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STUCK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE AFTER EFFECTS OF FREEDOM AND
CAPITALISM IN THE NEW SOUTH, 1865 - 1913

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For Mom

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Abstract

This dissertation asks two questions, one dependent on the other: what does it feel like to be left behind, defeated, and stuck in the U.S. South at the turn of the twentieth century, and how do people make new stories (or old ones) when they're stuck outside of a narrow script like The American Dream? These questions point to the ways in which affects, feelings, and moods are often more than psychological details but social testimony to the experience of living without the succor of a dependable historical narrative. To answer these questions this dissertation turns specifically to the period between 1890 and 1913 when the pressures of industrial capitalism, scientism, and a retrograde white nationalism came to bear on the first generation of white and black Americans living after the Civil War, and, in this, I turn to literatures of the South. In the aftermath of the war many could not adequately adjust to modernity, instead clinging to Lost Cause mythologies fixated on a nostalgic chivalrous past. This cultural program spoke to how both white and black people could be both bereft of a story of success and without an adequate story of their loss. In the late nineteenth century, Protestant values coalesced around capitalism to form the Gospel of Business Success, an important forerunner to what would by the 1930s be termed the "American Dream." The American Dream offers a conventional story of success *through* risk, specifically claiming that capitalist individuality means that diligent (or exploited) labor is virtuous and virtuous labor promises social mobility; this dissertation is about the promise of many other American cultural myths. But, at the turn of the twentieth century, there were more narratives too: the Lost Cause, the New South, Populism, and the Cult of True Womanhood to name a few. This dissertation is about those who fall out of the optimism of them. But it is more specific than that too. The cultural

fantasies of post-slavery freedom are not monolithic for those identifying as whites, for blacks, or Northerners and Southerners. Fantasies of overcoming difference and antagonism between whites and blacks, men and women also varied. Such fantasies and the practices that extend from them overlap, stretch, and often their bearers admit their own hollowness. This dissertation demonstrates how these kinds of fantasies hold and often fail to live up to the promise of escape. When people fall out of them, they must scavenge to build new, rickety, genres for continued survival. Transitional spaces, as this project shows, lead to transitional, unhandsome, and bewildered, feelings. These feelings shape the event and sense of living beyond and with failure.

My first chapter explores how subjects negotiate political defeat by examining the genre of Confederate life writing after the Civil War. Here I put literary attention on canonically historical texts—the writings of Emma LeConte, Jefferson Davis, Jubal A. Early, Alexander H. Stephens, and James Longstreet. Each author, through different subgenres of life writing (diary, missive, essay, recollection, and memoir) engages the affect of political failure. Any discussion of Southern cultural reaction to Reconstruction must discuss the ideology of the Lost Cause South. My chapter considers two founding texts for this ideology—Jefferson Davis’s letters and Jubal Early’s essays—to purposely find where and how their rhetoric fails. By reading these figures *against* the Lost Cause I demonstrate how their new affective states (neither nostalgia or melancholia) cannot find a suitable genre but instead an abject present, affectively detached from past and future. In surrender, ordinary temporal logic evaporates. Alexander H. Stephens illustrates how feelings of indignation, and righteousness break to the lasting atmosphere of defeat. His personal dogma of achievement cannot negotiate reality. Ultimately he acknowledges how it feels to

be unfairly treated by the world. This disgrace echoes James Longstreet's insight at his memoir's conclusion. Forced to fail in public, Longstreet becomes marked by the lasting influence of failure. These compelling moments articulate the expressed-yet-inexpressible condition of failure. Eventually I argue that defeat is a range of feelings and emotions that are expressed in writing through paradoxes, experiments, aphasia, and incoherence.

If the first chapter focuses upon those who lost the war, my second chapter focuses on those who won—and lost in turn. In the 1890s African American authors and presses tapped into emerging literary markets by selling self-help guides. Often borrowing wholesale from hugely popular white success manuals of the period, black self-help books like *The College of Life* (1895) and *Progress and Achievements of the Colored People* (1913) offered readers hundreds of pages of instruction in bourgeois, protestant values based upon Washingtonian respectability politics while also conspicuously overlooking the sobering conditions of Jim Crow. I show how these guides frame a profound moment in African American social history when the terms “optimism” and “discouragement” were frequently used to describe the mood of being in the present. While optimism might have been possible at the end of the 1890s, I find that by 1915 its overuse in the face of Jim Crow ultimately leads black writers to realize that one cannot merely tell black men and women how to affectively attach to the world. As optimism fails, these authors instead call for a new kind of realism that can guide subjects through the pitfalls of the present.

