left-wing poets, the poet is often the committed revolutionary intoxicated with the struggle for freedom" and the need "to question the authority of their own culture's often rigid proscriptions"[23] (6, 12). Trethewey takes a form with Arabic origins and makes it relevant to the American South as the poet-speaker struggles to claim her home from the region's racist past.

[22] Polk compares Faulkner and Welty again with regards to the way their characters fare against the past. Welty's Virgie Rainey "refus[es] to be imprisoned in the past" and so "can now step aside from history, as so many of Faulkner's characters want desperately to do but cannot" (Polk 21). Perhaps the closest a Faulkner character comes to ridding himself of the past is Isaac McCaslin in "The Bear," who after a lengthy argument with McCaslin Edmonds about the very nature of ownership, refuses his birthright and inheritance in hopes of being free from the burden of the past.

[23] Similarly, David Caplan believes that the ghazal "establishes…a 'triangulation of otherness" (123). He discusses the ghazals of Adrienne Rich, who he says "wants poetic form to present an 'equivalent" to the time's disorders," and he argues that "the ghazal complicates this task and makes it possible…as the ghazal's fragmentary argumentative structure evokes the age's skittish anxieties" (Caplan, "In the Thicket" 123).

In “Miscegenation,” Trethewey confronts Mississippi through crafting the poem as a ghazal – a form that creates the space for “alluring tension” (Ali 3). Through referencing Faulkner and his novel, *Light in August*, within the poem, Trethewey again aligns herself with a male literary figure who professed ambivalence toward the South, one who also made use of the tension between his love and his hated of the region in his literary works. In the same poem, she also confronts her personal and cultural past, a preoccupation for both herself and for Faulkner, even as the contours of their forms of Southern Ambivalence seem to differ.

2.4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout the previous three sections, I highlight how Natasha Trethewey, in her collection *Native Guard,* engages with canonical male writers who have a connection to the South. In each section, I note what seem to be her primary gleanings from studying and/or emulating the poetry or prose of each writer. From Hughes, Trethewey learns to mourn the personal with the cultural, a lesson that deeply impacted both her blues sonnet “Graveyard Blues” as well as *Native Guard* as a collection. From Warren, she learns to make use of the quarrel she has with her country and similarly learns that the act of “turning to history in order to deal with difficult knowledge” (Trethewey, “The Quarrel”) is a fundamental part of the tradition of poetry in America. She also revives the poetic approach Warren used in his book-length poem *Brother to Dragons*, which she implements in her poem “Pastoral.” From Faulkner, she learns to let her tension with Mississippi play out between the lines of her poems. For Jee Eun Kim, Trethewey’s interaction with these key literary figures is significant because “Instead of picturing herself as a black woman poet isolated from the canon of [S]outhern literature, Trethewey inserts herself among the canonical [S]outhern poets [and

writers] and reimagines the [S]outhern literary canon as an intersection of white and non-white voices," (95) a move that deepens the "centrality of miscegenation" (91) informing the collection. In *Native Guard*, Trethewey weaves together both black and white voices, "emerging as a poet who redefines [S]outhern history and literature as hybrid" (Kim 95). While I certainly agree with this reading of the collection, I have argued that the poet's evocation of these particular literary forbearers also shows her grappling with her own Southern Ambivalence, as she has specifically chosen three literary figures known for their affiliations with – and yet also skepticisms of – the South. As such, her referencing of Hughes, Warren, and Faulkner ground her poems in a tradition of Southern Ambivalence.

The poems from *Native Guard* do not articulate explicit ambivalence, as Hughes does in his poem "The South" (discussed in Part One) or as A.R. Ammons does in "Easter Morning" when the poem's speaker says of the South "I cannot leave this place, for / for me it is the dearest and the worst" (107). Also, no poem in *Native Guard* uses obviously ambivalent language – like "dearest/worst," "love/hate," or "attachment/alienation." However, ambivalence is embedded throughout the collection through both the gesture of referencing or alluding to Hughes, Warren, and Faulkner as well as illustrating the unsettling tensions of Southern life in other poems, which could serve as the basis for an additional study. For example, in the poem "Incident," the poet-speaker remembers a night from her childhood when the KKK came to her family's yard to burn a cross. While inside the home, the poet-speaker is safe, the "hurricane lights" denoting the security of a familiar shelter amid the storm (41). As the men outside set fire to her yard because of her parents' mixed-race marriage, the speaker must negotiate the safety of her home with the danger lurking outside, a hate crime perpetrated, no doubt, by local men and perhaps even people she knows. Such tensions are present throughout the collection and further identify the collection as an ambivalent work.

Furthermore, reading Trethewey as an ambivalent writer reveals that specific forms of ambivalence exist within the Southern experience, at least as expressed by the region's writers. In particular, ambivalence does not look the same for every writer, even for those who may generally use similar language to describe their experience. More specifically, both Faulkner and Trethewey use "love and hate" to describe their Southern experience, but as Polk explains, Faulkner, while experiencing both "love and hate," seems adamant in finding reconciliation and emphasizing his love; whereas, Trethewey seems comfortable for her poems to dwell in unresolved conflict. In an interview with Sara Kaplan, Trethewey explains that "the poems allow me to own [the South]. To call it mine. To love it and hate it very publicly and the poems create a space in which to reenter the site of exile and be home inside it…Inside the poem I am most at home" (43-44). For Trethewey, poems "create a space" where she can safely "reenter the site of exile and be home inside it," where she can articulate her ambivalence "very publicly" and yet be "at home" amid the conflict (43-44).

Additionally, it seems relevant to discuss the role of influence as it pertains to this collection. Regarding influence, two twentieth century texts have become key: T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence.* Polk, however, in his discussion of Faulkner and Welty, questions the critic's impulse to analyze a text under these traditional readings, saying it is "as though critics must or anyway do always operate chronologically…without recognizing that writers don't necessarily operate chronologically and that what they derive from their predecessors may not be anything that they can or need to articulate or that critics can possibly understand" (5). He goes on to make a significant point about the danger of reading the work of women writers within these largely male-centered frameworks: "since Bloom deals exclusively with male writers and their oedipal struggles with their predecessors, it is certainly worth noting that women writers

stand in an entirely different relationship to the 'tradition' and that it would be surprising indeed if they dealt with it in the same way male writers do" (Polk 5).

While Polk makes an important point, Trethewey's direct referencing of her literary forbearers in *Native Guard* lends the collection to a discussion of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," particularly regarding Eliot's idea of a writer's "historical sense," which "involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (38). For Eliot, this "historical sense" is "what makes a writer traditional," and it is not something that is merely passed down but rather something that must be obtained through "great labor" ("Tradition" 38), a labor that involves considerable close reading of his (or her) predecessors. Trethewey's poems reveal the "great labor" she has undertaken to be well-versed in Southern literature. Not only has she read the work of her predecessors, but she is also able to craft her own experiences within her poems while also implementing their insights, stories, and forms. For example, in "Graveyard Blues" she modifies Hughes' form to create her own variation of the blues sonnet in order to grieve the death of her mother. In this way, she does not merely repeat what her predecessors have done but adds a new voice to the existing order, a voice that self-consciously places her "for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Eliot, "Tradition" 38). For Eliot, "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it," that is, "the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly altered" ("Tradition" 38). This, too, applies to Trethewey. Her poems alter the way we read Hughes, Warren, and Faulkner. After reading Trethewey, we have viewed these literary figures through her singular lens, and that view cannot be unseen.

As few critical works have considered Trethewey's poetry and prose as ambivalent texts, there is ample room for further research. For example, a look at embedded forms of Southern Ambivalence in the other collections of poetry by Natasha Trethewey could prove

insightful. Also, an in-depth look at how Trethewey has been influenced by literary foremothers as well as an analysis of that influence as it presents in her work could also prove fruitful and illuminating. Additionally, such study could make for a valuable comparison to the way in which she interacts with and is influenced by literary forefathers.

CHAPTER THREE

SOUTHERN AMBIVALENCE IN *CALL ME DAUGHTER*: A COLLECTION OF CENTOS

As a Southern poet whose subject matter focuses on the U.S. South, a significant theme within my poems is my own ambivalence toward the region. After over 30 years of living in the South, spanning the North Carolina mountains, the Mississippi foothills, and the swamps of Cajun Louisiana, I still love the region that housed my earliest memories of tenderness and connection, but at the same time, I hate the South's dominant ideologies: racism, religious hypocrisy, the glorification of the Old South, and the patriarchal institution that informed my marriage. As such, a significant part of my Southern identity can be characterized as ambivalent, a perpetual crossroad of love and hate, of comfort and discomfort.

In the previous chapter, I argue that one significant way that poet Natasha Trethewey grapples with her Southern Ambivalence in her collection *Native Guard* is to situate her poet-speaker voice into direct or indirect conversation with literary forebearers who, like her, experienced ambivalence toward the South. Through doing so, Trethewey positions herself as an individual voice in a longstanding tradition of Southern writers who both love and hate the region. Importantly, however, Trethewey's poems do not merely repeat what her predecessors have already expressed. As a woman of mixed race who came of age in a South torn apart over the Civil Rights movement, Trethewey has a powerfully original narrative to share. The three poems I analyze in Chapter Two show the poet-speaker interacting with each literary forebearer through a carefully chosen poetic form, weaving together her own narrative alongside elements of the lives and literary works of Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, and Langston Hughes.

From reading and analyzing *Native Guard*, I formed the idea of responding to Trethewey's poems by crafting a series that focused on literary foremothers of the same time period as the forefathers that Trethewey references (early to mid-twentieth century) using only one form for all ten poems – the cento. However, although Trethewey inspired these poems, they are not an emulation of her work and are quite different from her poems in *Native Guard* that I analyze in Chapter Two, including differences in tone, subject matter, and form. In my poems, the cento becomes a vehicle – a kind of time machine – that allows me to both highlight different forms of Southern Ambivalence while also exploring my own ambivalence, both through the language of Southern women writers who came before me. In this way, the voices of these ten literary foremothers each become a different mask I wear, each a different persona through which I communicate what Katherine Henninger calls "'broader identifications' of [my own] autobiography" ("What Remains" 55).

In his introduction to *The Cento: A Collection of Collage Poems,* David Lehman offers his definition of the form: "a cento is a collage-poem composed of lines lifted from other sources – often, though not always, from great poets of the past. In Latin the word cento means 'patchwork,' and the verse form resembles a quilt of discrete lines stitched together to make a whole" (21). Lehman's explanation of the cento provides a sound baseline for understanding the form as one that is "composed of lines lifted from other sources" (21). But, like any poetic form, why and how a poet crafts a cento can vary greatly depending on the individual poet's aim for the poem. Without a rich history of the cento in contemporary Southern poetry, I turn to scholarship on contemporary Irish poetry in order to develop my understanding of the form. Shane Murphy discusses the cento in the work of Irish poets, for example Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian, finding that their use of the form is a "complicating, oblique approach to issues of historical memory, identity, and politics," (191) as both poets "address issues stemming from the Northern Irish conflict" (190). However, in

their centos, the two poets approach and attribute their source texts quite differently. Paulin does so by "joining together citations and remembered quotations" (Murphy 198). He also "incorporates the writing styles of others in his own text, often offering either a critique or an analysis of the author in the process" (Murphy 198). In contrast, "McGuckian hides [her knowledge] in the seams, usually avoiding the use of italics, quotation marks, footnotes and other indicators that a text is being referred to" (Murphy 199). Despite their different approaches, Murphy finds that "each poet has found a form best suited to tackling different aspects of identity politics," involving Ireland's complicated history and their place within their country as citizens and poets (206). In my centos, I aim to extend the form's use as a space for "tackling different aspects of identity politics" in relation to the American South by using the cento to both confront my own ambivalence and to highlight ambivalence experienced by well-known Southern women writers, which has not previously been widely discussed.

In his discussion of Paulin's vision of the cento, Murphy explains that, according to Paulin, "the function of the cento, is to provide old ideas with 'a redemptive life'" (197). The centos I composed seek to "provide old ideas with a 'redemptive life,'" as I am taking the words and phrases from the source texts and arranging and documenting them in a way so as to highlight ambivalence. I would use the term "reimagined" rather than "redemptive," however, as the latter seems to suggest that something about the source texts needs to be set right or somehow amended, which is generally not the way I view the source texts. In order to effectively analyze the centos in this chapter, I will discuss three relevant factors I considered when crafting the series: 1) maintaining the integrity of the source text, 2) using the cento to highlight different forms of Southern Ambivalence, and 3) crafting the poems so that the voice also reveals elements of my own experience.

From the beginning, a key element I considered as I worked on these poems was maintaining the integrity of the source text. The very nature of the cento means that the poet is borrowing the language of other poets or writers. I felt strongly that the texts I borrowed should be handled with care. While I would argue this should be the case anytime a poet composes a cento, the nature of this series warranted particular attention because instead of crafting each cento from multiple sources, as is often the case with centos, each poem in this series has a one-to-one relationship with a particular prose text. Therefore, each cento is based on multiple lines from one work. In composing centos of this nature, an initial concern was that I did not merely summarize or replicate the source text. For example, I crafted the cento titled "Her Own Watchman" (179) from lines and phrases in the novel *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee. When working on this poem, I refrained from choosing lines that, once the poem was complete, would merely read like a summary of the novel's plot. To combat this, I aimed to express the felt experience of the main character, Jean Louise. In this particular poem, that experience refers to an internal struggle that Jean Louise endures while she is back home in Alabama visiting her father: what it means to be a daughter, a Southern daughter whose heart is "in two" (Lee 19). The poem is meant to bring Jean Louise's ambivalent emotions to the fore using phrases from the novel itself.

For each poem, I also added epigraphs noting the author of each source text, and I included thorough footnotes. Referring to Murphy's discussion of attribution in the centos of Irish poets, my centos are much more in line with those of Paulin, rather than McGuckian, as my poems include footnotes that clearly state the title and author of the source text and provide a bit of criticism and analysis that helps to contextualize the writer and/or source text within the tradition of Southern Ambivalence. Furthermore, the critical footnotes are designed to have an impact on how the cento is read and interpreted. For instance, the poem "The Southern Writer" (178), based on two essays by Flannery O'Connor, can be read as a

kind of "how to" guide for young writers of the South. However, the poem takes on a new meaning after reading in the footnote that writing, for O'Connor, "was a means of pushing back against prejudices," even, most notably and perhaps shockingly, her own recently unearthed prejudices (O'Donnell 182).

When possible, I also tried to retain a poignant element from the original prose piece within the form or content of the cento as a way to both pay homage to the author and to maintain some essence of the source text, a move that Murphy claims is common practice for Paulin. For instance, in the poem "Imagined Interview" (169-170), which is based on newspaper columns by Margaret Mitchell, I chose to structure the form in such a way as to emulate the type of writing from which I was borrowing lines. Mitchell's newspaper columns often involved interviewing the citizens of Atlanta, Georgia, so I decided to structure the cento in a question/answer format as if the speaker were interviewing Mitchell. I decided upon three questions – in fact, the three questions I would ask Mitchell if I could – and I then pieced together phrases from her columns to compose her imagined answers. This means that two discrete voices surface in this poem: my poetic voice asking the questions and Mitchell's voice answering them. Similarly, in the poem "The Wanderer" (176), based on Eudora Welty's short story "The Wanderers," I included an element of the story in the cento. When I read the short story, the number of voices incessantly directed at the main character, Virgie, overwhelmed me. In fact, readers come to know Virgie not so much from what she thinks or does but from what other people from her hometown – her mother, her neighbors – tell her to do and think. While Virgie claims some private moments for herself and ultimately decides to leave the town after her mother's funeral, I found this plethora of voices to be central to Virgie's journey, so I composed the content of the cento to mirror this. Throughout the poem, a speaker narrates a version of Virgie's time back home in Morgana, but other voices also appear (noted in italics), disrupting the narrative and demanding something of her.

One of the key aims of this cento series is to draw attention to different forms of Southern Ambivalence within the literary canon. As previously stated, despite the fact that ambivalence seems to be a major theme in Southern literature, very little research looks at this phenomenon, and no source I have come across analyzes the various kinds of ambivalence that Southern writers experience. Trethewey's poems remind readers that for as long as the term *ambivalence* has existed (since the early twentieth century), there have been Southern men writing their own version of this experience. But, what about Southern *women* of the twentieth century? As Polk notes, not only do women experience the crossroad of regional ambivalence, they often face social pressures that dictate how they are supposed to manage their mixed feelings: "Women traditionally don't have that freedom [to choose how they cope with ambivalence]: to them falls the dailiness of love and reconciliation" (13). In crafting these poems, I sought specifically to highlight well-known female Southern writers of the twentieth century whose lives and/or literary works lend themselves to a conversation about Southern Ambivalence. The research for the centos uncovered an even more prevalent culture of ambivalence expressed by Southern writers than Chapter Two revealed. It also expanded my understanding of which particular elements of Southern culture can elicit ambivalent feelings. For these women, ambivalence stemmed from both personal and societal pressures, such as sexuality, domesticity, race, marriage, and even art.

The poem "The Women" (175), based on Lillian Smith's essay of the same title, highlights a similar kind of ambivalence as discussed in Chapters One and Two – that is, being divided between "love and hate" – though Smith's account of her own ambivalence tacks on "guilt" as well. Her essay explores the psyche of Southern women of the early twentieth century and before. Critical of these traditional Southern women while at the same time providing a sympathetic explanation for their faults, Smith's essay seeks to explain the curious contradictions of the women who were "vigilant guardians of … [S]outhern tradition"

("The Women" 151), a tradition that placed them in a role of subservience even as they staunchly defended it. Smith says "We cannot forget that their culture had stripped these white mothers of profound biological rights, had ripped off their inherent dignity and made them silly statues and psychic children, stunting their capacity for understanding and enjoyment of husbands and family" ("The Women" 151). For Smith, these traditional Southern women are products of their culture, and she believes they struggle to fulfill their societal duties even as they fight to uphold the very system that silences their voices. When I composed a cento from the lines of this essay, I wanted to first maintain the dark lyricism of the source text. While also a serious investigation into a subculture, Smith's essay is often dreamlike and filled with gothic descriptions, for example, when the narrator says "the moss swings in the still air as if to the heartbeat of the dead" (139). I wanted the language in the poem to mirror the dark tone and imagery of the essay, so I selected descriptions of this kind from the source text to include in the poem.

