Willa Cather and the Burden of Southern History

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The South . . . far from being utterly different, is really the essence of the nation. It is not a mutation born by some accident into the normal, lovely American family; it has simply taken the national genes and done the most with them. It contains, in concentrated and dangerous form, a set of characteristics which mark the country as a whole. It is different because it is a distillation of those traits which are the worst (and a few which are the best) in the national character. Those very qualities long attributed to the South as special possessions are, in truth, American qualities, and the nation reacts emotionally to the South precisely because it subconsciously recognizes itself there. The mystery is that attached to the bastard child, whose father disavows his act. But a paternity test, I suspect, would destroy the charge of bastardy and reveal the United States as the true father of the Southern region.

—Howard Zinn, "The South as a Mirror," *The Southern Mystique* (1964)

Even in post-apocalyptic America, memories of plantation slavery will continue to startle and trouble survivors of what was once a nation. Or so Cormac McCarthy suggests in his "post-topian" novel, *The Road*. A father and son head vaguely southward in the aftermath of an unspecified cataclysm, when, somewhere in the middle of the country, they encounter a place that promises shelter, maybe food to scavenge: it is a "once grand house," "tall and stately with white Doric columns across the front."[1] Given the novel's deliberate refusal to identify what has caused the total devastation enveloping the characters, the historical particularity of this moment appears all the starker. The father understands immediately that they are entering a plantation big house: "Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays" (106). The place has fallen into disrepair, the detritus of very recent occupancy joining the sagging wallpaper and bellying plaster ceilings of long ago. This could be Faulkner's Old Frenchman's Place, another plantation house abandoned to the slow, then quick, eclipse of time. Spooked, the child wants to leave, but the father notices signs of present habitation, signals of valuable supplies locked up.

He makes the mistake of forcing his way into the cellar, where he discovers a nightmarish scene: in the dark, and cold, and stench, he sees that "huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands" (110). Worse, a man missing legs, stumps charred, indicates the inconceivable: father and son have stumbled across a place where humans are being held for cannibalistic consumption.

This horrific scene of subjection functions as an historical memory unprepared for. The dimly innocent father and son, exiled from their comfortable twenty-first-century American lifestyle, never having seen the apocalypse coming, hardly expect to run into the forgotten foundation of national well-being. The mansion rests on the hidden reality of plantation violence: the discovered scene evokes a palimpsest of racial chattel slavery—the Middle Passage; plantation economy's cannibalization of laboring slave bodies; post-emancipation lynching; and eerie resonances with what followed: penitentiaries, "deathcamp[s]" (117), post-9/11 torture sites. McCarthy arranges a surreal confrontation with the historical premises of the apocalypse he imagines: central among them the moral monstrosity of slavery, still somehow alive in the present. The father notices that amid the shambles the mansion's "windows were oddly intact" (105), and it is not surprising that he both does and does not want to register a living connection to the resources of so degraded a past: "All these things he saw and did not see" (109).

The aftershocks of colonial plantation society continue to be felt because the frames and panes of the system have remained "oddly intact" in our national, hemispheric, and global activities. From the descent of wealth accumulated via the Atlantic trade and its extensive commercial web, to models of modern agribusiness and labor, foreign policy templates for the control of darker populations abroad, as well as a national penchant for violence and coercion, numerous features of slaveholding plantation history have been identified as lasting elements of the modern American state.[2] It is not surprising that the art of anticolonialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should conduct a long-deferred confrontation with plantation history. Édouard Glissant has memorably described such cultural expression as "the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world."[3] American and Southern studies have been pivoting for a decade toward examining representations of plantation colonialism, ensuing imperialisms, and traditions of resistance in national as well as hemispheric literature. But if we think of speculative slaveholding plantation colonialism as a (even *the*) disavowed primal crime of the national project, then we might also expect to find endless forms of such unwanted knowledge clogging the national imaginary. In other words, it ought to be

instructive to look for eruptions of bad historical conscience about national plantation origins in places where you would not expect them: in a postnation novel like *The Road*, but also in earlier works written as if the plantation South had no bearing on national development.[4]

Such a shard of the plantation past gets turned up unexpectedly on the plains of Nebraska in Willa Cather's epic of national destiny, *My Ántonia*.[5] The narrator's account of modern American prosperity centers on the rough vitality of frontier settlement and western growth, the novel's spare lyricism celebrating the vast potential of prairie farmland. *My Ántonia*'s exercise in national mythmaking strategically ignores the country's actual origins.[6] Cather's narrator, James Quayle Burden, is the prime beneficiary of such apparent amnesia:[7] a New York lawyer and western development agent who recalls that his arrival as an orphan to the open prairies felt like the discovery of "a new world" "in which to try [his] fortune" (5). Jim's dreamy memoir infamously clears the countryside of its earlier history, as if the only thing that could be imagined as anterior to nation were nothing, the vacated space welcoming the child as "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (7). Burden credits his grandfather with the "clear, meditative eye to foresee" that the cornfields of the Midwest will become "one of the great economic facts" of the world (88). It is this national destiny that shapes Jim's own good fortune, and as he grows up he surveys with approval the economic development necessary to fulfill it: "The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea" (197).

As a prerequisite for his success, Jim accepts the evacuation of his personal past as well. Transported to the emptied spaces of the prairie, Jim abandons himself to the larger destiny of a country-in-the-making: "I felt erased, blotted out. . . . here, I felt, what would be would be" (8). The Burden family's origins somewhere in Virginia, Jim's early childhood there—these barely get mentioned, as if the text wants to demonstrate how "immigrants" must disburden themselves of the past to make themselves Americans (and to make America America). The transplanted Virginian does once imagine the ghosts of his dead parents looking for him futilely back east, but he insists he has left "even their spirits behind me" (8). Here is an orphan who never misses his parents, an exile who never feels homesick. Jim's euphoria at his prospects depends on a deadening of the past and a curious forfeiture of agency: "I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire. . . . At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great" (14). Burden may be as equanimous a narrator as any in fiction. He records the death of his parents; his

removal across half a country; the hard conditions of frontier work, sex, and money; suicides, murders—all with calm oblivion, and sometimes even with strange contentment. Waking with a premonition of trouble on what turns out to be the morning of Mr. Shimerda's gruesome death, Jim reports—sensing his managerial future—that he "looked forward to any new crisis with delight. . . . Perhaps the barn had burned; perhaps the cattle had frozen to death; perhaps a neighbor was lost in the storm" (62). Throughout his account of leaving Virginia, growing up among pioneer families on the plains, gaining degrees at Harvard, marrying to advantage in New York, and making a success of himself as corporate counsel to a national railroad, little disturbs the narrator's faith in the invincibility of his "Destiny" (238)—a faith of course that may owe to Burden's having already achieved that destiny before he begins to write.