As the second chapter concerns Washingtonian strategies to cope with a market-driven world outside of slavery and politics, the third chapter is about what the predations of racial capital actually looked like. Emerging from the shadows of this black self-improvement narrative—but before the Great Migration and the Harlem renaissance—are

two important novels: Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). These novels form a provisional genre, eschewing optimism in order to craft stories of survival. Separately both illustrate the failed promise of mobility—be it physically migrating from South to North or moving into the bourgeoisie. In Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* a white Northern philanthropist attempts to liberalize his backwater Southern hometown, only to find that white nationalism and industrial capitalism had already claimed victory. In Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, a bourgeois black family flees North to New York City after the family patriarch is wrongfully convicted of theft, finding in the city only moral degradation and ruin. These novels portray black and white people searching for the meritocratic promise of uncorrupted free market capitalism. Here protagonists find that economic answers to political problems only lead to more exposure and exploitation. Both end without social or spiritual transformation, outlining a complex of affects and attitudes that mired black *and white* subjects after disenfranchisement.

My first chapter was about what comes after the Lost Cause; this chapter is about what comes under the banner of the New South. While Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* is particularly committed to describing the new systems of economic exploitation, the Virginian novelist Ellen Glasgow was particularly interested in understanding the psychological ramifications of the New South. Here I demonstrate how Glasgow's *Virginia* (1913) stages two parallel stories: the triumph of the New Woman over the Old, and the triumph of the New South over the remains of the Confederacy. While *Virginia* rarely strays from its heroine's intimate psyche, it sets her internal life in historical context, by way of set-pieces common to both Glasgow's contemporary audience and this dissertation—the

Confederacy's defeat, the exploitation of the South under Northern investment after Reconstruction, and the rise of capitalist massification posed through the language of Darwinian thought. In this, Glasgow tells a story of socioeconomic and historical change located not on the scale of the State but that of the individual's psychological state. This becomes clear when one sees how Virginia Pendleton, as the prototypical antebellum Southern woman, embodies the distorted and aggrandized nostalgia of Lost Cause sentimental culture. Glasgow, as a suffragist and strongly independent woman, chafed under the sexist ideologies of the retrograde South. In staging Virginia's demise, Glasgow offers a timely premonition about the eventual rise of the New South and, in this, the New Woman too. *Virginia* knowingly moves between generic forms, modifying nineteenth-century sentimentalism with Spencerian evolutionary theory and the language of literary naturalism in order to redefine Lost Cause genres as themselves retrograde and ill-suited for the inevitable triumph of modernity and the world it offered—one of reason, science, strong wills, and strong women.

This project proposes a new method for tracking the ongoing aftereffects of catastrophe. Following the Civil War and emancipation, both Southern whites and blacks found that their fantasies of the good life were dramatically different from the real thing. But whereas white people from all classes could continue to participate in racial dominance, black people in the South found that emancipation only led to different forms of oppression. Facing this crisis, many scrambled to reinvent ordinary life, often resorting to improvised plots, affects, and genres. In novels, memoir, self-help tracts, and newspapers, this project documents people forced to adjust their dreams, their contexts of labor, and their emotions (sometimes poorly) when their expectations have been fashioned

for another era and when the new world isn't entirely new. Ultimately I hope to demonstrate, in my project's method, how to look between and behind dominant cultural genres and to deepen our scholarly understanding of the defeat of political and cultural fantasies. In many ways, for many people, the Civil War only opened more confusing and risky ways to succeed or fail, proving how lost causes abound when freedom isn't free.