While Smith's essay focuses on the traditional Southern woman, I wanted to use the language of her text to depict a different kind of woman – one filled with ambivalence, like Smith herself. The first half of the poem illustrates a lyrical interpretation of what I feel to be a universal Southern woman's experience. Regardless of whether a woman from the South identifies as more traditional or more modern, as products of a largely patriarchal society, I argue that all Southern women face a "stark dance which all their lives / they tread too rigid," the dance intended to signify the pressure to please "one's father" and later "one's husband" or even the male-driven society at large. Halfway down the poem, however, a shift occurs when the speaker says "One question asked aloud might uproot / their garden of fantasies, leaving reality." At this moment, the "garden of fantasies" has, in fact, been uprooted. The women in question have changed, becoming instead the ones who "hated the word Dixie,"

who “had tears / but no words for their anxieties.” By the end, “the women” are ambivalent figures who “split their souls in two.”

I also aimed to find texts by Southern women writers that reveal varying types of ambivalence and other kinds of tensions relating to their Southern identities. The poem “The Princess” (172), based on Katherine Anne Porter’s short story of the same title, is one such poem that highlights a related though different form of Southern Ambivalence from that of Lillian Smith. Notably, Mary Titus locates Porter’s Southern Ambivalence as being a split between a desire to write and “a belief that domesticity, marriage, and childbearing denote female success” (6). Titus explains that “A turn away from women's traditional roles toward the independent creativity of an artistic career represented, Porter feared, a turn away from what she had learned was natural to female identity” (6-7). Porter’s prose explores the tension between these two identities – the compulsion to write versus domesticity. In fact, Titus says that “her best-known work, serves as a medium for…her gender-thinking: her serious and sustained examination of the interrelated issues of art, gender, and identity” (8).

One such story by Porter is “The Princess,” a short story that takes the form of a fairy tale. The main character, referred to as the Princess, lives in a kingdom where adults of a certain age take off their garments and present their naked bodies to the public. The Princess refuses to follow this tradition. In protest, she begins to dress herself in elaborate, heavy costumes – one on top of the other. Her defiance against this form of traditional womanhood and sexuality inspires her art form – costume design – at which she excels, but the weight of wearing her art, and thereby defying the cultural expectation of her home, becomes overbearing and eventually leads to her demise. Titus finds that the “oppositions created in this early story, and the tensions they generate, are painful and absolute. On one side is life as an artist, a choice demanding all of body and mind; on the other side are social norms, in

particular traditional gender roles" (1), a tension not unlike that faced by Porter herself in her personal life.

In the cento based on Porter's story, I omit any discussion of the heroine's costumes so as to focus on the character's defiance and not merely replicate the short story. It is important to note, however, that the heroine in the story is not an ambivalent figure. She faces the tension between artist and traditional female practices, but she firmly chooses to devote herself to her art. In this way, she accomplishes what Porter could not, leaving behind societal expectations in favor of a higher calling. Porter, on the other hand, spent her life anxiously balancing the two: artist versus proper wife and mother.

A third consideration when composing each of the centos was to apply a patchwork approach, weaving together the borrowed lines in a way that also reveals something about my own Southern experience. The inspiration for this came from Trethewey, as the poems in which she explores the works or forms of literary forefathers also disclose insight into her own experiences. I began to think of the various voices in the centos – whether first or third person – as different personae through which I communicated elements of my own narrative. Again, exploring Trethewey's method proves useful. Regarding Trethewey's frequent use of writing in personae, Henninger says that "wearing the 'thicker mask' of persona actually allows her to explore her personal experience more deeply" ("What Remains" 55). From my view, this technique did not necessarily produce a *deeper* exploration of my own ambivalence but rather a *wider* one, as I was able to explore many different variations of ambivalence and find a version of myself in each one.

The poem titled "Darling, Darling" (173-174), based on Zelda Fitzgerald's letters to F. Scott Fitzgerald, reveals the genesis of this approach. For a long time, I wanted to write a poem based on the fascinating though tragic life of Zelda Fitzgerald. In fact, this was the first cento of the series that I completed. Through reading her nonfiction, I became transfixed by

her imagination and her chaotic brilliance. I underlined various phrases as I read her letters, and once I had typed out the poem, I became intrigued by the fact that I had captured something of my own narrative, as well. The poem was composed of Fitzgerald's language, reconceived by me, but it also revealed something of my own life, my own Southern experience: the girl who "thought / of the South and a happy past I'd never had" (24-25), the girl with "Cosmic / regrets" of my own (28-29).

In crafting a cento based on Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening,* I took a more audacious approach to revealing my own narrative. Rather than exclusively borrowing lines from the novel, I derived only the first sixteen lines from the source text. The remaining lines were completely written by me in an effort to, in effect, explicitly rewrite the end of the novel. A longtime admirer of *The Awakening*, the novel began to take on a new significance for me when I moved to Southern Louisiana in 2012 with my then-husband. Over those five years in Louisiana, my life started to follow the path of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of the novel, who comes to realize the depths of her discontent, both her lack of freedom and her longing for an autonomous, art-driven life. Anne Goodwyn Jones' chapter on Chopin, titled "The Life Behind the Mask," argues that Edna was only able to realize her conflict (her ambivalence) but was not able to solve it or even move on from it (182). In a beautiful, though tragic final scene, Edna walks into the ocean at Grand Isle to her death, the very place she first felt the spark of desire: "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 127).

While I find that many emotional truths in this short novel speak painfully to my own narrative, this was not my fate. I leaned deeper into my art, regained my independence, and took the hard path of starting over. My version of Edna would not have walked into the water that day, nihilistic and defeated. Through writing the cento, titled "Edna's Redress" (167-168), I gave the character a new ending; I gave her my ending. The poem reimagines (or as

Paulin would say "redeems") Edna's fate. The cento combined with a rewriting meant an even deeper level of engagement with and analysis of the source text. This substitution to the cento form also allowed my own story an even more prominent role in the poem.

Because Southern Ambivalence, a major theme of Southern literature, is the primary focus of these poems, I argue that these centos fit within the context of contemporary Southern poetry. Chapter Two contextualizes Southern Ambivalence within the work of not only a present-day poet but in the works of canonical male writers leading back to the early twentieth century. In a similar way, "Magnolias, Inflamed" is an original, creative contribution to this existing milieu, which is overflowing with poems, stories, and personal accounts of regional ambivalence. Like Trethewey's poems, this series looks to the past for answers, to writers who came before me, demonstrating what Eliot calls a "historical sense" ("Tradition" 38). However, these poems do not repeat or emulate Trethewey's work or that of the source texts; instead, they offer a new way of reading and creatively approaching Southern Ambivalence, focusing on the literary works of women writers. Furthermore, Linda Wagner-Martin argues that what has "remained constant in a hundred years of the Southern novel by women is that women characters have been – and still are – drawing much of their sustenance and their wisdom from a female line of ancestry, and thereby creating a true community of women" (32). With this in mind, I would further argue that my own centos also fit within the wider tradition of Southern women's writing. Though Wagner-Martin discusses the history of female characters in novels by Southern women, these poems similarly draw their "sustenance" and "wisdom" from "a female line of ancestry," both Trethewey as a more recent predecessor as well as all ten of the Southern women writers featured in this series.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEFINING AND LOCATING THE ADULT CHILD VOICE

In this chapter, I will begin by defining concepts that are foundational to a discussion of the Adult Child Voice: voice and persona. I will also contextualize the term Adult Child Voice, exploring the article by Katherine Henninger that forms the basis of my understanding of the term, and I will discuss this particular voice in relation to Natasha Trethewey's collection *Thrall*. In the following chapter, I extend Henninger's understanding of the adult child to three other Southern women poets whose poems also make use of this voice. In so doing, I will analyze the work of Kathryn Stripling Byer, Linda Parsons, and Ava Leavell Haymon. Finally, in Chapter Six, I will analyze the ways in which I use the Adult Child Voice in *Call Me Daughter.*

4.1: DEFINING VOICE AND PERSONA

Before delving into an exploration of the Adult Child Voice, definitions of the terms "voice" and "persona" need to first be established. A major component in the writing of poetry, a well-crafted voice can add texture, identity, and a sense of place to the language. However, a wide variety of theories around, and definitions of, the concept exist, often in conflict with one another. For example, in attempting to define voice as it applies to poetry, David Nowell Smith finds that the more time he spends studying voice, the less he feels he understands it (4). He even considers whether there really is a voice in poetry, citing the 2012 edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: "To define *voice* in written poetry immediately poses a problem, for there is no literal voice in the poem: voice is an oral metaphor employed in the description and analysis of the written word" (Richards 1525). Smith ultimately takes issue with this definition. For one, he points out that this description

does not clearly define what is meant by a "literal voice" (Smith 3). He also questions the lack of explanation regarding "voice" as an "oral metaphor," arguing that "to call voice a 'metaphor' suggests that it is a metaphor *of* something, but of what?" (Smith 4). Smith contends that "when we speak of 'voice' we are always figuring voice in one way or another – as speechsound, as voiceprint, style, authenticity, persona, possession, orality. But, at the same time, it is easy enough to say that voice is 'not' any one of these instances…is encompassed wholly by none of them" (4).

Finding it easier to say what voice is not and which definitions of voice do not work, Smith's exploration of the concept as it applies to poetry seeks to provide a rethinking of poetic voice. He claims that "voice shows up a blindspot in contemporary philosophy of language" (Smith 11). Therefore, he attempts to bridge what he deems to be gaps in the existing literature, discussing in his book the notion of "voice as generated by text rather than transcribed into text, poem as transaction rather than object" (Smith 12). While Smith's book-length exploration on voice in poetry provides keen insight into the complications involving the concept as well as offering nuanced approaches to voice in poetics, Abrams and Harpham's definition of voice in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* provides a more stable understanding of voice for the purposes of this project. Abrams and Harpham define "voice" alongside the terms "tone" and "persona," highlighting the connection between the three. They suggest that all three terms "reflect the critical tendency to think of narrative and lyric works of literature as a mode of speech, or in what is now a favored term, as *discourse*. To conceive a work as an utterance suggests that there is a speaker who has determinate personal qualities and who expresses attitudes…" ("Persona" 286). Voice, in particular, they say "has come to signify the equivalent in imaginative literature to Aristotle's 'ethos' in a speech of persuasive rhetoric, and suggests also the traditional rhetorician's concern with the

importance of the physical voice in an oration"[24] ("Persona" 288). For this project, it is necessary to think of poetic voice as the utterance of a speaker "who has determinate personal qualities and expressed attitudes" (Abrams and Harpham, "Persona" 286) because it is through analyzing the speaker's "personal qualities" and "expressed attitudes" that makes observing an Adult Child Voice possible, which will be the focus of the following two chapters.

The term "persona" is often used instead of "voice" when referring to the speaker's voice in a poem. However, Abrams and Harpham use the terms interchangeably even as they provide separate discussions for the two: "On occasion, 'persona' is applied to the first person speaker who tells the story in a narrative poem or novel, or whose voice we hear in a lyric poem" ("Persona" 286). Mary Oliver provides a similar definition of persona as it relates to voice in poetry: "The term *voice* is used to identify the agency or agent who is speaking through the poem, apart from those passages that are actual dialogue. This voice, or speaker of the poem, is often called the persona…and so there exists a definite sense of a person, a perfectly *knowable* person, behind the poem" (76, 79). In the following chapters, like Abrams and Harpham, I will use the terms "voice" and "persona" interchangeably based on the understanding of "persona" as one kind of literary "voice."

The type of poetic persona that will be analyzed over the next two chapters is a variation of the poet-speaker voice called the Adult Child Voice. Personae belonging to this category are "presented as closer to their authors…where we are invited to attribute the voice

[24] This understanding of voice also seems at odds with the aforementioned definition of voice found in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which made the claim that "to define voice in written poetry immediately poses a problem, for there is no literal voice in the poem: voice is an oral metaphor employed in the description and analysis of the written word" (Richards 1525). Abrams and Harpham explain that "the term [voice] in criticism points to the fact that we are aware of a voice beyond the fictional voices that speak in a work, and of a persona behind all the dramatic personae, and behind even the first-person narrator" ("Persona" 288), suggesting that not only is there a voice(s) prevalent in a work of literature but also an "awareness" of a larger voice behind the voices.

we hear, and the sentiments it utters, to the poet in his own person"[25] (Abrams and Harpham, "Persona" 287). In this case, the "perfectly knowable person" behind the voice is a version of the poet (Oliver 79). However, it is important to note that even a persona that is understood to be the voice of the poet has still been *crafted*. In fact, Abrams and Harpham note that the ability to refer to a wide range of different speakers as personae "indicates that they are all, to some degree, adapted to the generic and formal requirements and the artistic aims of a particular literary work" ("Persona" 287). Similarly, Katherine Henninger, whose article will form the basis of my discussion of the adult child persona, argues that even in poems that "seem to present a voice of autobiographical transparency" this poetic voice is still "constructed and strategic" (56).

4.2: DEFINING AND LOCATING THE ADULT CHILD

The Adult Child Voice,[26] as I refer to it in this project, comes from Katherine Henninger's 2013 article in which she discusses the poetry of Natasha Trethewey. Henninger argues that "Of all the components of identity that comprise the 'real' Natasha Trethewey – wife, sister, teacher, poet, advocate, critic, friend – it is striking how near exclusively [she] chooses to contextualize her experience in frames of child-hood, not only in representations

[25] E. Richards in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* refers to this type of poetic voice as the "lyric voice—a figure that closely associates the poem's 'speaker' with the author's perspective" (1525). The impulse to liken the voice of the speaker to the voice of the poet has been debated. The New Critics, for example, "insisted on assuming 'always that the speaker is someone other than the poet himself,' even or [especially] when reading lyric poetry" (Richards 1525). However, when T.S. Eliot maps out three kinds of poetic voices in his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1954), each of the three is associated with the voice of the poet: The "first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse" (96).

[26] Henninger discusses the adult child as a "poetic voice" ("What Remains" 56) and as "persona" ("What Remains" 61). However, she often just uses "adult child" to refer to the same concept, meaning that for Henninger the Adult Child Voice, the adult child persona, and the adult child all essentially mean the same thing. My preference is "Adult Child Voice," and I've chosen to capitalize this term to keep it level with my capitalization of Southern Ambivalence and to highlight its importance to this thesis. I also do, at times, just use "adult child," which, like Henninger, is synonymous with the Adult Child Voice.

of herself as a child, but in the on-going condition of being a descendent or a daughter" ("What Remains" 56). What makes this particular facet of Trethewey's poetic persona noteworthy is that while her four collections of poetry "are full of images of children and childhood," those images function "in ways different than literary critics of childhood…have theorized" (Henninger, "What Remains" 57). For example, Henninger quotes Roni Natov's concept of the "poetics of childhood," which Natov describes as being the "persistent longing for childhood in adulthood and those states of mind we connect with childhood: openness and a sense of mystery and awe, as they are expressed in the language and literature of childhood" (6). However, Henninger does not feel that Trethewey's poems lend themselves to this kind of reading, for in Trethewey, "the pastoral is never pastoral, particularly not in the Romantic sense described by Natov" ("What Remains" 58). In fact, rather than writing from a sense of "nostalgia for the past – both the personal and the historical" ("What Remains" 58), Trethewey's use of the adult child is more about "offer[ing] her bodily self as a symbolic 'offspring' of regional, national, and transnational obsessions with race, identity, pollution, and 'progress'" ("What Remains" 57). Similarly, when analyzing the Adult Child Voice in the work of the three poets under discussion in the following chapter, it becomes apparent that the presence of this voice is never merely representative of a sentimental attachment to childhood but is instead always tied to some form of grief, tension, or trauma.

For Henninger, the adult child not only melds childlike experience with adult perspective but is also a voice that can be described as a "poet-speaker," one that can communicate "a voice of autobiographical transparency"[27] ("What Remains" 56). Henninger is not the only critic to link autobiography in poetry with a child's perspective. Richard N.

[27] It should be noted that Henninger's analysis of the adult child in Trethewey is focused more on how the adult child works as "constructed and strategic...'personal' personae," as Henninger is "interested less in Trethewey's actual personal history than in her choices for representing it in poetry" ("What Remains 56). Conversely, my analysis of the adult child in Trethewey, Byer, Parsons, and Haymon is interested in both sides: the poets' personal histories as well as why they opt to use this particular voice.

Coe argues that verse may be the best genre to explore what he calls the "child-Self." Coe establishes a "fundamental pre-condition" for autobiography: "the writer should declare his resolve…to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," a commitment "to absolute veracity [that] should be clearly communicated to the reader" (47). Because any narrative discourse in a poem might "carry an invisible stigma of fiction and of artifice," Coe explains that often people believe that "factual truth" must be written as prose (48). However, Coe claims that there is one kind of "autobiographical writing in which poetry…is entirely appropriate," and that he says is the "autobiography of childhood" (48). In fact, he says "poetry may well be better-suited to the re-creation, or re-evocation, or that strange, alien and baffling reality, the elusive truth of the child-Self" and labels this hybrid of "poetry" and "truth" as "poetic autobiography"[28] (Coe 48), a concept very similar to Henninger's understanding of the adult child in poems.

While another term for the (female) adult child could be "descendent, daughter, or offspring," Henninger finds that "adult child" best "captures the strategic tensions[29] developed in these personae: immediacy and distance, safety and danger, identity and survival" (56). In fact, the speaker's ability to "capture the strategic tensions" is what makes the persona "adult" as well as "child." A poem that merely sought to capture a child's voice or experience would not necessarily warrant the term "adult child." Regarding the functionality of the Adult Child Voice, Henninger explains:

[28] Coe attributes the term "poetic [auto]biography" to Thomas Carlyle from "his description of the ideal [auto]biography as one that is 'philosophically-poetically written and philosophically-poetically read'" (qtd. in Coe 48). He also traces the term through the twentieth century starting in 1960 when he says the term "acquired a new lease on life" (Coe 48).