That such composure, however, requires severe powers of denial may be inferred from occasional punctures in the facade of Jim's imperturbability. Perhaps the most telling of these comes in response to the seemingly innocuous appearance of a "Negro" pianist in Jim's Nebraska town. This sightless prodigy, Blind d'Arnault, plays the concert hall, then entertains privately one evening at the hotel. Jim reacts to the spectacle schizophrenically; irrational repugnance overwhelms his acknowledgment of the pianist's genius. Both the extremeness of revulsion and the gush of personal memories indicate that a nerve has been struck: "It was the soft, amiable Negro voice, like those I remembered from early childhood, with the note of docile subservience in it. He had the Negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool. He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy. It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia." Even as he concedes d'Arnault's gift, Burden cannot get past the Negro's physical repellence: "a heavy, bulky mulatto" with a "bullet-head," a "show of white teeth, all grinning," "shrunken, papery eyelids," an "expression of idiotic rapture" (118, 119, 120). Jim is unable to acknowledge d'Arnault's ability without dismissing his accomplishment: he is "a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real" (121). D'Arnault triggers memories of Virginia Negroes for Jim, and he reacts with the reflexes of a Southerner. He carries like a meme the amalgam of condescension and disgust that organizes white attitudes toward blacks in a slaveholding culture. D'Arnault is an unwanted reminder of a plantation society past that has no place in Jim's fantasy of the great modern country whose origins lie in the burgeoning of the West at century's end.[8]

Burden's resistance to recalling his place of origin symptomizes the broader national syndrome of willful blindness to the country's beginnings in colonial plantation projects, and the interlude of d'Arnault exemplifies an imperative to disavow a set of interrelated truths in imagining the myth of nation. I propose that Jim stages the most acute of his anxieties about compromised national origins in a *productive* way, by "hiding" such problems in plain sight. Many disturbing features of America's success story haunt Jim's pageant of national destiny. Rather than simply refusing to mention them, however, Jim incorporates them into his text in conspicuously disguised form. Such a strategy enables the narrator to *manage* threats to his account instead of simply ignoring them. The result is a narrative that includes compromising knowledge in order to recast it as the pleasure of self-affirmation and destiny. Readers familiar with Slavoj Žižek's model of ideology will recognize my approach here as owing to his hypothesis that societies construct collective fantasies that enable them to acknowledge unwanted, even disabling truth (such as that many pleasures of a high-consumption society are unsustainable economically and ecologically), while also enabling them to act as if they do not. Jim's story proves an ambitious exercise in the construction of national fantasy, one that prevails by means of intricate effects of misrecognition and equivocation. Whatever the struggles and suffering of others, they apparently remain incommunicable to Jim. The awkward episode of Blind d'Arnault, then, puts an embodiment of the plantation past—the Atlantic slave trade, the commoditization of black bodies, white dependence on black labor, sexual exploitation and miscegenation, rebellion, the persistence of racial subjugation after emancipation—out in the open, where the narrative must depict such repellent truths, even as it struggles to disavow them. Cather's novel demonstrates how cultural fantasy does not ignore what is real, but actually produces reality. By contrast, in her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), set in slaveholding antebellum Virginia, Cather admits the painful historical realities of plantation society and disarticulates them from any narrative of national disavowal. The result is a discomposed novel, one that fails to find the sort of modernist aesthetic that might allow ideological and narrative dismantling to reinforce each other, as, for example, Faulkner invents in *Absalom, Absalom! Sapphira* does anticipate the condition of dazed unhomedness in a work like *The Road*, however, which stumbles across a plantation mansion that could be anywhere in America, and cannot figure out how to make it a part of the story—perhaps because the survivors' story itself, as it turns out, has been produced by that very history.

White on Canvas

Burden's effort to construct a story that will absorb him into the "beautiful and harmonious" destiny of regional and national history (not to mention rationalizing his profitable management of it) must solve numerous challenges to its triumphalism. Recent scholarship has shown how extensively Jim's narrative suppresses the violent history of European colonialism that would obstruct his pastoral vision of the prairie.[9] Burden glosses over evidence of Indian extermination, New World Spanish conquest, and the exploitation of immigrant settlers in order to preserve his confidence that, as for the land's development, "all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility" (197). That he does see things with such selective personal and national self-interest is little in question, but how exactly do Burden's techniques of representation enable him to repel threats to his narrative of American destiny?

When Jim recounts the disposition of Mr. Shimerda's corpse, he reports that the suicide has been buried, in accordance with superstition, under the crossroads at the corner of his property. Burden lingers, though, over the "clemency" of the local travelers, who avoid treading on the grave, instead turning it into "a little island," and softening their routes into evasive curves. Jim says he loves the "spirit that could not carry out the sentence" (77), and it is precisely such reticence Burden himself emulates as he allows his sentences to circumscribe what is disquieting without addressing it. Jim's text tends toward the indecipherable, a kind of script already signaled in the train conductor's cuff links on Jim's journey from Virginia; they "were engraved with hieroglyphics and he was more inscribed than an Egyptian obelisk" (6). Such near-inscrutability carries through to the talismanic image of Jim's depiction of the prairie's grandeur: the "picture-writing" of a plough outlined against the setting sun. However affecting, the icon remains enigmatic, a triumph of aesthetic equipoise that frames the collaboration of nature and culture, beautiful and harmonious, by detaching it from human agency, story, history. When Jim discovers a faint circle worn into the grass on his grandparents' land, he learns there are two theories about this path "the Indians used to ride": grandfather figures it must have been a course to train and race horses, while Jake and Otto are sure the Indians must have tortured prisoners at the stake as they galloped round the ring.[10] Indian removal freed entrepreneurs to build railroads, connect regions of agricultural production to metropolitan markets, and open routes for European immigration and settlement. Towns like Cather's Red Cloud (become Burden's Black Hawk) flourished in consequence.[11] The land bore legible inscriptions of its earlier history, the traces of violent conflict. Jim,

however, moves the text from historical speculation to aesthetic appreciation: he notes that at sunset the circle shows "like a pattern in the grass," and that "when the first light spray of snow lay over it, it came out with wonderful distinctness, like strokes of Chinese white on canvas" (42).

Burden's determination to rework anything that might trouble his harmonious vision helps explain the absorbency of his narrative. He warns the reader at the outset that "I suppose it hasn't any form" (244), as if preparing us for digressions in plot that protect the ultimate purposes of the story.[12] Jim's anxiety about another phase of frontier development—this one involving his own complicity in capital projects—leads to an exemplary redirection of narrative effect. Burden understands soon after his arrival that the prairie can be a place of brutal economic struggle. With fortunes to be made, land brokers like Peter Krajiek capitalize on immigrants' ignorance and trustfulness. The "merciless" (35) Wick Cutter worsens things with extortionate loans and mortgages. Jim admires the more civil business practices of the Harlings, a prominent family, but it is the Krajieks and Cutters who make Burden worry there's something bestial behind the accumulation of wealth. Burden's destiny as an agent of industrial capital development has already been accomplished by the time he revisits his economic crucible on the frontier: Jim "is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. If a young man with an idea can once get Jim Burden's attention . . . then the money which means action is usually forthcoming" (1918 Introduction, 242–43). Yet Burden knows the road to prosperity is strewn with casualties: Shimerda may die of homesickness, but he longs for Bohemia because the family's poverty has reduced them to burrowing animals; his death degrades Ántonia to the condition of a "draught-horse" as she devolves into field worker; a tramp tired of roaming hurls himself into a thresher, his body so jamming the mechanism that "the machine ain't never worked right since" (115); Cutter himself burlesques the lust for money when he murders his wife then commits suicide so as to dispossess her surviving family. As if in a bad dream, Jim once finds himself in bed with that repugnant profiteer, a victim, he hopes, of mistaken identity.

Jim's anxiety about the predatory nature of economic life works itself out in the powerful, if seemingly anomalous story of Peter and Pavel's disgrace. The two Russians help celebrate the wedding of friends, then join a convoy of sledges to drive the party home across the frozen terrain. Soon set upon by a pack of wolves, the group begins to lose horses then passengers to the ferocious predators. Realizing that they will be caught themselves unless

they lighten their sledge, Pavel throws groom and bride overboard. Shame forces the friends into exile, their story kept secret, until on his deathbed Pavel "unburdened his mind" to Mr. Shimerda (40). Peter and Pavel's mad calculation of persons to be sacrificed against persons to be saved mimes the calculus of sacrifice and gain that organizes Jim's account of national advancement.[13] The anecdote literalizes Hobbes's "homo homini lupus" ("man is a wolf to man"), but Jim does everything he can to hide in plain sight the wolfishness that underlies life on the prairie. He has the good-hearted Bohemian, Anton Jelinek, show up for Shimerda's funeral in a "long wolfskin coat" (68). He mentions reading *Robinson Crusoe* on the morning of Shimerda's death; in it he might have encountered the episode in which a pack of wolves must be fended off by Crusoe's party as they cross the Pyrenees on their way home to England. Upon his rescue and return to Europe, Crusoe has discovered—quite implausibly—that he is now a wealthy man; his cash has been safeguarded, and his investment in a Brazilian plantation has also accumulated a fortune for him, thanks to the integrity of his Portuguese partner. Crusoe's real fear, he admits, is not actual animals but the "two-legged Wolves" who may rob the party. He has cause for concern since his saga begins when pirates sell him into slavery, his condition eventually to be relieved when he escapes with a slave boy (whom he later sells himself), and his future secured when he sets up as a plantation owner and slave trader in South America. Defoe's fantasy of providential capitalism is inseparable from speculation in New World plantations and commerce in slaves. The wolfishness of man to man in *Robinson Crusoe* is a shadow cast by avarice so extreme it can turn humans into goods for profit, merchants into dealers of flesh.[14]