Introduction

In the spring of 1893, a wizened Frederick Douglass traveled some hundred odd miles north from Washington D.C. to Carlisle, Pennsylvania in order to deliver a speech. While he had recited his essay “Self-Made Men” over four dozen times since the Civil War, that day’s occasion would prove noteworthy—not just because it would be the very last time he delivered this speech. At the lectern before him sat, in short cropped hair and stiff woolen overcoats, nearly eight hundred American Indian children from fifty-three different tribes now representing the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.¹ In the long and unhappy history of U.S. / American Indian relations, Carlisle holds a particularly traumatic place. Born out of the designs of reform-minded educators from the end of the nineteenth century, Carlisle became the flagship model for an institutional practice that spanned the majority of the twentieth century. The school—as all Indian boarding schools would become—was designed as a scene of forced assimilation in which Indian boys and girls from around the nation were shipped East from their homelands to be stripped of tribal rudiments, language, religion, and culture.² Here they could be forcibly assimilated into modern U.S. capitalism. How fitting—or perverse—for Douglass to instruct Indian students how to be “Self-Made,” when they were, in turn, being forcibly *re-made*.

By 1893 the once remarkable themes of “Self-Made Man” (1859) were really nothing new to the American reading public. Linking success and morality through the language of capitalism and democracy, Douglass was really providing a blueprint for black

¹ Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 140.

² See Laura Wexler’s *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

uplift rhetoric to come under Booker T. Washington. As historian Walter A. Friedman explains, “Implicit in Douglass’s speech was faith in the political process and in the workings of the marketplace. Businesses, if run without regard to race, would present the black American with great opportunity.”³ In phrases like “self-made men” and “men of work,” Douglass was articulating what had come to be known as the “Gospel of Success.” Born from Protestant ideology and empowered by the rationalization of all facets of American life, this gospel was now prevalent in late-nineteenth century public discourse, found in newspaper editorials, self-help manuals, citizenship guides, and primary school readers—familiar to both white and black audiences.⁴ Yet at the end of the speech, Douglass turns to a particularly coded refrain. He explains that self-made men “are obliged to come up...often in open and derisive defiance of all the efforts of society.” Then he adds, “From hunger, rags and destitution, they have come; motherless and fatherless, they have come, and may come.”⁵ Though supposedly universal, Douglass’s language actually tells his own story here. Literate listeners would have surely remembered that his exceedingly popular *Narrative* (1845) was also a story of an orphaned boy bootstrapping his way from ragged ignominy to success. For Douglass, real “self-made men” are those who have had no other choice than to be self-made, because, they had been so unmade by the irreparable violence of the State. And while some might be cowed by these circumstances, Douglass sees opportunity in this history of pain, explaining to students that America is the “foster-

³ Frederick Douglass, *Self-Made Men: An Address Before the Students of the Indian Industrial School, Carlisle PA* (Carlisle: Carlisle PAL Indian Industrial School Press, 1893).

⁴ See Chapter two. For books on the ethos of success in the United States see, Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (1954); Moses Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, (1965); John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (1965); Joseph L. DeVitis, and John Martin Rich, *The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream*, (1996); Sandra K. Dolby, *Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them* (2005).

⁵ Douglass, “Self-Made Men.”

mother of self-made men” and “with equal suffrage in our hands, we are beyond the power of families nationalities or races.”⁶

Yet if we stop for a moment, we might wonder whether this last phrase could have hit the Carlisle students as a sort of cruelty. These American Indian children had been forcibly and literally removed “beyond the power of families, nationalities, and races.” Carlisle’s own slogan was “To civilize the Indian, get him into civilization. To keep him civilized, let him stay.”⁷ This motto was testimony to a shift in policy where the state atomized sovereign tribes by focusing on the production of individuals.⁸ Shorn of their culture and homes, these Indians were being prepared as agents for the emerging marketplaces of capitalism. And though cultural assimilation was the desired end, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was never very effective. Of the eight hundred students Douglass addressed that March day, nearly two hundred had spent the previous three months “outing” in the surrounding community as piece-meal domestic servants—a common practice for the school.⁹ Over one hundred were children of Apache prisoners held in captivity at Fort Marion, Florida.¹⁰ Only six would graduate come June.¹¹ And some, like Samuel Sixkiller, would return to their tribes only to find their homelands sold off without receipt of payment.¹² These numbers speak to the precarious futures Indian boarding school children faced—futures of failed assimilation and alienation. As the famous Meriam

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Reyhner and Eder, *American Indian Education*, 142.