[29] Again, Trethewey's poems lend themselves to a discussion of tension. Whereas Chapter Two illustrates the tension between "love" and "hate" in her work regarding the South, another such tension in her work is "child" and "adult."

> Alongside poems spoken from the historical past, childhood in the "autobiographical" poems is similarly a seat of memory, whereas adulthood brings the ability to discern and control narrative. Narration by a child-grown-to-adulthood simultaneously links and separates the events of a poem in time, providing the distance necessary – for both the persona and readers – to being able to see the "big picture" ("What Remains" 72).

From this explanation, it is evident that the Adult Child Voice relies on both parts of its construction to be effective. If the poem is based on a childhood experience,[30] then the autobiographical event from the past becomes the subject matter of the poem, the "seat of memory" ("What Remains" 72). However, the adult voice shapes and constructs that experience into the poem through her "ability to discern and control the narrative" ("What Remains" 72). The overall effect is the "linking" and "separating" of the events within the poem, which according to Henninger is what "provide[s] the distance necessary" for the reader and the poet "to be able to see the 'big picture'" ("What Remains" 72) of the poem. An effective use of the adult child will communicate the autobiographical elements as well as more widely applicable universal truths or observations. It will avoid overwrought sentimentality, and it will also avoid what Rita Dove calls "'narrow identifications' of autobiography" and what Trethewey calls "navel gazing" (Henninger, "What Remains" 55).

Henninger's exploration of Trethewey is thorough, discussing the poet's use of the adult child persona in each of her published collections of poems, which she describes as a strategy employed by Trethewey to work as a "'hinge' joining personal and historical memory" ("What Remains" 71). Joseph Millichap also explores Trethewey's preoccupation

[30] Based on Henninger's definition, the poem does not have to be rooted in the poet's childhood in order for the voice to be considered adult child.

with her role as daughter, focusing on her fourth and most recent collection of poems, *Thrall* (2012). Millichap's particular interest in *Thrall* is no surprise. In her third collection, *Native Guard* (2007), the poet begins to tap into the very personal: the loss of her mother, growing up harassed by the KKK due to her parents' mixed-race marriage. But, in *Native Guard*, the poet ultimately confronts events and circumstances over which she had no control. In *Thrall*, however, the poet delves far deeper into her own emotional landscape, revealing a close, though troubled relationship with her white, Canadian father – poet Eric Trethewey – while at the same time investigating various other historical white father figures[31] of mixed-race children. The poet has attributed her own father as being "one of [her] earliest [writing] teachers," and has said that she "loved learning the [English] language from him" (Trethewey, "Outside the Frame" 152-153). Her poems also reveal a fondness for and close connection to her father. However, the poet's relationship with her father was complicated. For example, the poem "Knowledge" reveals one such tension: the poet speaker says "each learned man is my father / and I hear, again, his words – *I study / my crossbreed child*…" (30). In an interview, Trethewey explains this particular situation and her feelings regarding her father's insensitive language: "To even use that language, 'my crossbreed child,' you have to ask the question, *If I'm a cross-breed, what's my mother, what species is she?* It's a really painful thing for me. It's one thing to be 'othered' in your own country, in your own state, but when it happens at home…" ("Outside the Frame" 154). Millichap also draws attention to the collection's dedication, which reads "To my father," as if the book were a letter written to him directly. In fact, Trethewey has referred to *Thrall* as "a very intimate

[31] While in *Thrall* Trethewey delves into more complicated personal and emotional terrain regarding her father, she also expands the regional landscape beyond the Deep South of her previous collections. For example, in a series of ekphrastic poems, the poet recreates "familial portraits from eighteenth-century Latin America" (Millichap 195). Trethewey explains that these "*Casta* paintings illustrated the various mixed unions of colonial Mexico and the child of these unions whose names and taxonomies were recorded in *The Book of Castas"* (*Thrall* 81). Millichap further illuminates the relevance of *The Book of Castas*: "The cast, or color, of these bi-racial progeny, as well as the caste, or class, assigned them within their culture therefore are determined by their white fathers to whom the children then are forever in thrall" (Millichap 195).

conversation in a very public forum" (qtd. in Millichap 194). The adult child in *Thrall* is Trethewey's most effective use of the persona to date, and this can be attributed to the poet's willingness to disclose her very private, emotional issues with her father while also expanding her poetic investigation of race, considering both her own experience and "the bi-racial children of all the Americas" (Millichap 195).

Trethewey's career-long project has been to unearth forgotten or hidden racial histories. In fact, even poems that detail her own personal narrative seem to consciously serve her greater purpose of writing poems that call attention to non-white voices, stories, and legacies. With Trethewey, her economical, well-crafted poems are always filled with numerous cultural, historical, literary, and personal layers to parse and analyze. However, while Trethewey may be singular in her particular use of the adult child, she is not the only female Southern poet to "contextualize her experience in frames of child-hood, not only in representations of herself as a child, but in the on-going condition of being a descendent or a daughter" (Henninger, "What Remains" 56). In fact, the Adult Child Voice seems to be a largely unexplored facet of Southern poetry. As such, I will extend Henninger's understanding of the Adult Child Voice to three other female contemporary Southern poets – Kathryn Stripling Byer, Linda Parsons, and Ava Leavell Haymon – in the following chapter. I will then analyze my own use of the persona in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER FIVE

"HER OWN RESTLESS BLOOD"[32]: THE ADULT CHILD VOICE IN KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER, LINDA PARSONS, AND AVA LEAVELL HAYMON

When Katherine Henninger discusses the poetry of Natasha Trethewey in relation to what she labels the Adult Child Voice/Persona, she highlights a major theme of contemporary Southern poetry: a sense of unbreakable family connection. But Trethewey is by no means the only poet of the American South "who chooses to contextualize her experience … in the on-going condition of being a descendent or daughter" (Henninger, "What Remains" 56). In fact, it seems that almost every major voice in the contemporary Southern poetry milieu – both male and female – feels compelled to some degree to identify themselves in relation to their familial ancestors. This recurring poetic obsession of returning home to one's family raises the question of nostalgia. Daniel Cross Turner claims that Southern literature is known for nostalgia,[33] and "this is one of the most prevalent paradigms of current [S]outhern poetry," even as some poetry from the region "resists this impulse" (47). Turner, like Henninger, has observed that while forms of nostalgia exist within contemporary Southern poetry, often nostalgia does not merely take the form of a longing for a more idealized time in the past. In fact, Turner discusses the theories of Svetlana Boym who "proposes two contrasting impulses of nostalgic desire: restorative and reflective" (Turner 49). While restorative nostalgia can become "an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure," reflective nostalgia "dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (Boym xiv, xviii). Contemporary Southern poetry that has garnered critical

[32] This line was taken from the sixth poem in Kathryn Stripling Byer's "Search Party."
[33] Turner defines nostalgia: "From the Greek *nostos*, 'to return home,' and *algia*, 'a sorrowful or distressing condition or illness' (qtd. in Turner 48).

inquiry tends to be reflective rather than restorative when it edges into nostalgia, approaching the past with objectivity and purpose, and this is certainly true of the poets to be discussed in this chapter.

While Henninger's article on Trethewey seems to be the first to address the adult child in Southern poetry, it can also be traced in the poems of other contemporary Southern poets, which seems to suggest that this persona is a prevalent, if underappreciated, motif in the poetry of the region, related to adjacent themes of family ties and forms of nostalgia. In fact, this chapter will apply Henninger's understanding of the adult child to three contemporary, if lesser known, female poets from the South: Kathryn Stripling Byer, Linda Parsons, and Ava Leavell Haymon. These three poets fit into the framework defined by Henninger: all three "contextualize [their] experience … in the on-going condition of being a descendent or daughter" in poems that "seem to present a voice of autobiographical transparency" ("What Remains" 56). While Trethewey's predilections are singular, rooting her poems "squarely in the domain of social history" (Turner xxxi), a broader investigation of the Adult Child Voice in the work of other female poets from the South reveals significant insights into both the Southern, female identity and the ways in which female poets from the region seem to grapple with grief, trauma, and abuse within their poems.

5.1: KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER'S *THE GIRL IN THE MIDST OF THE HARVEST*

Much of the published research on the poetry of Kathryn Stripling Byer focuses on an aspect of her work that John Lang has called "decidedly this-worldly" (125). For Lang, Byer rejects "otherworldliness," preferring instead to "celebrate the natural world and the depths of human love" (125). Originally from South Georgia before moving to the mountains of North Carolina, Byer's sense of "home" is divided between these two geographically and culturally

distinct Southern regions; however, for the poet, both places are powerfully associated with the natural world, for which she expresses "profound affection" (Lang 126). Byer's love of nature and place is perhaps not surprising given that she was a student of Allen Tate, a member of the Southern Agrarians, and influenced by James Dickey. However, the natural world for Byer, in particular, is always linked to family, cultural legacy, and memory. In an interview, she claims that "With each passing year, our connections with the past, with family, with the land itself, become weaker and weaker. I see my poetry, all poetry, as a struggle against amnesia" (Byer, "Interview" 29). Byer's grief over the loss of her ancestors and her struggle to preserve family legacy from being lost to the past both inform how and why she writes poems in an Adult Child Voice, an aspect of her work that I will discuss, and which, as far as I am aware, has not before been the subject of scholarly attention. In this section, I will analyze Byer's use of the adult child in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (1986), her first full-length collection and the best example of the adult child in her oeuvre.[34]

Byer confirms that writing about her own life is a significant aspect of her poetry, a precondition of the Adult Child Voice as defined by Henninger. In fact, Byer's contemporary, Lee Smith, another well-regarded Southern writer, conducted an interview with Byer in which the two writers discuss the inspiration for each of Byer's collections of poetry. Throughout the lengthy interview, Byer traces her connection to the sandy farmlands of South Georgia where she was born and raised and the Appalachian Mountains where she spent her adulthood, the two landscapes in which her poems are rooted. She talks about her "beautiful grandmother" who had "culture and ambition in her background" and who was a "crackerjack businesswoman" (Byer, "Singing" 300). She also speaks of her father who "was a complicated man" but also "a brilliant and wonderful man in so many ways, with an

[34] All poems discussed and analyzed in this section come from Byer's collection *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (1986). Therefore, for readability, the citations for these poems will just include the page number.

excellent mind" (Byer, "Singing" 300). Byer discusses how and where her family members factor into her poems; however, a careful reader of Byer's work could easily have recognized that the family members discussed in this interview are the same characters revered and elegized in her poems.

In *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, Byer establishes the adult child in the first two poems, titled "Wide Open, These Gates" and "Cornwalking." Both poems feature an adult poet-speaker looking back on her childhood and, particularly, on her role as a daughter growing up on the family farms. In the third poem, however, titled "Daughter," the poet-speaker reveals the function of her Adult Child Voice. She begins the poem by reminiscing on the slow Saturdays of her childhood in South Georgia when she would "gather a tow sack too full of pecans / to be carried" (6). Byer presents a lively scene in this poem depicting these long-ago Saturdays. Her mother is only "a few yards away" (6). Then, there's "old Autry sat slumped on an oil can / still mooning for Lester" and "Sugar Boots [who] sang the blues all afternoon" (6). She recalls the sounds of the environment as much as the people: "The telephone wires…hummed with messages" and "the pigs…rattling their feed troughs" (6). Nearing the end of the poem, the poet-speaker communicates not only the central message of the poem but also of the book, including in the next to final line the title of the collection:

> …I have my grandfather's word
> on an acre of black dirt, my father's
> on four hundred more. What
> they lost is not lost. Here I am.
> When I look up, the future's a field for me.
> I am the girl in the midst of the harvest.

I am the harvest. (7)

The poet-speaker has been promised "an acre of black dirt" from her grandfather and "four hundred more" from her father (7). These acres are her inheritance: "the future's a field for me" (7). However, for Byer, the physical landscape and the physical bodies of her ancestors are nearly inseparable. To inherit their acreage is also to inherit something of their spirit. As the descendant, she not only sees herself as the future caretaker of the land but the very crop her grandfather and father hoped to sow. She is both the girl she describes in the poem, who sits in the "midst of the harvest" and the harvest itself, proclaiming with confidence "I am the harvest" (7). The poet-speaker believes her role as a descendant and as a poet is to return what the family has lost: "What / they lost is not lost. Here I am" (7), she says. In this collection, Byer uses the adult child to fulfill this promise.

In one respect, the poet-speaker attempts to restore lost material entities. For example, she rebuilds a family home in "The Carpenter," using the imaginative landscape of the poem to reconstruct her grandparents' house from the rubble. It begins: "From the ashes I rebuild my grandfather's house. / It is a slow labor. Whatever is left / I must gather" (16). The poet-speaker feels she must "gather" what is "left" (16). It is her duty to her grandparents and perhaps to her own grief, as well. The poem illustrates the poet's toil and commitment to the imaginary project in detail:

Tears streak my dirty cheeks. Each day I quit
and each day I start over again,
using buckets of glue if I must, and
a patience I hardly knew I had inherited. (16)

While the poem begins in the present tense, at the end of the second stanza, it has shifted to the future tense, promising that she *will* finish what she started: "…I swear / by toil of my two clumsy hands I will // make of this junk-pile a dwelling place" (17). In the final lines, she imagines what she will find when she finishes:

> The hinges will creak as I open the front door
> and call out my grandfather's name.
> In the silence that answers, I step
> slowly over the threshold,
> believing that each board supports me. (17)

In reality, the poet does not literally restore her grandfather's house. Even in her imagined version, her rebuilding of the house does not bring back the past. In fact, the poet-speaker finds only "silence that answers" (17), as if to confirm that merely rebuilding the structure could not bring her grandfather back to life. Byer has reconstructed the house in words, the poem offering a version of what she cannot do in reality; but even then, the house is empty. Still, Byer fulfills the promise she made in "Daughter" to return what is lost by writing the old house back into existence and memorializing it on the page.

In "Prayer," the eighth poem in a series titled "I Inherit the Light of My Grandmother's House," the poet-speaker returns her grandmother to the same home. In this poem, however, she wills her there through prayer rather than rebuilding the house as in "The Carpenter." The poem begins "May she wake on a Saturday morning, / wind through a raised window lifting / the sheer curtain" (70). Through writing the poem, Byer not only returns her grandmother to her home but also ensures she is conscious in her afterlife there: "She opens

her eyes / and sits up, / wide-awake among what she has lost" (70). "The Carpenter" and "Prayer" make for an interesting comparison. Both poems are seemingly based on the same house, and in both poems, the poet-speaker uses an Adult Child Voice to continue to care for her grandparents and their homes long after their deaths. While she only finds silence after rebuilding the house in "The Carpenter," in "Prayer," she tries a different tactic, calling on a higher power through the practice of prayer to ask that her grandmother "live in that homeplace forever" (70). Though the two poems differ, they both show the poet-speaker pre-occupied with an ongoing sense of familial duty.

In this collection, Byer also fills in the gaps of lost family history, a gesture she again enacts on the page out of a sense of deference and duty to her family. The second section of the collection titled "Search Party" was originally published as a chapbook after winning the 1978 Anne Sexton Prize. The eight poems attempt to reconstruct the life of her great-grandmother, and the poet-speaker does so through writing persona poems in the voice of both her paternal grandmother and her great-grandmother. The poem sequence begins with a piece of prose that Byer labels "a letter my grandmother might have written, circa 1920" (25). This imagined letter is integral to the poems that follow because it explains the family mystery for which the poems will try to provide some kind of answer. The letter begins "*You ask me to write of my mother's life, notes for your family records in Ireland. Cousin, I find that a difficult task*" (25). In this section, the words in italics represent both the voice of Byer's grandmother in this letter and a version of Byer herself in the first and final poems. By the end of the imagined letter, the difficulty Byer's grandmother faces in trying to write something of her own mother is explained:

...As she aged she grew silent, as if she'd

> *gone back to the wilderness, lost to her husband and children. The times I have tried to imagine her thoughts! And I know, even as I am writing this letter, that she is a stranger for whom I will always be searching, with sand in my eyes and the sun beating down on the trail she has taken...* (25)

For Byer's grandmother, her mother is "*a stranger for whom [she] will always be searching*," but the woman in question has not literally "*gone back to the wilderness, lost to her husband and children"* (25). Instead, she seems to have turned inward the older she becomes, the speaker revealing that "*As she aged she grew silent"* (25). The speaker laments never really knowing her mother, and what she does know reads like a folklore account of a mythic figure: "*Legend has it that she was the first white child into the Black Hills"* (25). This letter sets the stage for the project that follows. Byer's grandmother wished she could have been closer to her mother, to have known more about her. Now, both women (the grandmother and great grandmother) are deceased. Byer does not have the power to change the past, but she can use the landscape of her poems to imagine her great-grandmother's voice, thereby offering her grandmother a version of what she always longed for.

The first poem in the series, also in italics, seems to be a version of Byer's poet-speaker voice, a kind of self-persona Byer constructs to wander the imagined wilderness in search of the voice of her great grandmother, the poet-speaker forming the "search party" noted in the section's title. The poet-speaker has a family Bible on which the great grandmother has written "…*Dust is / the hand that has written these words. I will wait / for you, Dearest, in Deadwood*…" (25). Based on this information, the poet-speaker sets out on her journey, switching to the second person voice. The second person "you" seems to be Byer referring both to herself and her way of recruiting the reader to join the search party:

…You set out

to find her. You carry your dust

to her dust. On this journey no maps

chart the landscape… (25)

The journey described in the poem is treacherous, and the "you" must live off the land for survival, traveling for so long that she nearly loses her identity:

and when you lean over a clear pool

at last, you are unrecognizable.

You could be anyone's daughter. Who

are you? You stumble into the mesquite

still looking for one perfect skull

with a family resemblance which you will hold

up to the light. Through the holes

that were once her eyes you see the sky come

to meet you, panoramic as history. (26)

At long last, the search party has located the great-grandmother's remains, in particular her skull. After peering through the hollow eye sockets to the sky above, a kind of magic happens that revives the great-grandmother's voice.