Without overstating the centrality of plantation colonialism to the story of western capitalism, I do want to recall Eric Williams's insistence that the amassment of fortune in Europe derived from the profitability of coerced labor in the colonies, not to mention the lucrative trade in African chattel.[15] The residue of Peter and Pavel's story joins the disturbed dreams of a Virginian capitalist to narratives of sacrificed humans: "At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia" (41). Soon Jim makes a snow sledge of his own so he can take Ántonia for rides. Later, when he wonders why Shimerda's spirit should haunt the *Burden* house, he imagines the suicide's ghost making its homesick way back to Bohemia through Chicago, Virginia, and Baltimore, some of these places more evocative of Jim's past than of the dead man's. He even puzzles over the idea that Shimerda's restless spirit might be suffering

torment in Purgatory, since, unlike the Biblical Dives, "Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish" (67). True, but perhaps someone else has been. Burden puts himself in harm's way, only to master it. He decides that Peter and Pavel's story means nothing to him and Ántonia except the thrill they get from its rehearsal, "as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure" (41). Here is Jim all but confronting his willingness to throw others overboard for his own survival, but the anxiety of self-confrontation has been redirected into the mere pleasure of hearing a story, the significance of the fable left hidden in the open.

Blind Tom, Blind Jim

Blind d'Arnault, shade of a suppressed history, nearly blindsides Jim's serene account of a Midwest without a past.[16] We may appreciate even more fully the denial of Southern history at work in the novel if we take into account the person on whom d'Arnault is held to be based, a pianist known as "Blind Tom." The remarkable career of Thomas Greene Bethune, about which Cather certainly knew, illustrates so many troubling effects of American slavery on national consciousness that the literary construct "d'Arnault" looks all the more like a control device meant to disavow toxic knowledge, even as it insists on recognition.

Blind Tom, born into slavery on a Georgia plantation in 1849, made a celebrated career in the last half of the nineteenth century as a touring prodigy, a pianist and mimic who entertained huge audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, gained serious respect for his musical accomplishment, and earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for his handlers. Sightless from birth, the child responded to sounds preternaturally, and soon learned to play the piano by ear on the Bethune plantation. Tom's feats at the keyboard proved extraordinary: he could reproduce any composition performed for him; he could play separate pieces simultaneously with each hand—then face away from the keyboard and repeat them with opposite hands; he composed both imitations of classical works and original coloristic impressions of modern life, including his famous evocation of the "Battle of Manassas." Arguably, he suffered from a mental impairment that prevented him from living independently, and he was the object of two notorious court battles involving his "custody." Cather likely heard Blind Tom perform in Lincoln, when she was an undergraduate at the university. An unsigned review of a concert appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal*—for which she was a reporter—on May 18, 1894, and has been attributed to her. Cather herself,

however, later denied ever having heard Blind Tom in person, insisting instead that the character d'Arnault was inspired by another prodigy, Blind Boone. That pianist's career was quite different from Tom's, however; he had lost his vision to a childhood illness, was fully trained as a musician, and had complete control over his career and earnings. Even personally, then, Cather seems to resort to disavowal in dealing with figures associated with the plantation past. The *Journal* reviewer allows that Blind Tom brings the spectator "too near to the things we sane people do not like to think of."[17]

Blind Tom embodied the continuing significance of slavery in the formation of modern America. His performances in the Midwest would have highlighted the specific contradictions of the region's development. As a free black man appearing in Nebraska during the 1880s, for example, Tom would have been a reminder of the recent history of that state's Unionism. Fischer and Tellefsen have both elaborated on the history of the region's development, which, even as its status underscored the end of slavery, depended on the removal of the Sioux from the area around the eventual town of Red Cloud. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed the new states to determine the issue of slavery for themselves rather than banning it; the compromise resulted from an eagerness—Stephen Douglas's especially—to build transcontinental railroads across the territories. Cather's own grandfather and uncle, a Union veteran, were the family's first property owners in Nebraska when the territory was "opened" to white settlement. The entangled history of Indian removal, abolition and emancipation politics, commercial rail development, and foreign immigration yields the successful career of Jim Burden, of course, although his text disguises as much of this record as possible. Blind Tom, his far-flung touring made possible by the new "railroad towns" of the Midwest, functioned as a conduit for plantation history—the Stephen Foster songs, musical reminiscences of the Confederacy and Civil War, a personal history extending back to slave origins and involving continuing bondage to white masters. Tom is a graphic and insistent reminder of the awkward survival of such a past on the prairie and helps us realize how keenly Burden's portrait of d'Arnault works to downplay this disquieting reality.

Thomas Greene Bethune was more than a reminder of the persistence of plantation mentalities in late nineteenth-century America, however; he was a living embodiment of antebellum slave society, his appearances constantly reminding audiences of the foundation of Southern and even national life in plantation economy. Tom was born on the Wiley Jones plantation in Columbus, Georgia. Jones had moved to Georgia from Virginia when the tobacco economy went into decline, eventually to make more of his

money trading slaves than planting fields. The town, named after Christopher Columbus, sat on the Chattahoochee River, and enjoyed direct water passage to the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans. Columbus was part of an extended plantation slave society in the Southeast; it had been founded when the United States removed the native Creek from lands along the river. Columbus produced raw cotton, and later flourished when it built its own mills for finishing; it became known as the "Lowell of the South," after New England's most famous mill town. The story of Columbus illustrates the layering of Indian extermination, land speculation, and slavery in the foundation of colonial slaveholding plantation agriculture; from the beginning the eastern settlements required such practices, and they recurred in waves of subsequent European expansion across the continent. Cather may not have known how much Southern history Blind Tom represented, although his career as a performer and litigant were covered nationally; when he died in New York City in 1908 she had herself been living there two years. Moreover, Tom's primary guardians, members of the Bethune family of Georgia, acquired an estate in the Shenandoah Valley just after the Civil War. Each summer following the touring season, the group would retire to the Elway farm, just outside Warrenton, where the Bethunes "became part of Virginia's cavalier elite" (172), and Tom regaled the locals with his playing.[18] This continued until at least 1874, the year after Willa Cather was born in Back Creek, less than fifty miles away.