⁸ Nathan Wolf, “Pobrecito, Alessandro: Sentiment and Sovereignty in *Ramona*,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, 2.2. (2014): 227

⁹ Lewis Meriam et al., *Problems of Indian Administration* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Government Research, 1928), 389.

¹⁰ Reyhner and Eder, *American Indian Education*, 137.

¹¹ Ibid., 139.

¹² Samuel Sixkiller ’94 and his family had to sue the buyer of their property for payment. For more see, *The Southwestern Reporter*, Vol. 55, (St. Paul: West Publishing Co, 1900), 135.

Report explained in 1928, “normal family life...has been all but destroyed under the boarding school policy,” a policy that “interfered with the development of leadership and the ability to carry out cooperative enterprises, since the children have had little participation in organization for work or play.”¹³ Even with decorative epaulets and brass buttons how equal did these children feel to the rest of white America—or even their own tribes? Moreover, how equal did Douglass feel, considering less than a year earlier he wrote, “I find myself summoned again by the popular voice by what is called the negro problem...[to] give evidence upon disputed points concerning myself and my emancipated brothers and sisters who, though free, are yet oppressed and are in as much need of an advocate as before they were set free”? ¹⁴ Which is to ask, how can I explain being free and oppressed at the same time? What is it to feel equal? In truth, Douglass’s “negro problem” was a common phrase to describe the social apartheid of black people in the United States—what Michael Rudolph West explains as “the bad casting of a bad American drama originally authored by white persons but taken out on tour by black actors using ‘agency’ to redraw their own roles.”¹⁵ This is the white American drama offered from the lips of Frederick Douglass to the crowd of castoff Indian children who were already all too familiar with broken promises and ill-fitting identities. In this, the “negro problem” could just as well be the “Indian problem.” What West explains is something that African-American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois would famously articulate in his introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): “how does it feel to be a problem?”¹⁶ For African Americans the

¹³ Meriam, *Problems of Indian Administration*, 635.

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co, 1892), 620.

¹⁵ Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 30.

¹⁶ W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), 2.

problem they inhabited could be reduced to a seeming paradox, how to live in a state of freedom that is not free.

Here are the stakes of my project. We might see West's "bad American drama" as another way to say the "bad American Dream." No wonder that James Baldwin, writing in the 1960s, remarked that while he loved watching Gary Cooper kill Indians as a young boy, it came as a great shock to realize "that the Indians are you." A shock still when you "discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you."¹⁷ The American capitalist fantasy of self-improvement is a peculiar story. It is offered equally to all while remaining inherently unequal. This is what Douglass means when he laments being both free and oppressed. And this is what I suggest the students at Carlisle may have felt: that the bourgeois life offered to reformed Indians was not the same version available to white America. While not all of the students may have felt that way (the power of fantasy is not that strong) they would have all known the profound power and precariousness of living in the shadow of a cultural fantasy. The American Dream offers a narrative of spiritual becoming through individual struggle—a kind of story that distracts people from accepting the commonality of their poverty or understanding that their failures and their stuckness stem not from immorality but from the very apparatus of capitalism itself. Indeed, we need look no further than Benjamin Franklin and his *Autobiography*—the *ur-text* of the American self-making myth—for an example. Franklin had a sister, Jane, who having been left behind in the former's social ascent thanklessly reared twelve children while tending their father's middling soap business in poverty. Her story prompted Jill Lepore to muse,

¹⁷ James Baldwin, "The American Dream and The Negro," *The New York Times*, March 7th, 1965.

“The historical record is asymmetrical. We know so much more about the people who thrive and so little about the people who don’t thrive.”¹⁸

Unlike the winners, there are fewer histories written about those “who don’t thrive.” To reveal these episodes I often look in likely and unlikely places. My opening anecdote of Douglass at Carlisle is exemplary of this method. Tellingly, the proposed transition for these students was not so much from Indian to white, but from Indian to *capitalist citizen*. In this dissertation we will find that after the Civil War, emancipation both from slavery and the slave economy revealed to many Americans—black *and* white—that their “new birth” of freedom was only technical: a different, ricketier genre of insecurity and immobility that left little room for surviving well, let alone for flourishing. Just as the Carlisle students faced lives offstage, so to speak, in this bad American drama, others found themselves in the same place, from the expected—African-Americans, women, and working class Southerners—to the unexpected—the Southern aristocracy, former slave-owners, and ex-Confederate generals.