The section then turns to six poems in the voice of the great-grandmother. Throughout these poems, she speaks of getting married, having children, and of her German mother and grandmother. She also alludes to the reasons for her silence, revealing the tough, rural life she

endured in which "a woman must follow, must follow" and must also "… be / a good mother, / be a good wife, / be a strong woman" (29). She has been born into a culture with rigid ideas about the role of a woman and a lineage of women who quietly fulfilled that role. In a later poem, she speaks of stitching a winter rose and says "…my fingers have not lost / their language" (32). The rose pattern is the same that her mother and grandmother stitched before her. "No roses bloomed in the snow" (32), the voice reveals, not in Stettin[35] where the women lived before emigrating to America nor in the Black Hills of Northern Georgia. The stitched rose becomes a metaphor for the women, unable to bloom within the confines of their culture, but adept at stitching their "own restless blood" into the shapes of roses (32), recording their narratives in their domestic work.

The section ends on another poem in the voice of the poet-speaker. At first, the final poem seems to undo what the section worked to create: the poem begins "*You think you have found her?* / *You have not found her*" (33). But, the poet-speaker then clarifies "*In the silence* / *you find her* // *and you lose her* / *again and again*" (33). In the final stanza, the poet-speaker surmises that "*If you follow the road she has taken*," then it is possible to find where her ancestor lived, but in the end, "*There is no one home here but you*" (33). This final poem serves as a reminder that the whole section is a construct imagined by the poet. Byer reminds us that she has embarked upon an impossible task, trying to reconfigure the voice of an ancestor from a wholly different time and culture. Or, as Fred Chappell argues, "The great-grandmother cannot be discovered as an individual person; she can only be experienced as her presence is gathered into the surrounding world" (67). This gesture of turning back on the poems may also be Byer returning to the stable ground of the physical world, uncomfortable with dwelling in the world of the dead too long. As Lang has noted, Byer tends to favor the

[35] Stettin was part of the German Empire from 1871 until 1945 when it was handed over to Poland and renamed Szczecin.

inhabited world over "otherworldliness" (Lang 125). "Search Party" spends a fair amount of time among the souls of the deceased on an otherworldly quest. It may seem preferable to Byer to end the section showing the poet-speaker alone at a table, mirroring her actual experience of writing: a woman alone imagining familial voices.

Like other poems in this collection, the overall purpose of this section is to return something her family has lost; in this case, she returns the lost voice of her great-grandmother, offering her family and the reader imagined insight into her ancestor's mysterious life. To this end, she uses the Adult Child Voice in two ways. First, she constructs a self-persona that speaks in the second person, a poet-speaker voice that in the first poem endures a long, rough journey in search for her ancestor. Second, she lends her poetic voice to two women in her family – her grandmother and her great-grandmother – creating a space for them to tell the story that they could not or simply did not record themselves. However, it is ultimately Byer's voice behind their voices, even as she incorporates family folklore and recorded history into the poems. The "search party" then also refers to the poems themselves that will always, like the poet, be searching for the past, lest it be lost forever.

Much like Trethewey, Byer is preoccupied with the role of "daughter" and "descendent" in this collection. While a couple of the poems in the third section detail Byer's early days as a new mother, the greater part of the collection focuses on the girl in the harvest, Byer herself as dutiful daughter and granddaughter. When asked in an interview with Terry Kennedy for *storySouth* if her poems were "nostalgic," Byers says "I'd call many of them elegiac, but others I'd call confrontational, in that I'm confronting myself, my heritage, and my lineage." The "confrontational" poems would come later in collections such as *Wildwood Flower* (1992) and *Descent* (2012), but as far back as her first collection, there is a sense of grieving beyond her gestures of familial responsibility. For Byer, then, the Adult

Child Voice also allows her to mourn and to revisit her much loved family as well as to keep herself and her readers from forgetting the ever-diminishing past.

5.2: LINDA PARSONS'[36] *MOTHER LAND*

The Adult Child Voice is also present in the work of East Tennessee poet Linda Parsons, though Parsons uses this voice for different reasons and in different ways from Kathryn Stripling Byer. While Byer's adult child allows the poet-speaker to both mourn and yet also immortalize her family, Parsons' use of the voice creates a space to articulate childhood trauma and upheaval. Parson's 2008 collection of poems, *Mother Land*, centers around the poet's hard decision at age eleven to leave her mother and stepfather in favor of living with her father and his new wife, a decision that, according to Parsons, changed the landscape of her family forever: "I had chosen one mother over another. *I had left my mother.* This realization, this breaking of a blood bond, has followed me these many years. Our relationship [between Parsons and her mother] has never really healed" ("Rescue" 205). The poems in *Mother Land* depict why leaving was necessary to the poet's wellbeing: an erratic mother, a sinister stepfather, the couple's abusive relationship, and Parsons coming of age in a chaotic household. Similarly, the poem "Diagnosis" clarifies the medical reasoning for her mother's mood swings: "At 73, the doctor tells you what I've suspected for years: / bipolar disorder, or in the fitting older language: manic/depressive" (40). Her mother's mental illness, combined with an unstable home life, forced the poet to grow up early, to become, in

[36] Parsons' publications are under the names Linda Parsons and Linda Parsons Marion. However, since Parsons is no longer married to Jeff Daniel Marion and now chooses to publish under her maiden name, I will refer to her as Linda Parsons throughout this project.

a sense, the actual adult child for which her poetry is a vehicle.[37] In an interview with her former husband, poet Jeff Daniel Marion, Parsons says: "I suppose I was born old in that I understood some harsh realities and responsibilities before my time, was indeed robbed of certain aspects of my childhood by being forced into such decisions at an early age" ("Listening" 186). In response to Parsons' story of upending her life at a young age in hope of finding a more stable home environment, Marion says "This story seems to be one of the incredible price someone pays to be visible" ("Listening" 186). Like Trethewey and Byer, Parsons is preoccupied with her role as a daughter, and the Adult Child Voice allows Parsons to confront her mother, to reclaim the narrative of these real-life events, and to finally be visible and have her story heard.[38]

Like Byer, Parsons' subject matter is based on autobiographical events and, like her contemporary, she lends her voice to a family member in *Mother Land*, in particular her mother; however, her reasoning for doing so is quite different. Byer lends her voice to her ancestors to give them visibility and agency; however, Parsons does so to create a context in which she can confront her mother. For example, the two-part poem titled "Running from Blood" begins with "Mother's Lament" and ends with "Daughter's Reply." In "Mother's Lament," the voice of Parsons' mother attempts to assert her version of events: an ungrateful

[37] Though not mentioned by Henninger, the term "adult child" sounds a lot like "adult children" as in the term "Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA)." Douglas H. Ruben says ACOA "carries a double meaning: an adult who is trapped in the fears and reactions of a child, and the child who was forced to be an adult without going through the natural stages that result in a healthy adult" (8). Though alcoholism is not the primary subject matter of Parsons' collection, alcohol abuse is mentioned throughout the poems, often leading to the poet witnessing, at a young age, her parents' drunken fights and sexual encounters. Furthermore, Parsons' poems certainly show a woman affected by both facets of the term ACOA as defined by Ruben. The adult child would seem to be a fitting poetic voice for articulating childhood trauma or abuse, reflecting a speaker who is an adult "trapped in the fears and reactions of a child" (Ruben 8). In fact, this particular understanding of the term is relevant to my own poems. Though I've chosen not to make my father's alcoholism a primary theme throughout my collection of poems, the impact of his addiction on my life and on our relationship is certainly embedded throughout the collection and could indeed be the reason why I am drawn to the Adult Child Voice.

[38] All poems discussed and analyzed in this section come from Parson's collection *Mother Land* (2008). Therefore, for readability, the citations for these poems will just include the page number.

daughter abandoned her. At the end of the poem, she promises to haunt her child and to never let the bond truly be broken:

> Think of me in troubled sleep, knotted
> up in sheets, finding a way to hit back.
> You can't run from blood. My eye
> is on every hair of your head,
> little sparrow, first blood of mine. (8)

"Daughter's Reply," however, gives the poet-speaker the final word. To her mother, she says "Run I will, / from your mercury moods, your man / knowing my season of ripeness" (9). The poet tells her mother that she not only runs from her but from her husband who Parsons says in an essay exposed himself to her when she was eight years old ("Rescue" 204). At the end of the poem, she asserts control, promising her mother that she is, in fact, gone for good: "… O mother / of mine, our bloodpath divided, / Amen, evermore" (9). It is questionable, however, as to what extent the poet-speaker has truly broken the mother/daughter bond, considering that decades later she still seems to be sparring with her mother in her poems, unable to be rid of her.

In fact, the first poem in the collection suggests a different story. Parsons opens *Mother Land* with a poem titled "*Credo,"* the title implying that something fundamental to the poet-speaker's belief system will be the focus of the poem. "*Credo,*" originally part of an essay, signals the beginning of *Mother Land* without a page number and written in italics, suggesting that the poem hovers over the entire collection as a kind of emotional basis for what follows. The poet-speaker begins the poem "*I believe in the bicycle of forgiveness*." The bicycle represents the poet-speaker's child self who has gravel "*wedged in [her] Keds*."

However, the act of riding the bicycle also serves as a metaphor for laboring toward forgiveness. In this context, forgiveness must be chosen, consciously worked towards, just as feet work to pedal a bicycle, though the way is unclear: "… *forgiveness has no schedule, no maps, no AAA / triptych*." She sees reconciliation with her mother as another possibility: "*I believe in highways simmering ahead like heated lakes, / mirage of reconciliation near enough to imagine."* In the end, the poet-speaker says "… *I believe / grace will carry us there if we lean into the hairpin curves, / pedal hard, in life or after, beyond the blue rise,"* the adverb "*there*" referring to forgiveness and reconciliation, both real possibilities if mother and daughter choose to journey toward them. In this way, "*Credo*" sets up how to interpret the tone of the collection as a whole. The poet-speaker will use the Adult Child Voice to expose her narrative and to grapple with her complicated relationship with a mentally ill mother, the infidelity of her father, a controlling and sexually suspect stepfather, and a stepmother she chooses to live with over her birth mother. However, "*Credo*" emphasizes that despite so many negative and confusing circumstances, Parsons approaches her complicated parent with an eye toward making amends:

> *… I believe in the way—*
> *that if souls are reincarnated, I chose you for my mother,*
> *chose the rutted road we've traveled/travailed, chose*
> *the misfiring in your head, manic/depressive charge*
> *that drove me through Alice's looking-glass, under quilts,*
> *behind chairs until stormclouds lifted.*"

In this section of the poem, Parsons reveals a tenderness for her mother that reaches beyond forgiveness and reconciliation. Most of the poems in *Mother Land* find Parsons justifying her

choice to leave home; however, as she says in her interview with Marion, she is aware that "despite all the difficulties [she] was still my mother" ("Listening" 186). "*Credo*" taps into this understanding, the poet intimately admitting the possibility that she even *chose* – or perhaps would choose – her mother and their troubled relationship.

Throughout the collection, the "ground" is a central motif, acting as a kind of barometer for the mother/daughter relationship. For example, in the poem "Eleven" in which the poet-speaker narrates her father driving her away from her mother's house in Nashville toward his home in Knoxville, the poet-speaker reveals that her mother's "… tantrums crack our common / ground, burden blood to breaking" (5). Similarly, in the title poem "Mother Land," the ground is "sodden and silvered," and the adult child perceives that "…Icy misunderstandings / heave through topsoil, old as our earthly time" (36). In both poems, the burdened mother/daughter relationship is depicted as a breaking or shifting ground, perhaps to underscore the poet's inability to feel stable in their relationship and thus in her life. At the end of "Mother Land," the poet-speaker refers to trees that "…will tap auxiliary stores wintered / over centuries" (36) and bloom again, signaling the chance for hope and new beginnings. This does not seem to be the case for mother and daughter. Instead, for them "… the cracked land burdens, separates us still" (36), though hope is ever-present in the roots of their relationship.

Throughout *Mother Land*, the adult child poet-speaker tells and retells the story of her choosing to leave her volatile mother, each time offering a new detail or perspective. While the poems are narrative in mode, no one poem tells the whole story. In fact, in his review of *Mother Land*, Robert West says that the details of Parsons' life accumulate over the collection, which for the reader is like "assembling a jigsaw puzzle" and "brings the same kinds of satisfactions and surprises" (72). Just as memories and details are rehashed and accumulated, metaphors and images regarding the act of digging into the ground in order to

unearth something crop up several times and can be characterized as an important motif. In the poem "Unearthed," for example, the poet-speaker says "Come midsummer I work the high ground / to remember…" (4). In one respect, working the ground serves as a metaphor for the poet-speaker digging for memories so that she can express the story clearly and accurately:

> … I dig to weed out,
> reveal what remains of my early uprooting:
> *Go on, live with your daddy*, my mother flings
> the white suitcase on the bed, jumbles shortie
> pajamas with winter plaids. *Don't never come back!*
> a molehill of clothes into mountains. (4)

The poet-speaker works her mind as if working the earth, digging into her Mother Land, as the title of the book suggests, her origin story. Caught somewhere between child and adult, she attempts to "dig to weed out," to "reveal what remains" (4) of this seminal memory over the course of the poem. What she finds are details of this stressful memory: her mother's words as she hastily packs her daughter's belongings. However, this process of "digging" exposes good memories, as well, for example her "stepmother's house of sage and oak" (4). At the end of the same poem, the poet-speaker says "… This refuse I unearth / to the shards of day, ease back in its burying place. / Topsoil I peel open for flecks of mica deep down" (4). Among the "refuse" she unearths is also the possibility for shiny bits of mica. All of her memories are buried together. In order to unearth the pleasant memories, the adult child must also face the painful ones.

While the act of digging in Parsons' poems serves as a metaphor for sifting through her childhood memories, it also works as a metaphor for the act of writing as it is through the writing of the poems that Parsons channels and communicates these memories. In this way, Parsons places herself in conversation with Seamus Heaney who also uses the metaphor of "digging" throughout his work. In fact, in his poem "Digging," Heaney finds common ground with his paternal ancestors. The poem details the hard labor that Heaney's father and grandfather endured digging for potatoes, a labor that doubled as their legacy: "My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner's bog" (1). In the end, Heaney laments that he has "no spade to follow men like them" (1). But, in this hand, he has a pen and vows to use it to make his own legacy: "I'll dig with it" (1). In choosing a writer's life, Heaney is not distancing himself from his ancestors; rather, he venerates their life's work as he questions his own, hoping to add his own legacy to the family narrative. The family politics in Parsons are seemingly a good deal more complicated than in Heaney's "Digging." However, like Heaney, Parsons uses the metaphor of digging into the earth in order to reveal intimate family connections.

In a poem titled "This Digging" near the end of the collection, the poet-speaker questions if she should continue mining for memories and answers:

> This digging takes me nearly to the locus, but there's never
> enough lamplight to the fertile throat, the anthracite marrow.
> Should I hammer old sorrows, strata by strata, until brittle as birchbark?
> Mound grit and mud for memory's pink, wet worm? … (72).

No matter how long she digs, there never seems to be "enough lamplight," and she never reaches what she is looking for. However, as in earlier poems, there is still the promise of

unearthing something good if she presses on. At the end of "This Digging," the poet-speaker finds she is "… Nearly down to grace, creeping alcove to earthen self, / to the deep eye of *Peace, be still"* (72). It would seem that "grace" and "peace" are the treasures she seeks.

However, Parsons' Adult Child Voice appears to have already stumbled upon grace as she finds common ground with her mother throughout the collection. For example, in the poem "Madame Alexander," the poet-speaker describes a fancy doll that her mother bought for her. In looking back on the experience, she realizes that her mother "had never owned such a beauty," for in her "threadbare past," her mother shared "underwear with sisters" and endured "a father falling-down drunk" (18). Similarly, in "All That Glitters," the poet-speaker acknowledges that her mother, born in a poor and unstable household, did not have the same opportunities and support that she had: "…Your dreams only for escape / into love, some roustabout promising a platinum / tomorrow…" (48). Finally, in "Savior," Parsons recognizes that given the extent of her mother's mental health issues, it is a feat that she kept herself alive and well for as long as she did. Parsons attributes her mother's survival to her Christian faith and admits that she "… should be grateful, for a ghost-mother / cannot soften or finally come around to the real story, warts and all, / cannot transform a tower of salt into the shared cup" (57). West applauds Parsons' handling of the personal material in the collection, especially regarding her mother. He argues that "Such poetry runs a risk: what if the poet comes off as an unsympathetic revenger" or "an indecent opportunist, a desecrator" (West 73). But, West finds that Parsons "succeeds in that balancing act" (73), and a significant reason for this can be attributed to the careful way the poet shows both sides of her mother: the damaging and the vulnerable, the mark of a mature poet aiming for a truthful account of events.

Parsons' adult child excavates her motherland, revealing the troubled terrain of her mother's life and of the relationship between the two of them. In so doing, she confronts her

mother and the trauma she endured. She also reclaims her version of the narrative. However, she maintains a softness toward her mother, a readiness to understand, reconcile, and forgive. West notes the profound tension expressed by Parsons in this collection of poems: "the poet is left with a lifetime of ambivalence toward her mother: although her mother wounded her badly, [the poet] cannot forsake a sense of duty to her" (72). West places ambivalence at the core of the collection, a particularly meaningful observation given that this thesis discusses both Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice. In Parsons, the two converge, as they do in Trethewey. Parsons' ambivalence in *Mother Land* is familial rather than based on conflicted feelings toward the South; however, her poems suggest that Adult Child Voice can be an effective conduit for wrestling with opposing feelings, particularly regarding an ambivalence that begins in childhood and persists into adulthood.