Blind Tom displayed a prodigious memory. Not only could he replicate all but the most complex musical compositions on a single hearing, he perfectly mimed verbal forms like political speeches. The *Nebraska State Journal* review likens him to "a phonograph," and he was known as someone who "never forgot a thing."[19] Another contemporary referred to him as a "memoirist," a term that may identify a deeper significance to Tom's powers of recollection. Tom's performances depended on aural memory, and are flooded with material from his personal and racial experience of slavery. As Joseph Roach suggests in *Cities of the Dead*, if dominant historical narratives require the selective forgetting of disturbing material, popular performances "often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions."[20] Groups left out of official histories of place and nation must rely on unofficial performances of their countermemories. Although white middle-class audiences recognized the imitation of European classical masters in Tom's playing and composing, Deirdre O'Connell asserts that Tom's music was first understood by blacks as exhibiting features they associated with Africa: "slaves, peering through windows and doors, detected in Tom—not a musical prodigy—but a child whose musical revelations re-

kindled a connection with the great spirits of Africa." O'Connell concludes that many of the improvisatory and coloristic effects of Tom's playing suggest African sources. Tom was understood locally as "possessed," a Voodoo concept for those with special gifts, "marked" (as Nat Turner held himself to be) for greatness and often blessed with "second sight," especially in the case of those physically blind.[21]

Among the "memories" carried by Tom, then, was the origin of U.S. plantation society in the movement of peoples across the Atlantic—including the many Africans forced to leave their homelands. Tom's own history contains an awful reminder of black confinement as the beginning of black consciousness: the afflicted infant was put for safekeeping in a box, where he doubtless suffered profound physical and social deprivation. Tom's strange behavior—which he arguably outgrew, and which present scholars tend to consider autism—derives from his status as a damaged slave. It would be difficult not to see that box as a metaphor for all the tight spaces Houston Baker identifies as defining black experience out of Africa. Tom's acute auditory powers quicken as everything else goes dark. Once across the Atlantic, slaves might never get as far as the U.S., of course; many ended up staying on the more established and profitable plantations of the West Indies. Tom's personal history touches on this dimension of African "immigration," since Tom's mother, Charity, Jones's slave, is mated with a man named Mingo, purchased by Wiley from one Myles Greene, a neighboring Georgia planter. O'Connell speculates that "Mingo" suggests an origin in Santo Domingo; if Greene was responsible for bringing Mingo to Columbus, he might well have migrated himself from the islands. Tom's ancestry, then, plausibly includes a link to the Haitian Revolution, the primary reason white planters left Caribbean plantations and emigrated to the U.S. during these decades. The circumstances of Tom's past recall the event that slaveholding Southerners most wanted to forget: the violent revolution that established black freedom and independence on Haiti.[22]

Advertised as "The Last Slave in America," Blind Tom also paraded the persistence of neo-slavery in the post-Reconstruction nation. Charity and Mingo had fled Jones and sought refuge with Colonel John Bethune when it looked as if they were to be sold separately. Bethune arranged to buy them and keep them together, eventually recognizing he had a gold mine in their young prodigy. He drew up a contract entitling him to take most of the profits from the child's playing; eventually he licensed Tom to a showman named Oliver Perry, who returned him after a few years on the circuit. Tom's parents regretted their agreement, and Charity was once quoted as lamenting that they "stole" her child. Over the course of Tom's career there

were suits by both Bethune and his son's widow to gain control of Tom and his earnings. In all these dealings the prevailing conviction was that "there was money" in Tom. He was the last slave in America not only because white people retained legal custody of him, but also because he was an emblem of post-Reconstruction racial exploitation. Tom carries to the stage with him this massive, spectacularly publicized entanglement with white financial interests, one that summarizes an entire history of fiscal traffic in black bodies, work, and products.

Painful and Peculiar Pleasure

D'Arnault's appearance briefly startles Burden with a reminder that the South may not be as far away as he thinks. The pianist leads a gathering of salesmen and servant girls in an evening of "good old plantation songs," singing "one Negro melody after another." Jim summarizes the musician's history, beginning with his birth "on the d'Arnault plantation, where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted" (119). D'Arnault represents a counternarrative to Jim's expurgated national fantasy. As with Blind Tom, this prodigy's genius involves his "remarkable memory"; he can "repeat, after a fashion, any composition that is played for him" (121). The memory of plantation slavery survives for its victims through music like d'Arnault's and Tom's that personalizes, disfigures, and supplements its models in official culture. Prevented from writing their own accounts of the past—"his shrunken, papery eyelids lay motionless over his blind eyes" (118)—blacks like d'Arnault find other means of expression.

D'Arnault's story offers too much Southern history for Burden's memoir to accommodate, and Jim filters and distorts this unwanted burden. The moral disorder of the plantation appears in the circumstances of the child's rearing, but its source is displaced by the narrator, with the reflex of historical disavowal, onto the boy's own mother. Martha is described as "a buxom young Negro wench who was laundress for the d'Arnaults"; in the absence of any information about her children's father, one infers the usual explanation, but the slave's sexualization by Burden's account insinuates that she must have been complicit in her fate. The infant of three weeks loses his sight to an illness, and, though his mother loves him "devotedly," she also is ashamed of his being "not right" in his head, of his facial disfiguration and his nervous "fidgets." Although Martha tries to keep her son out of sight, his genius draws him to the main house, where the d'Arnault sisters practice the piano. When the boy rebels, it is against the prohibitions imposed by his own slave mother, while it is Nellie d'Arnault who recognizes his abil-

ity and arranges for instruction. Burden's account recycles standard beliefs about Negro depravity and plantation paternalism—convictions hardly supported by Tom's biography.

Similarly, d'Arnault's body carries a record of slavery's violence that Burden's manner of description both registers and tries to transfigure. D'Arnault's magical "yellow hands" conceal a history of coerced black labor; it "was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black-and-white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers" (121). In seeing the excess of pleasure and freedom in the pianist's hands, Jim exempts himself from having to acknowledge the history of black hands in the production of his own present. Even d'Arnault's fidgeting gets absorbed into his playing: at "the piano, he swayed in time to the music, and when he was not playing, his body kept up this motion, like an empty mill grinding on" (118). Burden believes that d'Arnault's "sense of rhythm . . . was stronger than his other physical senses—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly" (121). The text betrays an awareness that d'Arnault may be exhibiting somatic symptoms of his race's traumatic history, a body "worried" by the phantom rhythms of mechanical work, like the grinding of an empty mill. Jim, though, would rather such worried spasms appear as inconsequential, like those of a "rocking toy." When Burden beholds d'Arnault's transport at the piano, he says that he "looked like some glistening African god of pleasure" as the "perspiration shone on his short wool and on his uplifted face" (123). Jim fetishizes plantation residues by converting the sweat of Africans in the field into the "glistening" of pleasure, and the finished product of cotton agriculture—although d'Arnault's playing never acquires "any finish," Jim insists—into the picturesque wool of a minstrel's head.

Stephanie Smallwood has recently analyzed the experience of slaves transported from Africa to the New World through models of immigration.[23] In her book *Saltwater Slavery*, Smallwood imagines how utterly devastating involuntary immigration was: the Atlantic passage's violation of native customs regarding the disposal of the dead; the irrelevance of all former knowledge about time, navigation, space; the sheer deadliness of the voyage.[24] Smallwood tallies evidence for suicides among slaves recently arrived in the New World, describes the difficulty with which a diasporic monoculture was fashioned out of multiple tribal backgrounds, and notes how a mentality of African *Americanness* was formed among the first generations born in the New World. Smallwood's discussion helps us appreciate how Jim's celebration of voluntary European immigration in the making of

America refuses to incorporate the counternarrative of African immigration. Cather's use of a French name for d'Arnault's plantation master evokes a whole history of New World conquest and Caribbean plantation economy, while Jim's description of d'Arnault as an "*African* god of pleasure" (my emphasis) (123) points back through what Jim calls the "Far South"—distancing himself as much as he can—to even earlier memories that may haunt the first European Virginians.

D'Arnault's piano playing underscores the origins of African American selfhood in exile and loss. He learns to play after he overhears his mistress practicing. One day, sensing the room is empty, the blind child climbs through a window, and "found his way to the Thing, to its mouth" (120). For his mother's embarrassed remoteness Blind d'Arnault substitutes an "artificial instrument":

> He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his fingertips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space it occupied in primeval night. . . . He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. . . . He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him. (120)

In this uncanny moment, the African French Virginian "yellow" child blindly fathoms the void of his history. The "space" "in primeval night" of this "Thing" objectifies at once the violence of the black body's conversion to commodity, the eradication of African labor in a luxury good (during the nineteenth century, the trade in grand pianos—with their ivory and mahogany—cost the lives of millions of African slaves), the transfiguration of maternal lack into fetishistic replacement.[25] The tight space inside the piano—like Blind Tom's "cradle"—measures the cramped quarters of the Middle Passage, knowledge of which Blind d'Arnault will never possess but can sense as a terror-filled space.