To see just what these seemingly contradictory groups have in common, my dissertation engages two very broad questions, one dependent on the other: what does it feel like to be left behind, defeated, and stuck in the United States? And how have people made new stories (or old ones) when they’re stuck outside of the narrow normative scripts of freedom and success? The questions here point to the ways in which affects, feelings, and moods are often more than psychological details but social testimony to the experience of living without the succor of a historical narrative. To answer these questions I turn specifically to the period between 1890 and 1917 when the pressures of industrial

¹⁸ Jill Lepore in “Rags to Riches,” from “Busted: America’s Poverty Myth’s Exposed,” *On the Media* ed. Brooke Gladstone, WNYC, January 17, 2017.

capitalism, scientism, and a retrograde white nationalism came to bear on the first generation of Americans living after the Civil War, and, in this, I turn to the South.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the war many could not adequately adjust to modernity, instead clinging to what they called Lost Cause mythologies fixated on a nostalgic chivalrous past. The Lost Cause cultural program spoke to how white people could be both bereft of a story of success and without a bearable explanation of their loss. Just so, the “American Dream” offers a conventional story of success *through* sacrifice and risk, specifically how capitalist individuality means that diligent (and often exploited) labor equals virtue and virtuous labor promises social mobility. In this sense, this dissertation is all about the promise of these conventional cultural myths—the American Dream, the Lost Cause, the New South, and the Cult of True Womanhood—and those who fall out of them. But it is more specific than that too. The question of a United States after slavery remains unfinished business. The cultural fantasies of post-slavery freedom are not monolithic for whites, between whites and blacks, men and women, or Northerners and Southerners. They overlap, they stretch, and often they admit their own hollowness. But, as Lauren Berlant defines genres, these kinds of stories of living beyond slavery developed “aesthetic structure[s] of affective expectation.”²⁰ They say that “real life” happens when one can feel like one belongs to a world even if this world might not reciprocate.

These kinds of circulated stories offer ways for the dispossessed to feel political without having structural power. This dissertation demonstrates how these kinds of

¹⁹ By 1900s consumer capitalism was flourishing as major technological milestones such as the transcontinental railroad (1869), the typewriter (1873), the personal telephone (1897), the transatlantic radio (1907), Ford’s Model-T (1908), and the American film industry (1910) dramatically reduced the scale of the country while reimagining national identity. See Carroll W. Pursell, *Technology in America: A History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 3, 111, 149, 208.

²⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

fantasies hold and often fail to live up to the promise of escape. So, for example, in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (see chapter three) being a faithful black servant to a family of prosperous southern white aristocrats is a genre of bourgeois respectability that holds all sorts of meanings until unfair accusations and racism get in the way and then it isn't. And then, as Dunbar's pessimistic story progresses, he demonstrates in an enigmatic cynic named "Sadness" how sometimes these new genres for living aren't always optimistic—or coherent. When people fall out of these American capitalist fantasies, they find themselves in transitional spaces and must scavenge to build new, rickety, genres for survival—genres that are, as Berlant explains, "technical political heuristic[s] that allow for ambivalence, distraction, antagonism and inattention" so as "not to destroy collective existence."²¹ Transitional spaces lead to transitional feelings, affects that attempt to account for the bewildering experience of being without a central script.

Here I've found several diverse but linked cases of people and peoples stuck outside of prevailing narratives: from former Confederate generals facing their own possible viciousness before the amnesia of the Lost Cause (chapter one), to African Americans whose Washingtonian self-help guides attempt to answer political disfranchisement with hollow stories of economic success (chapter two), to black novelists who illustrate that economic success under Jim Crow is always already bankrupt (chapter three), and finally to a Southern realist writer who understands that even the conventions of the nineteenth century sentimental home aren't enough to keep an Old Woman attached in a New South (chapter four). One should not be so surprised that I would lump slaveholders and slaves, white gentry and black debt bondsmen into the same story about the failures of freedom.