5.3: AVA LEAVELL HAYMON'S *ELDEST DAUGHTER*

The third and final poet to be discussed in this chapter is Ava Leavell Haymon. Originally from Mississippi and raised in Missouri, Haymon now resides in Louisiana, where she was the state's 2013-2015 Poet Laureate. In her fourth collection of poems, *Eldest Daughter* (2013), the poet shakes the dust from a childhood trauma, using the Adult Child Voice to finally break her silence. In describing her experience writing *Eldest Daughter*, Haymon says she felt as though she were "scraping the unconscious until it bleeds." Similarly, Christie Matherne Hall calls this collection a "heap of literary compost, slow churned by time," as the poet spent over thirty years writing these poems. Both of these descriptions of Haymon's writing process are reminiscent of Linda Parsons, who also waited until adulthood to write about her childhood trauma in the Adult Child Voice and who uses the metaphor of digging into the ground to refer to the unearthing of memories and the

revelation of important, hidden truths. In fact, one interviewer calls the subject matter of *Eldest Daughter* "troubled ground," to which Haymon responds "Yes, troubled ground, indeed" ("Louisiana Talks" 21). In her own words, Haymon explains the distressing contours of this collection: "*Eldest Daughter* concerns itself with religion and its distortions, with secrets, pedophilia, father-daughter incest" ("Louisiana Talks" 21). But, this collection does not take on these menacing topics in any hypothetical context but rather reveals the poet's personal experience with each. "Yes, this happened to me," Haymon confesses, but along with the trauma she also speaks of "memory and language and their twin roles in survival … [and the] profound life force of family, a love that ultimately chooses life over silence" ("Louisiana Talks" 21-22). In *Eldest Daughter*, Haymon combines the Adult Child Voice with the sestina and the fairy tale in order to uncover and confront the abuse she endured at the hands of her father, a Southern Baptist preacher.[39]

Like both Byer and Parsons, Haymon establishes the adult child in the very first poem, titled "In Gratitude for a Southern Baptist Upbringing." In the same poem, she also positions her role as daughter as the overarching theme of the collection. However, one of Haymon's distinctive approaches to the Adult Child Voice in *Eldest Daughter* is to employ the sestina, beginning with the first poem, in order to confront her family, their problematic belief system, and the secrets they kept hidden:

> My father, his father, all the family men preached sin
> as though proclaiming the word often enough
> from the pulpit would wrestle it out of our hearts.
> Every Sunday a new sin, usually something about sex

[39] All poems discussed and analyzed in this section come from Haymons's collection *Eldest Daughter* (2013). Therefore, for readability, the citations for these poems will just include the page number.

and usually committed by a woman.

They all had those heavy cannon voices. (3)

Haymon was raised in a strict evangelical environment. In fact, she says "… my father required me to memorize ten verses of scripture every Sunday and stand and recite it to him. If not, no TV or comics for a week" (Haymon, "Louisiana Talks" 20). This poem, however, highlights that memorizing scripture was the least of her problems. From an early age, men in her family taught Haymon that women were inherently sinful: misogyny cloaked as Christianity. This sestina weaves together six haunting words: SIN, ENOUGH, HEARTS, SEX, WOMAN and VOICES, repeating each word multiple times as the form dictates so that the reader, like the poet-speaker, must face them over and over.[40] In the second stanza, Haymon recalls feeling like "a child-woman / suffering through puberty, suffering sermons enough / to leave me no time to dabble into sex" (3). Try as she may to repent, "…no conversion, no confession was quite enough / to earn me praise – as virtuous woman" (3). Haymon's description of her identity at that time as a "child-woman" is both poignant and revealing. Even as a child, Haymon had to bear the weight of her womanhood, as her family's church discriminated against women every Sunday while also sexualizing them, a particularly sinister situation given the incest Haymon endured at the hands of her father. At the end of the poem, however, Haymon speaks as a survivor:

I'd heard so much about sin in church, I knew enough

[40] In his discussion of a sestina by Anthony Hecht, David Caplan says that "The pressure that the sestina form exerts on the reader and the poet echoes the speaker's helplessness. The repetitions are 'involuntary': just as the speaker can[not] control…the past" (28). In Haymon, the pressures of the form are palpable to the reader. And, on one level, they also seem to echo the poet-speaker's "helplessness" growing up in a religious, misogynist family. However, there is also the sense that the repetitions are far from involuntary. In fact, Haymon's poet-speaker is not a slave to the form but rather wields the form to force the subject matter into the light. While she may not be able control the past, the sestina offers her the space to choose six words and repeat them over and over, emphasizing their significance and relevance, until the poem's conclusion.

to go at it whole heart, when the time came for sex.

I'm glad to be a woman, brought up right:

to sing desire in my own voice. (3)

While the poet-speaker wields these six words, repeating and re-interpreting them over and over as per the form, by the final stanza, she makes clear that she has reclaimed those same words, embracing in her adulthood both her gender and her sexuality, no longer feeling ashamed as she once did. This first poem sets up the most significant element of the collection: Haymon will not be silenced, and she will also no longer be a victim of the past.

David Caplan traces the rise of the sestina in America, claiming that three poems[41] "written in the 1930s modernized the form. Witnessing the Great Depression, [Bishop, Auden, and Zukofsky] introduced modern life to this archaic structure" ("The Age" 19). While the sestina was "an extremely minor form in English[42]" before the 1930's, since then it "has enjoyed a popularity unrivaled during any other period in Anglo-American literary history" (Caplan, "The Age" 19-20). These "Depression poems," as Caplan refers to them, are important to the history of the sestina not only because the poets revived a form that had been dormant for nearly three centuries but because they "revealed the sestina's modernity; they proved that the form could confront the age's most urgent challenges" ("The Age" 24). Of Elizabeth Bishop's sestina titled "A Miracle for Breakfast," Caplan writes "her poem about systematic oppression . . . employs a form whose harshly arbitrary demands echo its subject's" ("The Age" 23). In *Eldest Daughter*, there are six sestinas in total, and all but one directly confront either her father (the abuser) or her mother (the complicit denier). In a

[41] The three sestinas to which Caplan refers are Elizabeth Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast," W.H. Auden's "Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys," and Louis Zukofsky's "Mantis," each published between 1932-1937 ("The Age" 19).

[42] Caplan traces the origins of the form to Arnaut Daniel; however, he claims it was "made famous by Petrarch and Dante," entering "English literature during the sixteenth century. A period of less than two decades, though witnessed the sestina's introduction into English and its virtual disappearance" ("The Age" 19).

manner similar to Bishop, Haymon employs a demanding form (the sestina) to echo her own demands: the story hidden and denied by her parents must now come to light.

In the sestina "Why the Groundhog Fears Her Shadow," roughly the halfway point of the collection, Haymon's anger and shame come to the fore as the poet-speaker grapples with the day her father died, taking his secrets to the grave. In this poem, what has been only alluded to so far becomes clear. The poem begins

> It's just like you, you god-besotted woman hater. To die
> today, dragging off after you half the mythology of middle winter.
> Groundhog's Day – when all that's left of the future's a shadow
> or the lack of it. It's Candlemas. Celtic Imbolg. In Ireland, La Fheile Brid,
> the Day of St. Brigid, who is, in the Golden Bough, "a 'heathen'
> goddess of fertility, disguised in a threadbare Christian... (41)

In the next stanza, the poet-speaker goes on to say that this particular date is also the "Feast of the Purification of Women, a Christian / holy day" (41) and surmises that perhaps her father died on that day as a way of celebrating it. Infusing personal narrative with Christian and Pagan mythology, the poet-speaker begins to unravel her father's carefully constructed identity as a pious man. For the first time in the collection, the father has died, taking his story to his grave, but his death releases the daughter, freeing her "to drag these shape-shift shadow/ trysts to the light" (41). To do so, she chooses a form – the sestina – that allows the space for the Adult Child Voice to grapple with six significant words: DIE, WINTER, SHADOW, BRID (later, BREED, BRIDE), HEATHEN, and CHRISTIAN.

In his discussion of Anthony Hecht's sestina "The Book of Yolek," a poem about a boy who dies in a Nazi concentration camp, Caplan argues that "The sestina … meditates

upon the relationship between 'Christian humanism' and 'barbarism'"[43] ("The Age" 29). Caplan explains that "Hecht celebrates 'the contrariety of impulse' that [the poet] claims defines the greatest works of art" ("The Age" 31). For Hecht, "poetic form must be 'dialectical' and 'self-critical,' acknowledging not only the world's goodness but its evil" (Caplan, "The Age" 32). In Haymon's "Why the Groundhog Fears Her Shadow," the poet-speaker uses the sestina to contend with similar questions: is the adult child a heathen or a Christian; and which was her father? In the "middle winter" of her father's death, the poet-speaker, like the groundhog, cautiously comes to the surface to find:

> … I'm bride
>
> to too many lovers. Bride
> double bound to father/husband, Beast and Prince alike. My heathen
> scarlet heart's blood thumps toward rage, rage, to gush out, die
> fighting… (41)

The story is now made clear: "…family shame veiled with the eldest bride" (42). Until now, the recurring phrase has been "eldest daughter." In this sestina, the terms "bride" and "daughter" become horrifically synonymous in their relation to her father. Through his evil acts of incest, her father, whose only role should have been to protect his child, has "double bound" his daughter to serve as both child and bride. He becomes both "Beast" (for the abuse he inflicted) and "Prince" (for his role as father and Christian minister). Through the father's

[43] The juxtaposition between "Christian humanism" and "barbarism" comes from George Steiner, who observed that "the high places of literacy, of philosophy, of artistic expression, became the setting for Belsen … Barbarism prevailed on the very ground of Christian humanism, of Renaissance culture and classic rationalism" (qtd. in Caplan, "The Age" 29). Hecht was yet another Jewish intellectual "who experienced the Holocaust as a crisis of Western humanism," witnessing "firsthand the concentration camps' horrors, when his infantry troop helped to capture Flossenburg" (Caplan, "The Age" 29).

actions, he and his daughter must now also be marked "Heathen,"[44] one of the words Haymon turns over and over in the poem.

Caplan says that "For Hecht, the most appalling subjects often demand the most complicated forms" ("The Age" 33), and Haymon seems to have drawn a similar conclusion, choosing an intricate form to express her own appalling narrative. Similarly, Caplan surmises that the sestina "retreads the same basic complaint: the speaker's inability to conceive of 'what to do'"[45] ("The Age" 38). The end of Haymon's poem presents a fair amount of indecision on the part of the adult child. The poet-speaker says "This time, sun-struck, light-blind, she [the groundhog / the adult child] stays aboveground. Dying winter / gathers its last storm" (42). She has survived the storm, outliving her father, but there is no sense of absolution beyond her revelation that she now seems to be the one who "summons the cold": "Is it her shadow summons the cold, or the bride / tearing away her veil?" (42). In the final image, the poet-speaker describes "Purple heathen lips, eyes pale and old as Christ" (42). It is unclear if the poet-speaker refers to herself here or to the purple lips and pale eyes of her now deceased father. Perhaps the answer is both. However, the more significant point seems to be highlighting the thin veil between Christian (or Jew) and Heathen (or Gentile, Pagan), a dichotomy that has existed in the Judaic tradition since before the birth of Christ.

The poems in *Eldest Daughter*, particularly the sestinas, grapple with quite a few unresolved paradoxes: good/evil, woman/child, Christian/heathen, daughter/bride, father/husband. The final sestina,[46] however, takes yet another paradox and resolves it, evident in the title "How Two Became One Again" (43). Furthermore, it becomes clear in

[44] In Oxford's *A Dictionary of the Bible*, a "heathen" is defined as one "who do[es] not worship God as revealed in the Bible." Heathen can be interpreted in this context, then, as the opposite to a Christian.
[45] Caplan refers to Ezra Pound's description of the sestina: "a form like a thin sheet of flame folding and infolding upon itself" (38).
[46] Two other sestinas in this collection discuss the poet-speaker's mother directly and her mother's tacit complicity in the abuse: "In Which I Forgive My Mother Her Intentions" (pg. 9) and "The Dream Runs On" (pg. 36).

this poem that the poet-speaker has been consciously pairing the Adult Child Voice with the sestina in order to uncover and break from these family truths. Now, in the final sestina, the epigraph below the title reads: "Sestina's Work Done," the first stanza revealing a similar layer of metapoetics:

> This is how she came to know it, the turning
> of the lines and the spell of the numbers.
> The anagram in the name never occurred
> to her at all. Formal rules – repeating six words
> sex/woman/sin/enough/heart/voice[47] seven times
> each—snatched the narrative out of her hands (43)

When the poet-speaker says in the first line that she "came to know it" through "the turning / of lines..." and the "… Formal rules—repeating six words … seven times / each" (43), she refers to the process of writing a sestina. She also reveals that writing in this form "snatched the narrative out of her hands // and wheeled her away," (43) suggesting that the form itself had an important role in bringing the buried story out of her memory and onto the page where it could be communicated through language. The poet-speaker explains in the following lines how the trauma of her childhood split her into two children: "From then on, there were two" (43). One version of her child-Self "turned / smiling to Mama, source of alphabet, songs, numbers," (43) though her mother was also the "source of good times // approved for memory" (43). More specifically, her mother is associated with the happy child-Self; however, she is also accused in a later stanza of denying her daughter's claims of abuse:

[47] Here, Haymon references the six words from the first sestina in the collection "In Gratitude for a Southern Baptist Upbringing," suggesting the important connection between all six sestinas in revealing the full story.

"What if the mother is right, and none of it ever occurred" (43). The other child-Self was the one who:

> …waited for the bad times,
> grew sullen, hoarded the events which never occurred,
> invented a language of stutters and widened eyes, a number system
> based on lost teeth, a broken chair, nutshells. Your father's hands
> disappear behind his back, and when it's your turn
> to choose, you point: One fist reappears, he speaks no words. (43)

The central paradox in this poem is the split of one child into two psyches, which likely was the result of years of abuse on the part of her father coupled with the denial of that abuse on the part of her mother. In fact, one of the phrases repeated in this sestina is "never occurred," mirroring the mother's repeated insistence that the abuse never happened, a form of psychological abuse that the poet-speaker likens to a surgery or perhaps even female mutilation: "…Scalpel does its work—clitoris, memory. It never occurred, / the mother is right again, she's waiting the daughter's return" (43).

However, in the sestina's envoy, the poet-speaker uses the form to break from this vicious cycle. The final stanza reads:

> But, *Look at this!* The surgery turned out wrong. The numbers
> reverse again, No/Yes. Whatever never occurred babbles into words.
> The twins are reattached. This time: one child, two eyes, two hands. (44)

Throughout the poem, six words have been repeated, at times with slight grammatical substitutions: TURNING, NUMBERS, NEVER OCCURRED, WORDS, TIMES, and HANDS. At the end of the sixth sestet, the mother awaits the "daughter's return," but the adult child denies that fulfillment in the envoy, omitting the word "return" from the cycle. Rather, "The surgery [to deny/replace the daughter's memories] turned out wrong" and instead "Whatever never occurred babbles into words" (44). Just as the sestina folds from six lines into three lines, the two different child-Selves are merged back into one: "The twins are reattached" (44). Thus, whereas previous sestinas in this collection have struggled with unresolvable paradoxes—for example good versus evil—in the final sestina, the poet-speaker resolves the one paradox she can control, unifying the two versions of her child-Self. She also breaks from the cycle of abuse, refusing to "return" to the whitewashed version of events. With the story now exposed and her identity unified, the sestina sequence can come to a close, as the "Sestina's Work [is now] Done."

Jo Langdon argues that any kind of trauma writing is paradoxical. For example, she argues that writing about personal traumas "is so overwhelming and confusing as to pose major challenges to language and representations, and yet it is a widespread catalyst in the production of narrative" (Langdon 344). While trauma writing may be painful to produce and a challenge to write, many writers are still compelled to put their traumas on paper, and "it seems that traumatic experiences can often compel survivors to compulsively repeat their experiences in creative forms" (Langdon 344). As such, the sestina proves to be an ideal choice for expressing trauma, given that the poetic form encourages repetitions to arise in an intricate order. If, as Langdon suggests, those "traumatic events and experiences" the writer "wants to engage with prove elusive, and therefore repeat" (344), then the sestina provides a controlled space in which the poet can choose what aspects of the trauma to relive and "to

compulsively" repeat. For Haymon, one sestina is not enough, however; it takes six sestinas to complete the process of exposing the adult child's trauma.

In addition to the sestina, Haymon also uses the fairy tale genre in *Eldest Daughter* in order to explore yet another crucial element of her adult child narrative. The fairy tale is a fitting genre for Haymon to use in this collection because, as Elizabeth Marshall explains, "Fairy tales, or wonder tales, stage scenes in which the family appears as a site of violence, where (step)mothers poison their (step)daughters, where children are abandoned, and where rapacious fathers violate their daughters" (405). In fact, father-daughter incest was historically a common theme in fairy tales. Marshall says that "in over three hundred Cinderella variants [Marion] Cox analyzes, the incestuous father appears almost as often as does the evil stepmother" (407). However, the Brothers Grimm edited "the material to fit their social, historical, and political context" (407) so that in the final edition of their *Children's and Household Tales* (1857), "the lustful patriarch makes a suspicious exit for the majority of the tales" (Marshall 406).

Haymon is certainly not the first woman to explore her own trauma through the fairy tale genre. In fact, Marshall analyzes Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* (1997), arguing that "Harrison relies on 'fantastic' fairy tale material to tell her 'impossible' story about father-daughter incest" (413). To do so, Harrison "draws on the motif of incest and the narrative sequence of betrayal and exile found in runaway-daughter variants" (413). With *Eldest Daughter,* Haymon enters this same tradition of invoking the fairy tale in order to communicate incestuous trauma.[48]

[48] In *Transformations* (1970), Anne Sexton also combines the fairy tale genre with verse, writing a re-telling of the traditional Brothers Grimm tales in a series of free verse poems.