This episode becomes all the more telling, however, when we realize how much of it must owe to *Jim's* anxious fantasy. Jim projects his own blindness to the African origins of American prosperity into that yawning blackness that hides a circum-Atlantic history in plain sight. Jim resists this historical revenant of Africans in Virginia who toiled on the farms of the nation's first frontier. That the Burdens carry with them the faces and fortune of their Virginia forebears, that their present carries forward benefits accrued from the uncompensated "sacrifice" of African life and labor, constitutes an historical problem Jim's narrative cannot solve. Burden expurgates his Southernness as the condition of his Americanness. It is precisely because

Jim is far removed from his Southern beginnings that he can become a representative of the modern nation. Howard Zinn helps us appreciate how the U.S. South may have been the progeny of nation, embodying its principles in ways later denied, but Cather suggests that the nation is also progeny of the South, owing its life to origins it would prefer not to acknowledge.[26] Blind d'Arnault functions as the fetishized object of such knowledge—at once the repugnant reminder of racial interdependence and exploitation, and the object of desired recognition for the admittedly compromised white soul. Burden's task is not to exclude such history, but to include it in such a way that it can be acknowledged and disavowed indivisibly, converted into a source of "painful and peculiar pleasure." Thing of delight, the digression looks away harmlessly from the narrative Jim wants to tell. Yet looked at awry, it threatens the edifice altogether. What must Martha be thinking when she names her blind son Samson?[27]

The Fetish

Burden's textual strategies in this memoir of nation align his work of imaginative representation with the purposes of ideological fantasy. Relation to the real must be managed—disguised—because admitting such knowledge would disable the production of reality by exposing the irreconcilable antagonisms structuring all social organization. Žižek characterizes the work of ideology as the exercise of cultural disavowal. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues that social reality is less a question of what social actors know, than a question of what they actually do. Ideology is not bad faith, or some intentional deception of self or others about the way things are, but instead a suppression that structures and produces reality. To describe this dynamic Žižek draws on Freud's notion of the sexual fetish and Marx's of the commodity fetish. Both forms of fetishism enable a kind of "forgetting"—of the awareness of anatomical difference, or of the social realities of labor and production. But the defining element of fetishism is its capacity to equivocate about unwanted knowledge; the fetish acknowledges the source of anxiety as it also disavows it. This is not the failed recognition of repression, but the managed recognition of suppression. Thinking of racial stereotype in a similar way, Homi Bhabha observes that fetishism keeps unwanted knowledge available to conscious mediation; an *anxious* form of knowledge, the fetish is not buried in the unconscious, but persists as a dynamic of irritation and consolation to be dealt with consciously.[28]

Žižek argues that the fetishistic dimension of ideology works to cloak a more fundamental condition that serves as the ground for the local opera-

tions of commodity or sexual fetishism. It is the emergence of abstraction itself that produces the categories of fetishism: use and exchange value, male and female, self and other. It is not that we cannot see through the falsifications of such abstractions, but that we end up having to act as if we did not know. In other words,

> the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy.*

What the fantasy mediates is the kernel of the Real, something that has to do with what is left out of the equations of rational abstraction: "Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel." That kernel may be "conceptualized" as "antagonism," "a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized."[29]

The way Burden's narrative absorbs all events into a story of national destiny corresponds with Žižek's model for the fetishistic production of reality through the construction of fantasy. Notice, for example, how Mr. Shimerda's worrisome death is managed. Ántonia's father has been a weaver of renown in Czechoslovakia, a cultivated man who does not share his wife's ambition to forsake everything and come to America for its material opportunities. During the family's first winter in America, Shimerda is found dead in his barn, his "fixy" preparations and the nature of his wound strongly suggesting suicide by shotgun. But the Burdens' hired hands, Jake and Otto, both think there's something "queer" about the death scene: they notice that there is a gash in Shimerda's face that "just fit" the blade of Krajiek's axe, which happens to be found near the corpse. Krajiek himself is present at the discovery, and according to Jake has been "sneakin' round, pale and quiet, and when he seen me examinin' the axe, he begun whimperin', 'My God, man, don't do that! . . . they'll hang me sure.'" The Burdens, however, reject the possibility of homicide. Grandmother instructs Jake: "don't you go trying to add murder to suicide. We're deep enough in trouble" (64). The coroner agrees with Jake in finding the case "very perplexing, and said if it had not been for grandfather he would have sworn out a warrant against Krajiek," since the evidence "was enough to convict any man" (73). From

the standpoint of the Burdens' self-justifying smugness, it is one thing for a newcomer to admit that his presence is an impediment to the eventual prosperity of his family, and to decide to sacrifice himself to their future. It is another for predatory exploitation on the plains to have led to conditions of human degradation that may as well be murder. The event remains equivocal in Jim's narrative, even though it is decided legally. Like a fetishistic embodiment of the "trouble," the corpse becomes an object of fascination, providing the peculiar pleasure of repellent knowledge: Shimerda's self-fouling at the instant of death; the precise technique for blowing off your head by toeing the trigger of a shotgun; the frozen body finally cut loose four days later from its pool of blood on the barnyard floor. Žižek might say that the Burdens know something about the insupportable antagonism structuring the real of the prairie, but they act as if they do not. The determination of advantaged groups to proceed as if social division does not exist constitutes the power of ideological absentmindedness: as Grandmother urges, "Let's forget the Bohemians" (60).

The usefulness of such a model of ideological fantasy to understanding the representation of the U.S. South pertains to the habitual denial the region has solicited in narratives of nation. We might say the slave plantation South came to be identified almost from the outset with traumatic social divisions and antagonisms that constituted the "impossible kernel" of the nation's "real." Jennifer Rae Greeson has shown how Northerners began distinguishing the former colonies' national identity after the war of independence by casting Southern plantation states as the new nation's internal other: a realm of unenlightened tyranny and bondage that sharpened the rest of the new republic's revolutionary devotion to enlightenment ideals.[30] As Greeson demonstrates, a determination to disavow the South as a true part of the nation appears as early as Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. And because the South through the nineteenth century continued to be a region indispensable to national wealth as well as embarrassing to national conscience, it continued to require forms of attention that equivocated over the realities of slaveholding plantation agriculture. Whether as business partners in the production and manufacture of cotton goods, or in the wide range of commercial gain generated by the Atlantic slave trade, New England and the plantation South (continental as well as Caribbean) together created national prosperity. Elites enriched by national plantation economy fashioned cognitive mechanisms that allowed them to function in the face of impossible social divisions and antagonisms. Imaginative literature—as critical to fantasy-construction, but also sometimes critical *of* it—can display the workings by which the real of plantation his-

tory was made to hide in plain sight. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, for example, published seven years after the Nat Turner rebellion, could hardly have evoked more explicitly the dread among white slaveowners that the revolution on Haiti had spread ideas of bloody rebellion and black independence to the U.S. South and other plantation societies in the intervening decades since 1804. *Pym* stages repeated violent insurrections, depicts extreme racial phobia, and imagines a self-governed island populated entirely by blacks. Yet the tiny shifts that make Touissant into Too-wit, mask Haiti as Tsalal (the Solomons), or have blacks deathly afraid of the color white seem to be enough to have disguised a fable of revolution from its contemporary readers. Such willful incomprehension is the object of Poe's mockery at the tale's end, when Pym, of New England, and the fictional editor "Poe" deny that marks found on the island are human writing at all. The narrator disagrees, however, insisting that the shapes form words translatable as "to be shady," "left or most northwardly," and "to be white." To this racial and regional semaphore, the author Poe appends an unattributed sentence that sounds like God but might make more sense as coming from his servant Nat Turner: "I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock."[31]

Melville studies this problem minutely in the figure of Amasa Delano, a willful innocent himself who likewise fails to see New World slave rebellion already accomplished. It is not so much that Delano's racialist assumptions and New England self-righteousness make him blind to what has "really" happened, as that the good captain seizes on inscrutable signs or materializations of events that put him in the position of both knowing and not-knowing, thus preserving his advantageous relation to the real. The sailor's knot flung before him, for example, suggests the mode of fetish since he understands he ought to undo it (and would thereby find the message hidden in it that confirms what he already suspects about the ship's disordered authority), but he also refuses to act on that knowledge, thereby demonstrating a national mentality that understood its complicity in the Atlantic slave trade but excused itself as a well-intentioned bystander. These devices begin to look like purloined letters, hidden in plain view but disguised just enough to be overlooked.