²¹ Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34.3 (2016): 394.

Because this story is as much about race and gender as it is about class, the success of the industrialized New South meant the failure of old ways, old identities, and old attachments. Social Darwinist thought defined the American Dream, which, in turn, said that success only comes to the *fittest* and the *good*—indeed that these attributes essentially overlap. This narrow claim left out many others, proving that being stuck in the U.S. can happen to anyone regardless of race, creed, or virtue. While capitalism promised to heal the deep wounds of slavery, poverty, and political disgrace, its remedial powers were not available to everyone. Enduring are the recalcitrant bodies of those left to scavenge a life out of half-made myths.

My first chapter explores how ex-Confederate subjects dealt with the loss of their national fantasy *before* the rise of that other fantasy, the Lost Cause. Here I pay literary attention to canonically historical texts—the writings of Emma LeConte, Jefferson Davis, Jubal A. Early, Alexander H. Stephens, and James Longstreet who through different subgenres of life writing attempt to understand how to feel (or not) after political catastrophe. What I work to uncover here are the transitional narratives and makeshift affects that attempt to bolster these authors before the powerful mythology of the Lost Cause could give them succor. The Lost Cause and its many literary channels worked to sublimate racial hatred and a history of violence, sexual abuse, and misery into a story that was not only palatable but also grandiose. Edward Pollard's *The Lost Cause* (1866), Jubal Early and Fitzhugh Lee's screeds in *Southern Literary History*, Jefferson Davis's periphrastic *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881), and many other texts all worked to

redefine the stakes of the war. These authors argued that the Civil War was fought not over slavery but honor, and turned the Confederacy's defeat from a divinely mandated punishment to a Southern jeremiad meant to prove the South's worthiness.

Yet before this could come about, many of these Confederates were struggling to write a new script. In Jefferson Davis's letters and Jubal Early's essays my chapter finds where and how the rhetoric to support this mythology fails. By reading these figures *against* the Lost Cause I demonstrate how these authors' new transitional affective states (neither nostalgia or melancholia) did not find a suitable genre. They find themselves in an abject present, affectively detached from the fantasy of a Confederate past and an understanding of the future. Living with defeat means that ordinary temporal logic evaporates. Reading Alexander H. Stephens' prison diary from immediately after the war, I show how his feelings of indignation and self-righteousness eventually give out in the face of his own abjectness and political defeat. His personal dogma of achievement cannot negotiate reality. Ultimately he acknowledges how it feels to be unfairly treated by the world. This disgrace echoes James Longstreet's insight at his memoir's conclusion. Forced to fail in public, Longstreet becomes marked by the lasting influence of his political failures. Through these compelling moments I demonstrate how defeat feels like an expressed-yet-inexpressible affect. Ultimately, the space of political defeat within which all of these ex-confederates find themselves, is not an affect in particular, but opens onto a range of feelings that are, in their very nature, incoherent, contradictory, but predictably difficult to bear.

While my first chapter focuses upon those who lost the war, my second chapter focuses on those who were freer because of it—and who lost in turn. By the 1890s—a full

generation after the Civil War—many African American authors and presses, supported by increased literacy rates and a rapidly growing black professional class, had finally become self-sustaining.²² Though scholars credit the very first African-American novel to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853)—and sometimes Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859)—Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) was the first in African-American novel to inaugurate the arrival of an incipient black publishing sphere in the United States. While this period would see the first black novelists, it was the self-help, citizenship, and etiquette guides that were the best sellers. Often borrowing wholesale from hugely popular white success manuals of the period, black self-help books like *The College of Life* (1895) and *Progress and Achievements of the Colored People* (1913) offered readers hundreds of pages of instruction in bourgeois, protestant values—championing diligence, patience, and moral probity above all. These books preached virtuous traits based upon a model of respectability politics made most famous by Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) and his Tuskegee Institute. Yet however much these self-help authors advised personal and domestic care they also conspicuously overlooked the sober conditions of Jim Crow as mob violence, lynchings, voter suppression acts, and vagrancy laws were swiftly delivering black men and women in the South back to an apartheid society nearly identical to slavery. At this critical moment in African American social history, black authors and editors frequently used “discouragement” to describe the problematic mood of being in the present. Their self-help rhetoric sought to effectively replace discouragement with a new mood: economic and cultural optimism. While optimism might have been possible at the end of the 1890s, I find