The fourth section of *Eldest Daughter* is titled "The Castle of Either/Or: A Fairy Tale." Over six pages, the poet-speaker weaves together an extended prose poem in the familiar style and language of the traditional fairy tale. The first stanza begins

> Once upon a time, there was a family that lived a long way from anyone else. At first, there had been a grandmother, but she was dead. There were two fathers, a good father who played with the little children and made sure they got enough to eat, and a wicked father who hit them. The wicked father kept the first daughter in his bed to keep him warm. The mother was blind and sat by the hearth and sang songs. A secret hid in the first daughter's hand. She kept her hand closed. (53)

The sestinas, which come before "The Castle of Either/Or" in the collection, set up the reader's ability to recognize this first stanza as a variant of the poet-speaker's childhood: an incestuous father and an ineffectual mother. Now, the same story is retold again, but the purpose and form have changed. In the sestinas, the poet-speaker aims to disclose her childhood traumas and unify her identity. Now, using the fairy tale, she communicates her feelings about her father and the abuse she endured, revealing an ambivalence that is central to the collection.

In "The Castle of Either/Or," the poet-speaker's entire family has passed away, and she leaves her home with only three items: her grandmother's ring, "a pebble from her little sister," and "a bowl from her mother, too small to hold even a crumb" (53-54). Early in the tale, Haymon has already established the fairy tale motifs charted by Marshall in relation to Harrison: "betrayal and exile" (413). Abused and then orphaned by her family, the poet-speaker journeys from her homeland in search of a new life. One day, she finds herself at The

Castle of Either/Or. Inside the castle walls, a voice whispers to her "*First Daughter, you have / come all this way to decide between the good father and the wicked father*" (56). When the poet-speaker doesn't answer, the impatient voice says "*Your life will go on for a long time. Either you remember the / good father and forget the wicked father. Or you remember the wicked father / and never think of the good father again…"* (56). She carefully considers the two options and the implications of choosing between them. Finally, she says "Both. I choose to / remember both" (57), causing her to be banished from the castle and cursed: "*Your eyes will open too wide. No matter what they see, they will not look away*" (57). For the rest of her life, the poet-speaker must see both the good and bad of whatever she experiences, unwilling to even label her own narrative as "happy" or "unhappy."

The fairy tale genre is particularly significant to the adult child persona. While fairy tales were written/recorded, edited, and published by adults, they are read by (or read to) children. In fact, according to Marshall, they tend to "serve as informal child-reading material" and "function as salient educational tools" (408). As such, children learn innumerable lessons about gender norms and sexuality through reading these ubiquitous stories. Given that fairy tales bridge the realms of childhood and adulthood, coupled with the genre's history of communicating incest, it is no wonder that Haymon would use this form in her collection. In "The Castle of Either/Or," the adult poet-speaker is able to disclose a fantasy-based version of her childhood trauma in a genre that traditionally "foregrounds psychological conflict" (Marshall 413). At the same time, however, Haymon also communicates the psychological conflict – her ambivalence – of her adulthood within a genre typically associated with childhood.

5.4: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Chapter Five applies my understanding of the Adult Child Voice to three contemporary female poets of the U.S. South beyond Natasha Trethewey, who was the focus of Henninger's original inquiry. In the first section, I analyzed the adult child in the collection *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* by Kathryn Stripling Byer, whose particular use of this persona aids the poet in her pursuit of crafting poems that "struggle against amnesia" ("Interview" 29). Ever the descendant, Byer crafts poems in this voice out of her sense of grief and affection for her now deceased ancestors, but she also seeks to return what the family has lost, including material entities and family histories. In contrast, Linda Parsons' use of the adult child in her collection *Mother Land* creates a space to articulate childhood trauma and upheaval and to confront her mother. Through extended metaphors involving the act of digging into the ground, Parsons excavates her motherland, reclaiming her narrative and articulating ambivalence toward her mother. Ambivalence is also revealed to be at the heart of Ava Leavell Haymon's collection *Eldest Daughter*, in which the poet combines the sestina and the fairy tale with the Adult Child Voice in order to uncover and confront the abuse she endured at the hands of her father.

In considering each collection in relation to Boym's two forms of nostalgia, Byer is the only one who comes close to the problematic restorative form of nostalgia, as her poems could be accused of "intensifying into a shrine for ancestor worship" (Turner 45). While expressing reverence for one's ancestors may seem innocuous, Turner argues that "Waxing nostalgic is a politically weighted act," especially in a collection that overlooks the extreme racial politics of the times and place in question (45). However, I argue that Byer's collection subverts the restorative form of nostalgia through the "Search Party" section of the collection, which carefully and realistically examines the hard lives of early women settlers in the South

and their lost narratives. Furthermore, it is important to consider that subsequent collections by Byer find her poet-speaker retracing her steps, looking at her family and homeland from a more discerning, if uncomfortable position. In 2012, almost three decades after publishing *The Girl,* Byer published *Descent*, a collection which considers a much more holistic South. If these three poets are "nostalgic" because of their compulsion to return home to confront or to mourn their families in an Adult Child Voice, they each approach their nostalgia from a reflective, yet critical point of view, "dwell[ing] on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging" (Boym xviii) rather than presenting a one-sided or revisionist version of events.

While Byer's collection focuses on mostly favorable familial relationships between the poet-speaker and her family, the collections by Parsons and Haymon detail the opposite: abuse and neglect inflicted on the poet-speakers by their respective parental figures. Both poets reveal extremely personal, unsavory familial details within their poems,[49] yet both emerge in their collections as ambivalent figures, capable of both hating and loving their troubled parents and of forgiving them. Furthermore, Parsons' and Haymon's collections show two instances in which the two facets of Southern poetry discussed in this thesis – ambivalence and the adult child – intersect. Similarly, Trethewey's most recent collections of poems, *Native Guard* and *Thrall,* also combine Southern Ambivalence with the Adult Child Voice. Future research could examine the pairing of ambivalence and the adult child in a wider number of Southern poets as a way of exploring how and why the two seem to emerge

[49] Because both Parsons and Haymon write about their own personal family struggles, one could certainly question if their poems belong in the context of confessional poetry, particularly alongside a poem like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy." While there are some overlaps, I argue that the Adult Child Voice has a completely different relationship to the parent(s) than the confessional poets and that the desire of the adult child is not to "confess" but perhaps, at best, to "confront," as Byer claims, noted at the end of Part One in Chapter Five. Furthermore, Melanie Waters claims that in confessional poetry "the poet and the speaker are not synonymous, no matter how effective the poem might be in generating this illusion" (379). Waters goes on to argue that confessional poetry might be better termed "psychobiography" rather than a "straightforward mechanism for the revelation of truth" (380). In contrast, the very basis of the Adult Child Voice, as discussed by Henninger, is an understanding that these poems are based in autobiography. Furthermore, a comparison between Parsons/Haymon and Plath's "Daddy" shows the later expressing a profound disconnection from her parent, while the adult child poets, at least in contemporary Southern poetry, seem to be committed to remaining connected – for better or worse – to their parents and at the very least ambivalent toward their parents (both loving and hating).

in tandem in Southern poetry. One likely reason for this is that ambivalence and family ties are perhaps the two most significant themes in Southern literature, and to a larger extent, the Southern identity, as well.

While the three collections discussed in Chapter Five have obvious differences, it is perhaps striking to note their similarities. Despite the fact that all three poets are from different regions of the South, each chooses to contextualize her experience through the lifelong role as "daughter" or "descendant," underscoring a profound sense of family connection, a bond that not even familial abuse and incest can fully break apart. Major male poets from the South – including Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan, and Maurice Manning – also craft poems in variations of the Adult Child Voice and seem particularly interested in exploring the environs of the South in addition to the lives and voices of their ancestors. More research is needed to investigate the contours of the Adult Child Voice/Persona in the work of male poets from the South, but I suspect it will prove quite different to the poems of their female counterparts. Traditionally, Southern women have been tethered to family and home life and encouraged to be submissive and silent. As Polk says, Southern women are generally not even granted the agency to choose what they want "to love and be reconciled with … to them falls the dailiness of love and reconciliation" (13). Unlike their male counterparts, Southern women are bred to be the family caregivers, to love without question and to reconcile away any discomforts. While the three poets discussed in this chapter do at times defy the cultural norms, speaking out against their families' secrets and transgressions, each of the three poet-speakers seem overwhelmingly compelled to remain a dutiful daughter, ready to keep the family unit together at all costs.

Finally, additional research should consider the adult child in a wider number of female poets from the South, including younger poets from the region as well as poets from different racial and economic backgrounds. I argue that Trethewey, Byer, Parsons, and

Haymon are four of the most important examples of the adult child in Southern poetry written by women, and they are the four, I believe, my own poems are most in conversation with. But, they are by no means the only female poets writing of and about their families in the Adult Child Voice. A more extensive study could uncover further nuances regarding the adult child in Southern poetry written by women and offer further insight into the female Southern identity and the ways in which Southern women writers adhere to and break from the prevalent cultural norms.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ADULT CHILD VOICE IN *CALL ME DAUGHTER*

For a long time, I refused to read Southern poetry. I did not want to be associated with that tradition just as I did not want to be Southern or have my work labeled as such either. In Mississippi, one cannot hide from Faulkner and Welty, and so I was exposed to Southern literature in high school and university. But, because Southern poetry does not yet receive the same public and critical attention as Southern fiction, I managed to keep away from the region's verse. Southern poetry, I assumed, was written by Southerners who *wanted* to be Southern, who identified with the region's dominant ideologies. I wanted to be some other kind of poet, to belong somewhere else, somewhere *better.*

The first Southern poet I read and admired was Natasha Trethewey, but even her work at first did not seem in any way similar to my own. I felt that Trethewey's poems had much more at stake than mine did, as her work takes on racism in America and particularly the entities that seek to minimize and erase non-white histories and narratives.

This is why reading Katherine Henninger's article on the adult child was a revelation. I immediately recognized in her discussion of Trethewey a long-standing compulsion of my own to frame my poet-speaker voice in many of my autobiographical poems as that of a daughter and a descendent. I then turned to Trethewey's interviews, which are filled with the poet expressing both love and hate for Mississippi and the South. That was, again, exactly how I felt. Was Trethewey an anomaly, or was there an entire cohort of poetry wrestling with the same concerns? I did not have to look far to find the answer because even if I had avoided Southern poetry, it had not avoided me. I knew the names of the poets I should look to because they had been recommended to me by professors and friends for decades: Byer, Parsons, Haymon, Morgan, Wright, Chappell among others. Even before I read their

collections, my work already belonged in conversation with theirs. I could no longer hide from Southern poetry, nor did I want to, and I felt ashamed for the baseless indignation I had once felt. These Southern poets are my people, and reading and studying their work has strengthened not only my poems but also my understanding of who I am and what *Southern* can mean.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the different ways I implemented the Adult Child Voice in my collection of poems, *Call Me Daughter*. Byer, Parsons, Haymon, and Trethewey comprise the basis of my understanding of this poetic voice, and I will refer to them throughout. However, other writers and critics have also shaped the particular nuances of my own variations on the adult child, and so they will also be analyzed and discussed.

6.1: EXPRESSING CHILDHOOD ANXIETY AND AMBIVALENCE

The opening section of poems in *Call Me Daughter* – "Genesis of a Farm Girl" – details the first twelve years of my life living on a rural apple farm in Western North Carolina with my parents. Like Parsons and Haymon, who were discussed in the previous chapter, I do not return to the location and the events of my childhood out of nostalgia or homesickness. In fact, I return reluctantly even as I feel compelled to write poems that revisit the site of my earliest years. When we lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains, a place of profound natural beauty, my parents and I were extremely isolated, distanced from each side of the family and miles away from the nearest town. As neither of my parents had been raised in the area – the land at that time belonged to my paternal grandfather whose ancestors had passed it down to him – we were also not rooted in the cove's community. Small, rural Appalachian communities are not known for welcoming outsiders. In fact, before my mother and father

had unpacked or planted their seedling trees, they were met with vandalism and arson. They were not wanted there, and the locals made that known.

As the years passed, the quality of life hardly improved. My father spent sunup to sundown in the orchard, steering his tractor between the steep rows of apple trees that covered the side of a mountain. His plan was eventually to harvest enough produce annually so that he could sell to food corporations in addition to selling fruit at his roadside warehouse, called The Apple House. His ambition knew no bounds, but he had little help achieving his dream: dwindling finances, the recession of the 1980s, and only a few part-time workers. The extreme stress and physical demands took their toll and plunged him into what was to become a lifelong battle with alcoholism, drinking to dull the pang of uncertainty, his body aches, the fussing of his unhappy wife. My mother attempted to be a dutiful wife, managing the roadside fruit stand, taking care of the bills and paperwork, doing the housework and most of the childrearing. But the stressful environment and dark winter months took their toll on her, too. As the years passed, her unhappiness grew; she came to struggle with clinical depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder.

It would be untrue to say there were not good times. My parents loved me and made that love known. They spent lots of time reading to me, taking me to festivals, parks, and activities, and encouraging me to pursue any interest, talent, or hobby. I also enjoyed the freedom of roaming the farm and came to know its geography – its trees, fields, and creeks – as well as I knew my own young body. But, the experience of living there created for me a tremendous amount of childhood anxiety as the good times were constantly overshadowed by my parents' frequent, intense fights, my father's evolving drinking problem, and my mother's depression, which often left her bedridden. There was no stability to my small world. For as long as I could remember, my mother threatened to leave my father and the farm and move me to Mississippi, her homeland. *Bankruptcy* was one of the more common words in our

house, and more often than not, my parents were unhappy and unwell. I became the balm that soothed their pain, doing what I could to lift their spirits and distract them from their incessant worries. I am grateful to have had loving parents, but I am also filled with stress and sadness when I think back on that blue farmhouse, referred to as the "Doc Bill House" after my great-great-uncle who built it. Though it sheltered me in my infancy and childhood, I rarely step inside when we go back to the farm for visits. The rooms are still too full of those freezing cold nights in the winter, my parents' fights, the darkness I dreaded, lying awake and counting the minutes until dawn.

My ambivalence regarding my childhood makes me want to write about it – so that I might be able to better understand it. As Patricia Hampl says of her own pull toward memoir writing, "I suppose I write memoir because of the radiance of the past – it draws me back and back to it. Not that the past is beautiful…But still, the past is radiant. It sheds the light of lived life. One who writes memoir wishes to step into that light…to feel the length of shadow cast by the light" (36). I too wish to step into the radiant light of the past, to finally be able to make sense of the strange paradoxes, to finally make peace with it all. While Hampl speaks of memoir writing, I aim to examine the past and my childhood memories through poetry,[50] using the Adult Child Voice.

Chapter Five focuses on the poems of Byer, Parsons, and Haymon, arguing that the Adult Child Voice is a feature of contemporary Southern poetry. Of particular interest to this section, both Parsons and Haymon use the adult child to articulate childhood trauma that

[50] Poetry has generally not met with the same fact vs. fiction debate that pervades discussions of fiction and nonfiction. In fact, Richard N. Coe says "that the only proper medium for the communication of a literal and factual truth must necessarily be prose" because poetry for "the modern reader…invariably conveys the suggestion of something more, or else of something less, than the literal truth" (47-48). However, Coe argues that there is one "significant category of autobiographical writing, in which poetry…is entirely appropriate, and that is the autobiography of childhood," for "poetry may well be better-suited to the re-creation, or re-evocation, of that strange, alien and baffling reality, the elusive truth of the child-Self" (48). Sections One and Three of *Call Me Daughter* belong in the framework of "Poetic autobiography," as outlined by Coe and discussed previously in Chapter Four, but Section One fits within the even more specific framework of the "poetic autobiography of childhood," or autobiographical poems that seek to reveal childhood memories, events, or emotions.

results in adulthood ambivalence. I also argue that all three poets seem to feel compelled to remain dutiful daughters despite their traumas.[51] In these two respects, the poems in Section One of *Call Me Daughter* fit within this same existing tradition while also expanding that tradition by presenting a new, original voice. In this section, I will analyze the Adult Child Voice in Section One of the collection, "Genesis of a Farm Girl."

The first poem in the section, "Genesis" (141), offers an imaginative reconstruction of how my father came to start the farm, establishing both an Adult Child Voice preoccupied with my family narrative and the larger mythology – a retelling of the Judeo-Christian origin myth combined with Cherokee beliefs and local folklore – that will inform the whole of Section One. The first half of "Genesis" describes a real Polaroid taken before I was born of my father holding a snake at Santa's Land, a theme park located in Cherokee, North Carolina. In line 14 however, I leave behind a literal description of the image in favor of imagining a mythic version of the event: "In the story I've made up, the snake whispers / to my father about the wonder of growing apples" (141). In combining my father's biography with a fictionalized version of the Judeo-Christian origin myth, I mean to highlight his Christian beliefs, the mythic proportions of his ambitions to start the farm, and the faith he kept that the farm would succeed, despite so many signs to the contrary. The poem also functions as a fictionalized origin story for my own childhood, as well, as I would soon be born into this rural, farming existence my father created. However, whereas "Genesis" is based on a photo taken before my time and a reconstruction of my father's ambitions, the majority of poems in this section detail my own childhood experiences and memories.

One way I use the adult child in Section One is to express the parent/child role reversal that I feel was a predominant feature of my childhood, as I took on the role of caring

[51] I do not feel comfortable using the term "trauma" to define my childhood experiences, particularly in comparison with Parsons and Haymon who both endured genuine and intense traumatic experiences. I prefer to use the terms "anxiety/childhood anxiety" as I feel they better articulate the situation I am describing.

for my parents. As Parsons says of her own childhood, "I suppose I was born old in that I understood some harsh realities and responsibilities before my time, was indeed robbed of certain aspects of my childhood by being forced into such decisions at an early age" ("Rescue" 186). I too felt the need to grow up early and to care for my parents as they struggled to keep the farm going. For example, the poem "Fetus in Fetu"[52] articulates this role reversal:

> I wasn't born an *only child.*
> I was born a single parent
> already a mother
> to a boy and a girl, who asked
> me to call them momma & daddy. (143)

"Fetus in Fetu" reconceptualizes my birth. Rather than being born an "only child," I argue "I was born a single parent / already a mother" (143), making the claim that to a certain extent I missed being a child altogether, as being a child for me meant, in a sense, nurturing my own parents.