In the period following Southern Reconstruction there were numerous efforts to reinvent plantation ideology. "Redeemer" Democrats hoped to revive an actual plantation economy with new forms of coerced black and white labor, while architects of a new industrial and commercial South understood that nostalgic fantasies of the old South might be serviceable in negotiating the modernization of the region. The era also provoked open

social violence, including the lynchings that exercised fantasies of white male power. In this context one might understand the popularity of certain imaginative work that facilitated both the acknowledgment and disavowal of the social divisions organizing neo-plantation ideology. Joel Chandler Harris's tales of Uncle Remus superimpose the contemporary South of the late 1870s and '80s over imaginary antebellum scenes. In Remus, Harris portrays a contemporary free black who is docile, genial, and reliable, traits that would reassure Northern investors and industrial developers in the new South. Harris's strategy, though, requires some delicacy, for he must manage a whole set of anxious associations in the refurbished stereotypes constellated around Remus: the injustice of slavery and the threat of violent revenge get bound to the pleasures of equivocation that organize the Brer Rabbit stories he tells; a hybrid racial history involving native Americans of the South gets misrecognized as a black-white binary; the complicity of antebellum North and South gets transformed into postwar racial solidarities and the formation of a new transregional white family after the war; the sexual violence of the plantation gets disseminated as the inscrutable eroticism of the Brer Rabbit adventures. By subjecting the slave tales to Remus's mediation, Harris produces a fetishized version of black outrage and menace, framing anxiety as a source of repetitive pleasure, and so hiding unwanted knowledge in plain sight, where it could be acknowledged and disavowed by national white audiences in acts of reassuring consumption.

Literary works about the U.S. South through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries explore the continued effects of denying a common history in the colonial plantation system. Out of the intense anxieties generated by segregation's hostilities, habits of fetishistic disavowal become increasingly strained, increasingly desperate. Consider Twain's brilliant spoof of the ideological abstraction of binarism organizing Jim Crow segregation in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Twain implicates a society's willful blindness through the figure of conjoined twins—a single entity taken as two separate ones—like the "legal fiction" of separate races, or like assumptions about separate regional histories and separate national futures. The trick of Twain's book is that the twins' indivisibility is never remarked. The townsfolk know the brothers are one, yet act as if they are two. That Twain makes the fetishistic disavowal of First-Families-of-Virginia beliefs a kind of comic *problem* might suggest why he was so important a writer for a succeeding generation of American literary moderns, among whom we might include Cather.

Southern Hist'ry

The Southern past that Jim Burden finds no reason to recall, that puzzles and disturbs his midwestern narrative when it does surface unbidden, and that Cather herself—as a native Virginian—deferred as a subject for her fiction, that Southern past suddenly gains the full attention of Cather's last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Set in the 1850s, the story describes the Colbert household: the named title character, mistress of a small slaveholding farm; her husband, Henry, a miller; their daughter, Rachel, who eventually helps a young slave girl, Nancy, escape when her sexual virtue is endangered; and Sapphira's nephew, Martin, a rake whom his aunt encourages to go after Nancy. Cather composed the work after a visit in 1938 to her childhood home in Winchester, in the northern part of the Shenandoah Valley, about fifteen miles from the West Virginia border. Cather makes the novel explicitly autobiographical by modeling a number of her characters on family members, by narrating the first-person epilogue in the voice of a child of about her own age and circumstances at the time, and by appending a brief postscript above the name "Willa Cather." The author spent her first ten years among the Cathers and Boaks, families who represented the Shenandoah's divided loyalties to North and South, abolitionism and slaveholding. Cather identified strongly with her mother's family, who were antislavery Confederates; she took to dressing in uniform after moving to Nebraska, and claimed the middle name of an uncle killed by the Yankees.

The rival—and often unclear—interests of Sapphira, Henry, and Martin in Nancy form the core of the plot, and constitute the novel's central consideration of dimensions of slaveholding like racial abuse, desire, ethics, family loyalty, and regional ideology. Toni Morrison judges the book severely in *Playing in the Dark*, castigating the novel's weak grasp of the contradictions of white identity, "the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in woman's battle for coherence" that leads to the plundering of black bodies and souls in the construction of white subjects. Morrison's analysis indicts Cather, too, for allowing the narrative to flee its own possible recognitions. Although Morrison has inarguably identified a failure of imagination in Cather's last work, I want to propose that the novel dramatizes the tension between white people's sympathy and black people's suffering, between guilty recollections of slaveholding and the historical record of enslavement.[32] *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* at least comes to understand that no one cares about the burden of Southern history borne by privileged whites. The only question that matters is what that Southern history actually is.

Not long before Rachel helps Nancy flee the Colbert farm for Canada

(their determination having been steeled by the recently passed Fugitive Slave Law), the farm's oldest slave dies. The death of "Jezebel" signals the end of an order, and the narrator pauses to tell her story, since her long life extends back to the 1780s, "about twenty years before the importation of slaves became illegal," and ends in 1856, as the Civil War looms.[33] Chapter 2 of book 3 is devoted entirely to a matter-of-fact rehearsal of Jezebel's history. The inland African woman who comes to be known as the slave Jezebel originates among a "fierce cannibal people" (91). With others of her tribe she is captured by African slave hunters who sell her to European slave traders on the Gold Coast of Guinea. The narrator describes in detail how the parcel of captives is "stowed" on the English slaver for transit across the Atlantic. A long paragraph notes that each deck is less than four feet high, and that the naked slaves are confined to cramped positions for the two to three months of the journey. The reader is told that the captain "was not a brutal man, and his vessel was a model slaver," but the narrator's examples of small liberties accorded the slaves hardly offset the recognition of how cruel and unjust the condition of enslavement itself is. Jezebel earns her name in an act of wild rage at her captors, as she first incites other Africans to howling, and then snaps "like a mastiff" at the mate who seeks to throttle her, biting through the ball of his thumb. Rather than throw the "female gorilla" overboard, the captain realizes he has an "African negress" of spirit, and figures her temper as well as her comeliness will be worth a good deal in the States. Nor does the narrator ignore the dehumanizing conditions of life in the plantation South. Jezebel passes through several owners before she comes into the possession of Sapphira's family; at her first stop, Jezebel learns how to milk cows and do farmyard work for her Dutch owner, "but she was kept in the barn and was never allowed to touch the butter" (96).

Despite the persistence in the novel of racist condescension, misinformation, and insult, *Sapphira* does confront plantation slavery as a long-unacknowledged offense contaminating the whole South.[34] The trauma of slavery represented by Jezebel's life is not hidden here; it stands in the open, undisguised. And Jezebel's experience proves emblematic. Other incidents confirm the deranged grief caused the victims of slavery: Nancy's mother, "Aunt" Till, watches her own mother die horrifically in a fire; Till subsides into somber, near-total silence for the rest of her life, and suffers the added indignation of being wed to an elderly slave named Jefferson, whose sexual incapacity is public knowledge. Another slave tries to follow his lover to Baltimore, where she has been sold by the Colbert family, but Dave gets only as far as Harpers Ferry, where he loses his nerve, and eventually wanders back to the Colberts, to sink into alcoholic distraction. The slaver's

captain may be told that Nancy comes from cannibals, but she bites his crew member to strike back against her abuse, not because she is hungry. Visiting Jezebel on her deathbed, Sapphira asks if there is anything the old woman might "relish": nothing except "a li'l pickaninny's hand," she responds with "a sly chuckle" and "a flash of grim humour" (89). Jezebel must be mocking white folks' notions about African cannibalism, even as she may be protesting the consumption of African bodies, labor, *hands*—precisely—under chattel slavery.