The poem "Legend" (150), which is part of a three-poem series comprised of "Myth," "Memorate," and "Legend," intentionally mixes my own memories of feeling compelled to care for my parents with a fictionalized folk narrative,[53] attempting to capture an authentic, "felt" version of my childhood. "Legend" is based on the earlier poem "Memorate" (146), a

[52] The title "Fetus in Fetu" references the rare congenital condition in which a baby is born carrying its own fetus. In a variation of this condition, a baby can be born with twin fetuses, which is relevant to this poem.
[53] Elliott Oring says that "folk narratives are generally conceptualized to be those narratives which circulate primarily in the oral tradition and are communicated face to face" (122). Furthermore, folk narratives can be broken into "Three major prose narrative categories regularly distinguished by folklorists," which are "myth, legend, and tale" (Oring 124). I include a poem titled "Tale" (147) in "Genesis of a Farm Girl," but it doesn't fit within the same trajectory as the other three and therefore isn't part of the three-poem series. Rather, I included a "memorate" instead, another type of folk narrative. "Myth," "Memorate," and "Legend" are connected, each retelling the same story in a different type of folk narrative.

gesture meant to mimic the way that a memorate[54] can "in time develop into a legend" in real world contexts (Honko 12). The poem "Memorate" details my earliest memory: apples everywhere and my father placing me on a wild, black horse that shot off through the field with me on its back. The poem itself calls attention to the memory's problematic nature: my father swears this never happened. Could this have been a dream, perhaps the first dream I remembered, and my young mind confused it for a memory? This is a definite possibility, but it is still such a strong memory: the smell of my uncle's flannel shirt, the horse's coarse mane, the fear I felt when the horse took off across the field. When I extended this poem into "Legend," I carried over the image of apples everywhere (revised into a flood of apples) and the detail of a girl riding in on a black mare "as if from memory" (150).

Elliott Oring says that legends "are considered narratives which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing" (124). He goes on to say the legends are "set in historical time in the world as we know it today," and they often "reference…real people and places" (125). In writing the poem "Legend," I attempted to adhere to the traditional folk narrative form, creating a single "miraculous" episode in which a flood of apples covered the mountain valley, forever altering the people who lived there. In contrast to the poem "Myth" (142), which references a similar flood of apples in a primitive time, "Legend" is meant to have taken place during a more recent past in the world we live in, though the repetition of the phase "Legend has it" is meant to mimic the fact that folk narratives are generally thought to "circulate primarily in oral tradition" (Oring 122). Finally, the gesture of surmising that real-world figures –

[54] The term "memorate" was coined by German folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow to refer to "reproductions of people's 'own, purely personal experiences'" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 225). A remarkable feature of the memorate is its ability to influence and shape other kinds of folklore, like folk belief and legends. In the three-poem series, I also extend "Memorate" into "Myth." According to Lauri Honko, "Memorates are a valuable source for the study of folk religion primarily because they reveal those situations in which supernatural tradition was actualized…On the basis of memorates we can form a picture of the social context of beliefs" (10-11). The poem "Myth" is meant to serve as an origin story for a fictionalized belief system based on "Memorate," the way that a memorate can shape belief systems in real world contexts.

Malinda Blalock and Annie Oakley – might have ridden in and saved the day also places the poem within the legend form, as noted by Oring.

The primary feature of "Legend," however, is the way the poem retells my own childhood experience in the Adult Child Voice. In "Legend," when the parents are "…rendered half-dead / from the ungodly harvest…" (150), it is the children who become the caretakers of the land and of their parents. In fact, the ending surmises that "…the parents wouldn't have made it, save / for the prayers of their children who loved and worshipped them" (150). In this way, the fictionalized folk narrative represents my own childhood, the flood of apples meant to be a fantasy-based version of the real annual apple crops, which produced massive quantities of apples that my parents had to harvest, grade, box, sell, and ship, a grueling season year after year that left them "bled barren" (150) of life. On the worst days, my mother would say over and over that she "used to be alive" (150), a phrase I remember always finding alarming as a child and which the poem quotes. In these times, I became their caretaker, and while that did not include lighting fires and hunting for animals as the poem details, it very much included finding and discarding of my father's alcohol, bringing my mother food and trying to soothe her sadness, and praying all the time that things would improve.

In Chapter Five, I made the claim that Haymon's extended prose poem "Castle of Either/Or" uses the fairy tale genre alongside the Adult Child Voice to communicate her feelings about her father and the abuse she endured, revealing an ambivalence that is central to her collection. In fact, I argue that Haymon's "Castle of Either/Or" expresses an even more authentic, "felt" version of her childhood than another, more traditional poetic form might have been able to accomplish. The fairy tale genre enables the adult child poet-speaker to subvert overwrought sentimentality and predictable tropes, creating an effectively nuanced poem despite the age-old theme of writing about one's family. In "Legend," I aim to do

something similar. Expressing the anxiety of caring for my parents during harvest season could have been a challenge to write without coming across as sentimental, hyperbolic, or angry. However, fictionalizing the real-life narrative into a mythic, felt poetic version helped me to elicit the circumstance more objectively and, I think, more effectively.

Another way that I use the Adult Child Voice in this section is to highlight both the childhood anxiety that resulted from this parent/child role reversal and, following Parsons and Haymon, my adult ambivalence regarding the experience. For example, the poem "Lyric of a Childhood" (151-153) articulates the most significant way my childhood anxiety manifested: insomnia and an acute fear of the dark that lasted until we moved from the farm in 1996. The poem's title comes from the essay that inspired it – Jeremy Hooker's "Lyric of Being." In this essay, Hooker explains that in writing the poems for his collection *Ancestral Lines*, he "sought not memory only with its deceptive images of the past time, but what [he] call[s] the 'lyric of being.' By this [he] mean[s] the quick of experience, whether felt or glimpsed: the living moment which, in an image, may intimate the whole life it is part of" (76-77). For Hooker, the "lyric of being" is a type of lyric poem that seeks to "touch the momentary quick" of memory through articulating both concrete and felt memories in quick succession (77). Hooker's lyric poems in this project are composed of short, numbered sections, and each section is composed of short lines. As such, the poems are pared down with no extraneous language, allowing the images associated with each memory to take precedence. In fact, the rapid movement of Hooker's poems make the reader feel as if they are experiencing his quick, elusive memories for themselves, while other sections discuss the poet-speaker's experience attempting to interact with or interpret the memories. For example, here are the first two sections of Hooker's poem "Northover Road":

1

The sheer quick is a torrent

I glimpse but cannot see.

Blindly

I hold out my hand

and reach for the door.

2

Plums drop on the lawn.

Mating house sparrows fall

on the sunroom roof with a bump.

From the garden

the distant island appears

a blue hill, and far off

across the fields

Fawley Oil Refinery, a blue flame.

Almost blind, my father

sits among his paintings,

colour flowing from his hands. (9-10)

In writing the poem “Lyric of a Childhood,” I wanted to craft my own version of Hooker’s “Lyric of Being” as a way of articulating my memories of the anxiety-ridden,

sleepless nights of my childhood, which, I argue, were a result of the unstable environment and the parent/child role reversal. In doing so, I first modified Hooker's practice by infusing it with the Adult Child Voice. Certainly, some of Hooker's poems in *Ancestral Lines* articulate childhood memories, but his poems do not distinguish childhood memories from young adult/adult memories. In contrast, "Lyric of a Childhood" is concentrated on a particular timeframe from my childhood and is quite clearly an adult poet-speaker preoccupied with childhood memories; as such, the poet-speaker voice is that of an adult child. The sections are also far more narrative than Hooker's poems; however, the poem's sections are more pared down than my usual narrative mode. Like Hooker, I also aim to move quickly in and out of memories; some of the sections are set in the night during the periods of high anxiety; others take place in the morning and then in the late afternoon or evening before bed. The first section of the poem illustrates the pared down language I used in the poem:

1.
Daughter, haunted.
Home is not home, but
a blue house overgrown
with a century of sadness.
Bad, I tell my parents
who call it a *nightmare*.
I awake with new words –
names for the spirits
who break into my room
at the witching hour. (151)

The multi-sectioned poem seems to be a significant feature of Hooker's concept of the "Lyric of Being." For example, his poem referenced above – Northover Road – comprises eight sections. In attempting "to touch the momentary quick" (77), Hooker does not merely present one memory per poem but rather crafts long, multi-sectioned poems that each express several "felt or glimpsed" memories associated with the place. In doing so, Hooker makes the argument that his memories regarding his subject matter cannot be adequately summed up in a single-sectioned poem but rather must be unfurled through multiple sections that each share his varied associations and memories of his subject matter. Similarly, I do not believe that a single-sectioned poem could have sufficiently described the nighttime anxiety I endured as a child; it was imperative that the reader experience my memories of both the days and the nights as well as memories with my parents, both good and distressing, in order for the moments in the darkness to carry more weight.

"Lyric of a Childhood" also uses the Adult Child Voice to articulate the ambivalence I feel about the experience of living on the farm; the sections juxtapose the anxiety of nighttime with the "relief of morning" (151), underscoring both the light and dark of these years. For example, in the final section of the poem, I quote a translated song lyric from Chavela Vargas' "La Llorona," a song I remember the Hispanic migrant workers playing as they sorted the apples: "…*Negro, pero carinoso*, / Vargas sings in my mind. Those / years on the farm: *dark but lovely*" (153). Earlier in the same section, I also implicate my parents for their role in creating both my childhood anxiety and my ambivalence regarding those years:

> … They are the pillars
> that protect me from the dark.
> They are the earthquake that rattles
> me to fear every stray sound. (153)

A similar ambivalence is also articulated in the third person at the end of the poem "Moving Day" (164), an elegiac poem that looks back on the day my mother and I left the farm: "Years later, the girl will look back on / this day with both relief and regret" (164).

6.2: ANCESTRAL MEMORY AND CONNECTION

At the beginning of the previous section, I explained the isolation my parents and I endured throughout my childhood when we lived on our rural family farm. But while we were cut off from the world, we lived in the perpetual presence of the past; each acre felt consumed with traces of our ancestors who lived and worked on the farm before us. Almost 200 years ago when the land became part of my family's legacy, the 250 acres I knew so well while growing up were part of a much larger, sprawling expanse of mountain farmland gifted by Gideon Allman in 1832 to his newly married daughter, Mary Caroline Allman, who had recently wedded William Francis. This transfer of land is only the third registered piece of property in the county records, rooting the Allmans' and Francis' as among the earliest documented settlers in the region. By the time I was born, the great-great-great grandchild of Mary Caroline and William Francis, the land was dotted with dwellings that had housed generations of Francis descendants: the original log cabins, the large, stately farmhouse William built for his wife, the Doc Bill house that I grew up in, and several barns, cold houses, and outhouses. As a child, I walked the property often, my twin dalmatians following behind me. I crept into these old buildings when I mustered up the nerve, and miraculously each was still filled with relics of the past: old furniture, dishes, photographs, letters, clothes, quilts. My ancestors were no longer living, but their essence filled the rooms of each dwelling. In fact, the poem "The Old Big House" (157-158) details my childhood experience

of both intrigue and fear as I walked down the long gravel road to peer at William Francis' "…immense Victorian farmhouse / with its three stories & five gables," which somehow seemed to be "both dead and breathing" (157).

Of her own experience growing up in the South, Shirley Abbott says that "Like any properly brought up Southern girl, [she] used to spend a lot of time in graveyards" (1). In fact, Abbott claims that it is common for Southern children to "grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies" (1). In Abbott's family, she says "there was no such thing as a person who did not matter…and the dead [mattered] most of all" (3). And though she finds that Southern men were also taught the value of one's ancestors from the time they were young, "the job of tomb guardians usually went to the women" (Abbott 3), much like my mother who sorted through and cared for the old homes on the farm even though the people who had lived there had been her husband's relations and not her own. My experience confirms Abbott's observations regarding the tremendous importance the South places on one's ancestors as well as the Faulknerian notion that "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (*Requiem for a Nun* 85).

During my childhood, family stories and histories were shared and studied often, perhaps not surprisingly since we lived on their land, amongst their possessions. I was shown timeworn photos that had been retrieved from the old houses and told about the people – my ancestors – in the photos. Then later, my parents would quiz me to see if I remembered who was who. My mother and I would collect old letters we found in the houses and try to retrace family narratives. For example, what had happened to William's granddaughter, Mary Hester Francis, who gave birth out of wedlock and died mysteriously seven years later, her son raised by her parents as her brother? Hester's ghost was reportedly seen twice after her death, walking with a bouquet of flowers in her hands, one of the many stories that inspired the

family lore which suggests that the land and its inhabitants might have been cursed. A couple of letters written by Hester and found in the old house suggest a secret love affair, her language teeming with raw emotion. For instance, in one of her letters dated 26 May 1889, Hester writes to someone whose name on the letter is illegible: "It is with a troubled mind that I seat myself to draft you a few lines that the trouble that lies betwext us is only thin. If I only knew that you loved me like I love you how much ease my poor heart." From a young age, I was transfixed by these narratives, and years later, they would resurface in the form of a series of persona/epistolary poems[55] titled "Letters to the Living,"[56] in which I imagine what five of my ancestors might say to their living descendant from the grave. In this section, I will discuss my approach to writing these poems, and I will analyze how the Adult Child Voice factors into this series.

The "Letters to the Living" [57] series presently includes five poems,[58] each named after the ancestor it is based on. In articulating my approach to writing these poems, I again draw on Jeremy's Hooker's "Lyric of Being." Hooker, in speaking of his collection *Ancestral*

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[55] The *Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* labels the epistolary poem as the "verse epistle," which they define as "a poem addressed to a friend, lover, or patron" (381). In her article for the *Poetry Foundation,* Hannah Brooks-Motl prefers the term "epistolary poem." Of particular relevance to this section, her article discusses epistolary poems, in part, with regard to persona poems. Brooks-Motl claims that since the earliest versions of the epistolary poem in ancient Greece and Rome there has been a distinction between "epistles that appear to be true letters – written by the poet, ostensibly as a communiqué to an actual person – and epistles that are obviously fictional, perhaps because they are written in a persona other than the poet's." The "Letters to the Living" set fall within the latter category: fictional letters in the form of poems. Even though the poems are based on real people, the poetic voices in each must be labeled personas, as they are each "written in a persona other than the poet's."

[56] The "Letters of the Living" series owes a debt of gratitude to Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which loosely inspired these poems. However, the two projects are quite different. Masters' classic collection of poems presents epitaphs of 214 individual members of the same community, weaving a wide communal narrative. Whereas, the "Letters to the Living" poems are persona/epistolary poems, and this set of poems has a much smaller scope than Masters' collection: five ancestors (and someday another five) addressing one descendant as opposed to a whole town each addressing a different audience: the reader, each other, etc.

[57] I debated where to place the "Letters to the Living" poems within the collection. It made sense to include them in "Genesis of a Farm Girl," as this section is set within the timeframe that I lived on the Francis farm and explored the old homes. However, in the end, I chose to place them in the third part of the collection, titled "Call me Daughter" because my sense is that these figures are not speaking to the child described in "Genesis of a Farm Girl," but are instead speaking to their adult descendant. As the third section – "Call me Daughter" – focuses on my adult-based familial and Southern experiences, I felt this section to be a better-suited place for these poems.

[58] In the future, after I am able to research more of my ancestors, I hope to add approximately another five poems to this series.

Lines, says the "writing came from a sense of connection, not with family and ancestors seen as picturesque figures, or ghosts, but as persons at once respected in their unique being, and felt as flesh of my flesh" (77). My compulsion to write these poems came from a similar sense of familial connection, and I wanted to bring to life authentic representations of their voices – "their unique beings" – to feel as close as possible their flesh as my flesh. As I worked on this series, it was very important to me that I research each of their lives, combining family stories with materials retrieved from the old homes as well as documents found through ancestral databases and vital document offices. Like Hooker, "I aimed to reimagine truthfully. Loyalty operated like an instinct: the desire not to misrepresent other people's lives" (77). Of course, the information that I have about each of these ancestors is hardly noteworthy; the documents, letters, and family bibles simply do not take the place of having known each of these people. In the absence of more information, the "groundwork of the poems is a factual geography and an experienced history" (Hooker 76). Referring to the "Letters to the Living" poems, this means that I am combining a factual place and a factual people with my own experience, infusing their lives with my poetic voice in order to create a version of the Adult Child Voice.

In Chapter Five, I argue that Byer's first collection of poems fills in gaps of lost family history out of a sense of deference and duty to her family, particularly in the "Search Party" section which reconstructs the mysterious life of her great-grandmother. In doing so, I made the case that Byer's preoccupation with family legacy compels her to lend her own poet-speaker voice to her grandmother and great-grandmother, thereby creating a space for them to tell their own previously untold narratives. I further argue that the poetic voice shared between descendant and ancestor is a version of the Adult Child Voice, as it shows both a compulsion on the part of the poet-speaker to dwell on both autobiographical, family heritage as well as the poet's ongoing familial position as a descendant. As such, I believe that the

"Letters to the Living" poems belong in conversation with the poems in Byer's "Search Party." In a manner similar to Byer, these five poems attempt to fill in lost family history and to keep each ancestor's memory alive, and I also lend my poet-speaker voice to each ancestor in these poems, creating a space for each of their lives to be rehashed. Furthermore, like Byer, these poems show a compulsion on my part to pursue writing projects in which I am identified as a daughter or a descendant. The "Letters to the Living" poems, however, take this compulsion one step further than Byer's "Search Party," as my poems not only give voice to my deceased ancestors, they are also framed in such a way that their entire reason for being is to communicate life lessons or observations to their living descendant, rendering the adult descendant (or the adult child) part-speaker, part-audience. For these reasons, the "Letters to the Living" poems, like Byer's "Search Party," function as a variation of the Adult Child Voice.

These poems additionally meld the biographical lives of my adult ancestors with the sensibilities and perspectives of their descendant, rendering each persona part child (or descendant) and part adult (ancestor), both informing the personas' identities. However, the extent or degree of my own perspective as the child or descendant within these poems varies depending on whether or not I had primary sources written by the family member. For instance, the poem "Hester" (183) could be considered a kind of collaboration between my great-great aunt and myself. Of the 19 lines in the poem, ten came directly from her letters and notebooks, which I note in italics, meaning that this particular poem's project is to create a space for my ancestor's actual words to be communicated to the living, memorializing her brief but tremendously interesting life. However, the poems "Eliza" (187) and "Charlie" (192) are both a different project from "Hester." In fact, I know very little about Eliza except that her birth certificate lists her race as "black," yet her marriage license lists her race as "white." From this information, I composed an entirely fictionalized persona poem based

very loosely on Nella Larson's novel *Passing,* referring to cultural and literary examples to inspire her persona as I can only assume that Eliza likely spent her life "passing" as white. Similarly, I only know that Charlie died in World War I, and I have no other information on him aside from one artifact: the American flag that was sent home with his body in 1918. As such, I again fictionalized his persona based on the little biographical information to which I had access, filling in the gaps with both my own cultural and historical knowledge as well as my own viewpoints and predilections.

Between these two categories discussed above – having a lot of primary source information from the ancestor versus having none – the poem "Doc Bill" (196) registers somewhere in the middle. Of the items my mother salvaged from the William Francis farmhouse before it burned down, the most exciting is a manuscript written by William Francis's grandson, William "Doc Bill" Gifford Francis. In the 1910s, Bill Francis left his father's rural farm to study medicine at a university, the only child in the family to have done so, and after marrying, he moved back to his family's farm and built his own home atop a hill – the same house I grew up in over 50 years later. In his lengthy manuscript, written in a very neat and formal cursive, Doc Bill attempts to reconcile his Christian faith with the science he learned at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, trying to make sense of the two opposing belief systems that mattered to him. His home must have looked quite different to him after going away to college and returning a more learned and worldly adult, an experience I too have faced. It is also likely that his rural community gave him little opportunity to freely exercise his thoughts on science and his non-conforming religious ideas, so he turned to writing to try to make sense of it all. I do not, however, have any letters written by him or any other primary sources, so everything I know about him comes from his manuscript. However, more than any of the other Letters to the Living poems, I find that the poem "Doc Bill" best merges my own lived experience alongside my ancestor's. The poem

includes a few significant lines from his manuscript, noted in italics, but the majority of it is a fictionalized supernatural account of his lived experience, one that speaks to my own life, as well. Like my great-great uncle, I too have felt as though the South demands a choice: follow the mainstream conservative ideologies or leave. For Doc Bill, the debate seems to have been choosing between God (and thereby the South) or Science. In the poem, Doc Bill refuses to choose between the two when the South tries to force him to do so. In not choosing, he makes the claim that it is possible to be a faithful Southern Christian while also possessing a knowledge of science and a curious mind. He vows to defend this stance even from the grave: "The South will return again to pigeonhole me, will return / even to my grave. When it does, I'm ready…." (196). In this poem, the Adult Child Voice not only combines the ancestor's life with the descendant's voice, it also shares a fictionalized version of a Southern experience faced by both. While the South has obviously never visited me in demonic form – nor did it visit Doc Bill – the pressure felt by both of us to conform to mainstream Southern culture unites ancestor and descendant, despite the fact that we never met.

6.3: THE ADULT DAUGHTER AND LEARNING TO SEE

The third section of *Call Me Daughter*, bearing the same title as the collection, begins just as the first section of poems ends: with a move to Mississippi. In particular, "Genesis of a Farm Girl" ends with my mother and I relocating to Mississippi just before my twelfth birthday, leaving behind North Carolina, the family farm and, by extension, leaving my father, too, though he joined us the following year. The journey to Mississippi at the beginning of "Call Me Daughter," described in the poem "Prodigal" (181), takes place 20 years later, following my divorce, as I moved back to my parents' home from Louisiana. Whereas in "Genesis of a Farm Girl" I look back on my childhood as a time when everything

in my life centered around my parents, at the beginning of "Call Me Daughter" I had not lived with my parents for over a decade, which is why the poet-speaker's preoccupations are more varied in the final section than in the first, taking on additional themes, such as marriage, womanhood, and displacement. In contrast to my childhood, my parents were no longer my whole world; my life had just been turned upside down, and I faced another impending move to Cardiff in a couple of months to pursue a PhD. There was also a newly elected American president whose presence in the White House began to precipitate and validate a new wave of racism all over the country. In these ways, "Call Me Daughter," as a section, depicts the experience of navigating the role of daughter as an adult. As an adult daughter, I have much more agency, even as I continue to find myself ever more connected to my parents; however, my adult perspective and greater knowledge of the world means that I inevitably analyze my parents, comparing them – for better or worse – to others, realizing, and often demonizing, their human frailties and pitfalls. The experience of returning home as the prodigal daughter meant that I finally had to confront my parents, particularly my father. But in doing so, I found that, ultimately, I had to confront my own prejudices and faults, as well. Despite the obvious differences between the two sections, the Adult Child Voice is as equally present and significant in "Call Me Daughter" as it was in "Genesis of a Farm Girl," and I will discuss in this section how it factors into the adult-based poems.

At the heart of the poems in Section Three is the father/daughter relationship, which is explored through the Adult Child Voice. The presence of the adult child in "Call Me Daughter" again contextualizes the poems within the field of contemporary Southern poetry written by women, particularly the work of Trethewey, Byer, Parsons, and Haymon. Of these four poets and their collections, however, "Call Me Daughter" is most in conversation with Trethewey's collection *Thrall* (2012), particularly regarding a shared theme of exploring father/daughter relationships against the background of the South, though the scope of *Thrall*

extends beyond the U.S. South. In writing *Thrall*, Trethewey shares her "most explicit meditation on the concept of race…to date" (Henninger, "What Remains" 69), exploring 18th century Mexican casta paintings through a series of ekphrastic poems.[59] Henninger claims that "If Trethewey pointedly insists that Mississippi history *is* US history in *Native Guard*, *Thrall* traces US taxonomies to the foundations of the colonial 'New World'" ("What Remains" 66). But, while *Thrall* finds the poet broadening her field of interest beyond the U.S. South, at the same time, she moves "analytically closer than ever to her native relation to whiteness and poetry," turning her "'ruthless' poet's lens on images of fatherhood in race history," specifically taking a hard look at her own white father, poet Eric Trethewey (Henninger, "What Remains" 69).

Thrall is not the first collection by Trethewey to investigate fathers; in fact, fathers and father figures are present in all four of Trethewey's collections, including "her personal and poetic relationships with her literal and literary"[60] father figures (Millichap 204). However, as both Henninger and Millichap note, the father/daughter relationship depicted in *Thrall* is far more personal than her previous work, revealing insight into her relationship with her own father. In fact, Trethewey says the poems in this collection show "a very intimate conversation in a very public forum" ("How"). "As much as we love each other," Trethewey explains, "there is some growing difficulty in my adult relationship with my father" ("How"). That difficulty is made explicitly apparent within the poems; for example, in the poem "Knowledge," discussed in more depth in Chapter Four, in which the poet-

[59] In an interview with Daniel Cross Turner, Trethewey explains that the Mexican casta paintings "illustrated the mixed blood unions in the colony and also defined their taxonomies, the ways in which the people had been labeled as a form of social control" (166). Trethewey sees a personal connection between herself and the children depicted in the casta paintings: "this idea [of being enthralled to language] has been especially close to my own experience. 'Miscegenation,' for example, is a word that entered the American lexicon during the Civil War. These terms are invented to identify and categorize human subjects" (Trethewey, "Southern Crossings" 166).

[60] Regarding the notion of "literary father figures," Chapter Two of this project examines the literary forefathers Trethewey evokes in her third collection, *Native Guard.* In fact, it could be argued that Trethewey has a type of "adult child" reverence for Hughes, Warren, and Faulkner, positioning herself as their adult literary descendant.

speaker reveals that that her father once referred to her as his "crossbreed child" (30) in one of his poems.

Henninger finds "learning to see" to be one of the central themes in *Thrall*, in particular learning to see "the process of this enthrallment is the first step to breaking its hold" ("What Remains" 71), referring to the hold of the father's language over the adult child. While I agree with Henninger's reading, I argue that "learning to see" in *Thrall* is also part of a common adult child approach toward understanding and reconciliation. Or, as Millichap says, *Thrall* presents a "sharpened focus on the conflicts of love and knowledge that informs the relationship between fathers and daughters" (189). I further argue that both of these observations can be extended to Southern women poets beyond Trethewey, as "learning to see" one's parent and negotiating "love and [sometimes painful] knowledge" can be observed in the work of Byer, Parsons, and Haymon as well as in my own poems.[61] This means that while Trethewey's particular father/daughter narrative is inseparable from a discussion of race, her poems also show a universal adult child experience: seeing one's parent from an adult's point of view and learning to reconcile their faults with their better qualities. In fact, I argue that the effectiveness of the Adult Child Voice relies on the poet-speaker's willingness to push beyond anger or resentment to a more detached, holistic viewpoint, even as the poet-speaker sometimes reveals unflattering details about the parent. In this way, the adult child poet-speaker must be capable of dwelling in and creating from a place of ambivalence – seeing both the good and the bad of the parent – highlighting once again how the two main concepts of this project at times overlap. In "Call Me Daughter," I also use the Adult Child Voice to articulate my own process of "learning to see" my father and coming to reconcile the good with the bad.

[61] I do not mean to make the argument that "learning to see" one's parent is a theme exclusive to Southern poetry, as similar themes can be traced in the work of other writers from around the world. I only mean to suggest that it is a markedly common and significant theme in Southern poetry and not exclusive merely to Trethewey.

Two texts helped me refine my understating of "learning to see." John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, speaks of "seeing" in terms of visual art, but his theories can also be applied to the craft of writing: "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach…we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (8-9). Eudora Welty's autobiographical book on her journey toward becoming a writer, *One Writer's Beginning*, includes a chapter titled "Learning to See," in which she speaks of learning to see as a choice made by the writer, one that can lead to the "continuous thread of revelation" (69). Both Berger and Welty articulate "learning to see" as a choice, revealing that the artist/writer must have some form of investment in or attachment to the person or thing in question. This idea relates back to Millichap's investigation of love and knowledge in Trethewey's *Thall*, specifically his argument that the collection shows a "sharpened focus on the conflicts of love and knowledge that informs the relationship between fathers and daughters" (189). Trethewey points readers in this direction, as she includes a quote by Robert Penn Warren as an epigraph that reads "What is love? / One name for it is knowledge" (qtd. in Trethewey, *Thrall*). For Trethewey and for Warren, it would seem that the act of seeking knowledge is an act of love. But, Berger says that "we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (9). In effect, the more knowledge we gain about something or someone else, the more we learn about ourselves, too. Therefore, the whole process of seeking knowledge or "learning to see" can result in what Welty refers to as a "continuous thread of revelation" (*One Writer's* 69). The Adult Child Voice is a particularly effective poetic mode for articulating a child "learning to see" the parent because as Henninger says "Narration by a child-grown-to-adulthood simultaneously links and separates the events of a poem in time, providing the necessary distance – for both the persona and readers – to be able to see the 'big picture'" ("What Remains" 72).

Regarding my own experience, I never understood my father. Even when I was a child and we were very close, he was a mystery to me. In fact, he's a paradox that I will likely spend my life parsing for answers. How can one man be so wise and yet fall victim to alcoholism? How can one man revere the Confederacy and yet champion minorities? How can one man love guns but hate violence and killing? And why, I've wondered for years, has he always been so sad? For a decade, I kept him at arm's length. As he aged, his alcoholism worsened, and several times, he would go missing after drinking away from home and losing consciousness, leaving my mother and I to worry and look for him. For years, he had wanted us to be closer, promising he would get help for his addiction before again and again breaking his sobriety. But, when I moved back home, I could not hide from the situation any longer. And, as a daughter, I had significant revelations of my own to uncover. Yes, he is a troubled and flawed man, but he has also always been a loving father, and he is filled with redeemable qualities that endear him to friends and family. In order to mend my relationship with my father – and to be able to write about him and our relationship truthfully and holistically in my poems – I had to learn to really see him for both the good and the bad and to reconcile the two sides.

Six poems in "Call Me Daughter" articulate the adult child's process of learning to see: "Prodigal," "Shipwreck," "All the Words I Can't Say Aloud," "Hummingbirds," "Target Practice," and "Shiloh." These narrative free verse[62] poems can be considered a six-part series, as they work together to articulate a change in perspective toward the father. The first poem, "Prodigal" (181), begins with the words "I see" and sets the narrative for what is to come: the poet-speaker has returned home to her parents' house. It also establishes a significant feature of all six poems: the adult child as observer, documenting her father's

[62] Mary Oliver's definition of free verse informs my own: "Free verse is not, of course, free. It is free from formal metical design, but it certainly isn't free from some kind of design" (67). When composing free verse poems, I aim to create a sense of poetic design by including such features as figurative language, anaphora, repetition of sounds, and effective lineation.

actions and words and her own changing emotional landscape. The poem “Shipwreck” (185) depicts the height of the adult child’s disillusionment regarding her father. The overzealous father has put her in harm’s way, and she finds herself in a literal sinking boat. In fact, the shipwreck is referred to as “another almost-grave” at the end of the poem, underscoring that this event is yet another dangerous defeat that the father has inflicted on his family. But, over the series, as the adult child continues to observe her father, revelations begin to unfold. In “All the Words I Can’t Say Aloud” (189-190), the adult child meditates on the emotional gulf that exists between the father and the daughter but reveals at the end that she wonders “...What stirred him / to addiction? What dug the deep hole / inside of him, filled it with sorrow?” She goes on to admit that she would “give anything to know, / even the forgiveness I’ve withheld, even / this carefully cultivated anger of mine” (190), paving the way for reconciliation. In “Hummingbirds” (194), another revelation takes place. The poem begins with the adult child again judging the father’s actions; this time, it is the dirty hummingbird feeders that inspire her indignation, though the adult child self-consciously admits that she is again charting “the man my father should be” (194). By the end of the poem, the adult child is finally able to see the father, looking past the surface details to the beautiful spectacle he created: a swarm of healthy hummingbirds and a vibrant garden beyond. The poet-speaker finally realizes that “...whatever life / he nurtures, thrives. Even his ungracious daughter” (194), acknowledging that despite his faults he is a nurturing and supportive father. The final poem in the series, “Shiloh” (203-204), depicts reconciliation and the hope of forgiveness on the horizon against the backdrop of an unlikely venue: The Shiloh National Military Park. Even though the father/daughter relationship is still not perfect, the adult child has come to “look for what we share, for the small / joys that bind us” (203). Ultimately, the most significant revelation for the adult child in this series is that

...We can't change

what has passed, only learn from it. Only let

tomorrow be the miracle it always is: a blank

page on which we can shoulder any burden,

issue any forgiveness, stand side by side

on hallowed ground – father and daughter. (204)

Overall, the Adult Child Voice operates in *Call Me Daughter* in three significant ways. First, the Adult Child Voice is used in "Genesis of a Farm Girl" to articulate childhood anxiety and ambivalence. Secondly, in the section "Call Me Daughter," the adult child functions as a way of memorializing ancestors and connecting with them in verse. Finally, the poet-speaker uses the Adult Child Voice to articulate learning to see her father, paving the way for reconciliation. I argue that because of the prevalent use of the adult child in this collection, *Call Me Daughter* fits within the same tradition as Trethewey, Byer, Parsons, and Haymon, offering as they do a glimpse into the experience of being a woman and a daughter in the South; however, I further argue that *Call Me Daughter* is an original contribution to contemporary Southern poetry by women, as the collection is distinct from its predecessors in terms of the singular poet-speaker and her experiences depicted in the poems as well as her particular approaches to the Adult Child Voice.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this critical commentary has been to contextualize my collection of poems, *Call Me Daughter*, within the field of contemporary Southern poetry. In doing so, I focused on two facets of this milieu that are relevant to my poems and that I believe mark the collection as distinctly Southern: Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice.

However, while this commentary aims to be a practice-led exegesis, meaning that it "situates creative practice as both an outcome and driver of the research process" (Hamilton and Jaaniste 1), it also puts forth two substantial, original contributions to knowledge, particularly regarding the fields of Southern literature and, more specifically, Southern poetry. Although a burgeoning field, much more scholarship on contemporary Southern poetry is needed, particularly regarding female poets of the region. Turner claims that currently there is "a scholarly bias against poetry in favor of genres that seem to reflect historical conditions more 'transparently'" (xviii). His 2012 collection of scholarly essays, *Southern Crossings: Poetry, Memory, and the Transcultural South*, aims to fill that gap by "interpreting [Southern] poetry and poetics in connection with its contemporary social and historical contexts" (Turner xviii). I too argue that poetry, as much as prose, can be an instructive and insightful source for exploring and interpreting the Southern experience and the Southern identity, particularly poetry based in autobiography. Furthermore, although a major theme across all genres of Southern literature, Southern Ambivalence has yet to be defined or studied in depth. As previously noted, when ambivalence stemming from the U.S. South is analyzed within works of literature, it is almost always regarding works of prose. This is what makes Chapter Two of this thesis significant to any exegesis of Southern literature, as it discusses Southern Ambivalence in relation to poetry, specifically regarding how one poet – Trethewey – grapples with her own ambivalence within her poems by turning

to literary forefathers for guidance. I hope this chapter will inspire further research into both Southern Ambivalence as well as the ways in which ambivalence shapes the region's verse. Similarly, more research needs to be done on the Adult Child Voice in Southern poetry. Henninger began this inquiry in relation to Trethewey, and Chapter Five of this thesis extends the conversation by applying Henninger's framework to Southern women poets beyond Trethewey, namely Byer, Parsons, and Haymon. What is it about the South that inspires contemporary poets to remain in adult child identities/poetic personas? And why do the Adult Child Voice and Southern Ambivalence, at times, manifest together? From my own personal experience, I would argue that Southern cultural and historical pressures can and do create both, perhaps with one leading to the other. However, more research also needs to be done on the adult child relating to both the Southern identity and Southern literature, in addition to the relationship between Southern Ambivalence and the Adult Child Voice. What can be said with certainty, however, is that daughterhood continues to be a complex yet powerful source of inspiration, discovery, and revelation for women writers of the South.

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