The Colberts struggle over their various degrees of complicity with slaveholding, but Rachel finally articulates a principle that is never gainsaid in the novel: she points out to her father that "neither you nor I have ever owned flesh and blood, and I will not begin it." "It was the *owning* that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant. She had always known it was wrong" (136, 137). Henry is compromised by his relation to his wife's slave owning; the initial capitalization of his milling business comes from Sapphira's sale of a few of her people (22). Colbert's situation reflects Walter Johnson's contention in *Soul by Soul* that the whole South's prosperity was tied to the economy of slave trading, even sectors that derived no direct benefit from it and may even have opposed it.[35] On a trip to New Orleans to visit wealthy planter colleagues, Rachel's husband, a congressman, and their son both die of yellow fever, their fates perhaps a symptom of the "contagion" of slavery.

Cather also confronts the sexual immorality consequent to slave ownership. Nancy's paternity remains an unresolved matter of speculation. One view is that Till—given her sexless "marriage"—takes up with an itinerant Cuban portrait painter who visits the Dodderidge plantation. But Sapphira insists that "black Till bore a yellow child" after two of Henry's ne'er-do-well brothers have passed through. If one of them is Nancy's father, then Sapphira's suspicion that her husband is attracted to the young girl amounts to his having "a kind of family feeling about" her (9). Although this is hardly the earthquake Ike McCaslin suffers when he confronts not just miscegenation but incest at the foul center of his family line in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Cather does depict the way sexuality is perverted by racial chattel slavery. Heterosexual relations are corrupted both by an insistence on white female chastity by planter dynasts, and by the exploitation of black women by their white masters. Cather's sensibility does imagine options to white heteronormativity. The novel puts queer desire in plain view, but so equivocally that it remains a speculative possibility rather than an actual alternative.[36] In *Sapphira* the impulse toward dissenting forms of desire gravitates toward "homo-ness," relations that seek exemption from heteronormative

reproduction and the reinforcement of racial hierarchy.[37] Sapphira's own palpable desire for Nancy is caught in plantation contradiction: on the one hand, love between women of different races could bypass Southern white male heterosexual rule. On the other, it is the arrogation of male authority and the assumption of white privilege that enables Sapphira to press her desire for Nancy at all. Sapphira's projection of her husband's sexual interest in Nancy makes Henry the mediator of his wife's Sapphic desire. Later, Sapphira actually commissions her nephew to rape Nancy—in effect on her behalf—a measure that captures the impossible antagonism of racial power and sexual desire on the plantation. In a highly enigmatic scene, Martin waylays Nancy after she has climbed a tree. He ascends a few steps on the ladder, settling his head between the "frame" of her legs as she faces him, then seems to root himself there, inhaling "something sweet," and murmuring about curing a toothache. This pantomime of cunnilingus represents what we might call Sapphirac desire, although the narrative will not say what is going on. The result is that the scene both acknowledges and disavows Martin's performance as Sapphira's proxy, and thus both acknowledges and disavows the love between women, even as it displays the inescapability of white male mastery in the framing of plantation desire.

When Nancy visits her mother, Till, at the former Colbert homestead for the first time since fleeing to Canada twenty-five years earlier, she is able to tell a success story. Nancy has married in a land where race matters little, to a man half Scotch and half Indian; in domestic service on an estate in Montreal, the couple provides a secure life for their children. Rachel Colbert Blake still seems to live in her parents' house, but its new occupants host the reunion. This family, a mother, father, and their small daughter, have an unspecified relation to the Colberts, but they exhibit a personal interest in aspects of the household's history, and the child becomes the privileged spectator of the novel's last event. The "I" who narrates the chapter entitled "Nancy's Return" is never identified, however, although we do learn that the child is ill, that "the actual scene of the meeting [between Nancy and her mother] had been arranged for my benefit" (282), that family history must be censored for innocent ears (the story of Martin is a "forbidden subject"), and that the child has absorbed the racial condescension of her place and time, speaking of "darkies" and being pleased at Nancy's "shade of deference" when she addresses the child's mother. The portrait that emerges here, I want to suggest, is one of an unenlightened "innocent," an unconsciously selfish, superior, and indulged child, who corresponds to, without exactly ever being identified as, the young author. *Sapphira* may reproduce elements of the racism that rationalized centuries of Southern slavery, but the

narrative ultimately associates many of these offensive attitudes with the condition of an invalid child, whose innocence of slave history may represent the author's acknowledgment of her own earlier oblivion. The child-narrator represents a mentality unacquainted with the evils of the past she has been born into; she comes too late to the novel, and her self-absorption is juvenile to a fault. Cather's strategy here is to subject such historical obtuseness to implicit reproach. It is true that Cather does not tell those stories, but perhaps they are not hers to tell. At the end of her career she does confront the plantation as the corruption at the origin of the national story. The child takes offense at the foreign way Nancy pronounces the word "his-to-ry," with three syllables, while everyone in her world collapses it to "hist'ry." This is the "right and easy way to say it," and doing otherwise "didn't seem a friendly way to talk" (284).[38] Might not Nancy's pronunciation, however, recall and sound the silent "O" traced in the Nebraska earth? Might not the restored syllable open a space for all the stories disavowed by history as it is pronounced by elites?

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NOTES

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1 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Random House, 2006), 105. Subsequent references are parenthetic.

2 In *The Politics of Denial* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), Michael A. Milburn and Sheree D. Conrad study a variety of ways American political life has been shaped by the denial of patent realities. Their chapter on "Denial, Slavery, and Racism" demonstrates the lasting effects of slaveholding on the U.S. in the country's persistent racism, urban and domestic violence, penal practices, and education policies. Suggestively for my purposes, Milburn and Conrad summarize the problem by quoting the view of Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), that Southerners were "geniuses in the art of evading reality," their thought "thrown into fantastic contradictions" (153).

3 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1997), 73.

4 I have speculated in a preliminary way on this idea in my essay "What Was High about Modernism?" *A Companion to the Modern American Novel, 1900–1950*, ed. John T. Matthews (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 282–305.

5 Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995). Subsequent citations are parenthetic.

6 Blythe Tellesfsen, "Blood in the Wheat: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia,*" *Studies in American Fiction* 27 (1999): 229–44, brilliantly delineates Jim's strategies for envisioning national greatness and expansion as forms of narrative forgetfulness. She draws on Ernest Renan to conceptualize the "dual process" of remembering and forgetting "crucial to the formation of nation-states" (231), and links Jim's representation of Ántonia to the gendering of nation as woman. Tellefsen refers to Jim's "burden" as being that of national expansion (229), a play on the narrator's name that Tellefsen adds to those already suggested by Mike Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism," *Mosaic* 23 (1990): 30–44. Fischer analyzes the "political unconscious" of Cather's text by excavating the Nebraska history Jim's narrative ignores. Fischer details the history of Custer's defeat, the removal of the Sioux, beginning with Coronado's efforts in the Southwest and his rumored forays into Nebraska, the importance of the railroads in transforming the region, and the politics of preferring European immigrants such as the Czechs to internal ones such as African Americans. The "white man's burden" is a second operative pun in Fischer's treatment. To these I wish to add another sense—the weight of the slaveholding plantation past—by alluding to C. Vann Woodward's classic *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U. Press, 2008).

7 Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontents," 43, uses this term to characterize "Cather's 'georgic' portrayal of Nebraska," in which "we seem to have amnesia concerning the people who once lived there."

8 Elizabeth Ammons, *"My Ántonia* and African American Art," *New Essays on "My Ántonia,"* ed. Sharon O'Brien (Cambridge U. Press, 1998), 57–83, thoroughly examines d'Arnault as an embodiment of African American artistic practices, showing how Cather relies on certain of these techniques in syncopating her narrative, freeing it from a dominant plot and experimenting with the narrative equivalents of the new rhythms found in ragtime and jazz. Ammons contends that d'Arnault "erupts as if out of nowhere in *My Ántonia* because he serves to embody the African American cultural presence that has all along been in the text" (73). Ammons includes careful discussions of Blind Tom and Blind Boone, the two salient models for d'Arnault, and argues that both contribute to Cather's reflection on artistic method. Anne Goodwyn Jones, "Displacing Dixie: The Southern Subtext in *My Ántonia,*" *New Essays on "My Ántonia,"* 85–109, studies Jim's relation to d'Arnault as a function of the narrator's ambivalent sexuality. Jones sees Jim trapped in a heterosexual "normativity" inculcated through the white paternalism of his Southern upbringing. D'Arnault's playing triggers forms of desire and images of pleasure that Jim's Victorian code can hardly accommodate; Jones argues that the heterosexual white Southern male is an inadequate model of identity for Jim. Fischer suggests that accompanying the manifest racism of Jim's portrait of d'Arnault as an "African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood" is a strain of romanticism that parallels the romanticization of European immigrants in the novel; these attitudes are strange bedfellows, but they combine to obscure native Americans altogether at a time in the decades after the Civil War when "the Union was reaffirming its commitment to freedom for all peoples [while] it was implanting its genocidal policy of expansion in the West" (42). Tellefsen, "Blood in the Wheat," 237, considers Blind d'Arnault as an emblem of racial otherness, the "forever-excluded Negro" the frame of reference against which the process of Americanization for European immigrants may be measured. More crucial to my purposes here, Tellefsen writes powerfully about d'Arnault as a representative of white theft of black labor, a victim of forced immigration, and a sign of the recent violence unleashed on the plains by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

9 In addition to the studies by Tellefsen and Fischer cited above, see Lisa Marie Lucenti, "Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*: Haunting the Houses of Memory," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 46 (2000): 197, on how the histories of chattel slavery and Indian removal haunt Burden's worried narrative, making it impossible for him to imagine home as anything but plagued by "alienation, exclusion, and violence."

10 Tellefsen, "Blood in the Wheat," 239, reads these two interpretations as reflections of competing histories of the Plains Indians, emphasizing that Cather's narrative refuses to choose between them and ultimately "forgets" the problem altogether.

11 Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontents," 34, describes the way white settlers marked their success by naming new towns after the people eradicated to make way for them.

12 Tellefsen, "Blood in the Wheat," 233, describes the violence of the novel's narrative form as an effect of the conflicting truths Burden tries unsuccessfully to reconcile: these "result not just in fissures in the narrative(s) but in glaring abysses, which gape suddenly and, equally suddenly, disappear."

13 Lucenti, "Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," reads the anecdote as expressing a general view of human nature as brutal and barbaric, that condition underlying the specific forms of violence haunting the American experience.

14 Curiously, the trope of Crusoe resurfaces at the conclusion of *The Road*, when McCarthy pictures father and son having reached the coast, discovering a wrecked vessel, and scavenging it for provisions.

15 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1994).

16 Walter Benn Michaels, "The Vanishing American," *American Literary History* 2 (1990): 220–41, points out that the relevant past in Cather's account of modern America is the classical past. Classical culture becomes the institution capable of mediating between the contradictions of naturalization and descent in a country filling with immigrants and debating the proper basis of citizenship: knowledge of the classics could be acquired, like citizenship via naturalization, but it also required innate intelligence and distinction, like citizenship via ancestry. Michaels studies *The Professor's House* from this standpoint, but in *My Ántonia* as well Burden's regard for Virgil informs his confidence in the relation between midwestern farming and national empire.

17 Information about Blind Tom is drawn from Geneva H. Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999); from "Blind Tom: A Misrepresented and Neglected Composer-Pianist," *The Black Perspective in Music* 3 (1975): 141–59; and from Deirdre O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom* (London: Duckworth, 2009). The review from the *Nebraska State Journal* is reprinted in William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish, Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902,* 2 vols. (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1970), 1:6.

18 Southall, *Blind Tom,* 172.

19 O'Connell, *Ballad of Blind Tom,* 90.

20 Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia U. Press, 1996), 5.

21 O'Connell, *Ballad of Blind Tom,* 55–57.

22 I have learned much from two studies of the suppression of knowledge about the Haitian Revolution: Michel Rolphe-Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), and Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Duke U. Press, 2004).

23 Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard U. Press, 2007).

24 Tellefsen, "Blood in the Wheat," 237–38, contrasts d'Arnault's forced immigration to the story of voluntary European immigration that Jim so celebrates.

25 Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine, 2005). See esp. chap. 10, "Plunder for Pianos."

26 Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 218.

27 Lucenti, "Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," 206, brilliantly summarizes Blind d'Arnault's predicament and potential rebellion against continued oppression: "This black man is not only one of the few characters able to complete himself but also the *only* character with a perfect and inviolable memory. Blind d'Arnault—the hidden Samson—thus becomes the principal figure for the haunting of American national and cultural memory houses. An African American in postslavery America, he remains excluded from the Big House of the plantation and from the bigger house of national memory. Yet he himself *will remember*, and will turn Gothic to its core and return with 'strong, savage blood' to erase the faces of those who refuse to bear witness to or stand accountable for the violent deaths and casual buryings of slavery."

28 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), esp. 66–84.

29 Žižek, *Sublime Object,* 32–33, 45.

30 Jennifer Rae Greeson, "The Figure of the South and the Nationalizing Imperatives of Early United States Literature," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 12 (1999): 209–48.

31 Edgar Allen Poe, *Poetry and Tales,* ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1181.

32 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard U. Press, 1992), 20. Morrison discusses Sapphira's racially self-centered relations with Nancy and her mother, Till, but does not mention Jezebel.

33 Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* ed. Ann Romines, Charles W. Mignon, Kari A. Ronning, and Frederick M. Link (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 2009), 90. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

34 I am aware that the much of the novel is taken up with what slavery and the crises of abolitionism mean to white people. Tomas Pollard, "Political Science and Hist'ry in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. Ann Romines (Charlottesville: U. of Virginia Press, 2000), 38–53, discusses the question of the political silencing of Rachel. Patricia Yaeger, "White Dirt: The Surreal Racial Landscapes of Willa Cather's South," *New Essays on Cather,* 138–57, has a stunning reading of the panic of racial materiality in *Sapphira*. Judith Fetterly, "The Question of Sympathy," *New Essays on Cather,* 16, condemns Cather for seeming to believe that race did not matter to her story, and insists that whatever knowledge of slavery or race do we gain from the novel is "profoundly amoral."

35 Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Harvard U. Press, 2001).

36 Naomi E. Morgenstern, "'Love Is Home-Sickness': Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 29 (1996): 184–205, argues that Sapphira's desire in the novel remains partially unintelligible because it involves a longing for other women that cannot be satisfied in the plantation's sexual regime. Lisa Marcus, "'The Pull of Race and Blood and Kindred': Willa Cather's Southern Inheritance," *New Essays on Cather*, 98–119, insists that the two interpretations of Martin's function—as homoerotic proxy for Sapphira, and as commandeered heterosexual male power—are incompatible, and that the latter is Cather's intention. I see the two as undecidable, much in the way Michael P. Bibler often does in his study of homosexual rebelliousness and co-optation in plantation culture: *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936–1968* (Charlottesville: U. of Virginia Press, 2009).

37 "Homo-ness" is the term Bibler uses in *Cotton's Queer Relations* to indicate queered spaces for homoerotic desire that materialize within the plantation sexual order and pose various degrees of challenge to the political and economic hierarchies of the society.

38 Pollard, "Political Silence," 52, observes that the difference over how to pronounce "history" suggests that geography and sectional interest shape the recording of history. He also argues that the limitations of the child-narrator's understanding of Nancy's story suggests that "the dominant representation of the South is an immature view of history."