²² For the first time, all Americans could participate in the same integrated cultural distribution—a process known as “massification.” See Kaestle and Radway, *History of the Book in America: Volume Four*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 229.

that by the start of WWI, black writers came to realize that such overly sanguine appeals to optimism in the face of Jim Crow no longer held purchase for their readers. As optimism fails, these authors instead call for a new kind of realism that can guide subjects through the pitfalls of the present.

My third chapter serves as a corollary to the second. Emerging from the shadows of this black self-improvement narrative—but after disfranchisement and before the Great Migration and the Harlem renaissance—are two important novels: Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) and Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). I turn to these novels for obvious and not-so-obvious reasons. Dunbar and Chesnutt were, by far, the most famous black novelists of this period.²³ And, in particular, these two novels present, perhaps, the most pessimistic opinions about the future of African Americans in and out of the South. The two novels pose a particularly important outlook. They eschew optimism in order to craft stories of surviving with what is left. Dunbar and Chesnutt's novels separately illustrate the failed promise of mobility—be it physically migrating from South to North or moving into the bourgeoisie. In Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* a white Northern philanthropist moves back to his Southern hometown dreaming of liberalizing it through economic development, only to find that white nationalism and industrial capitalism had already claimed their victories. In Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, a bourgeois black family flees North to New York City after the family patriarch is wrongfully convicted of theft, finding in the city only moral degradation and ruin. Both novels portray black and white protagonists attempting to migrate from their purported homes in search of the great meritocratic promise of uncorrupted free market capitalism. And in both, the

²³ Kaestle and Radway, *History of the Book in America*, 229.

protagonists find that economic answers to political problems only lead to more exposure and exploitation. They end without social activation or spiritual transformation; instead watching the world as it used to be, fall away as the New South and the new black ghetto spring up instead. I purposefully take Dunbar and Chesnutt's unmitigated opinions to heart in order to demonstrate what the obverse to chapter two's optimism looks and feels like. In this, Dunbar and Chesnutt outline a complex of affects and attitudes that mired black *and white* subjects after disfranchisement. These authors provide an aesthetic model for what national/capitalist disfranchisement can feel like for both races: a dead-end of misery, sadness, and numbness. In this, both novels demonstrate how legal freedom was not social freedom. Instead they track the unfreedom of capital when it masquerades as white bourgeois forms of philanthropy and social mobility.

Chapter two and chapter three center upon African-American responses to the changing Southern order. Indeed, by the 1890s whiteness, and the status of white patriarchy led to a pyrrhic quest to uphold a fantasy of white triumph and status above everything else. There is a reason that the Ku Klux Klan finds a second wind in the 1890s, that African Americans are driven back into servitude under the moniker of Jim Crow, and that the white nationalist Lost Cause ideology of Thomas Nelson Page becomes best-selling culture.²⁴ Writers like Page and Thomas Dixon Jr. spoke directly to growing Civil War nostalgia. By the 1890s, Union and Confederate soldiers sought reconciliation regardless of the historical accuracy upon which this reunion was based. This cultural fantasy inflated

²⁴ An influx of immigrant labor along with a growing Populist movement led to a period of violent labor unrest that the U.S. has never seen before or since, consolidating American corporate capitalism. See Barbara Antoniazzi, *The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution, and Performance in the United States* (Madison WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 6.

²⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

the sense of abjection for former Confederates and the children of the defeated. Through these forms of Historical Romance what might have been, before the war, a poor slaveless farmhand could become, thirty years later, an honorary member of the dispossessed Virginia elite (see chapter 3). This cultural nostalgia meant that all white Southerners could participate in the chivalrous fables (and racial prejudice) of the Confederacy.

The fourth chapter also takes as its focus what white failure looks like under the historical guise of the New South. But if in chapter one white defeat before (and for Longstreet, during) the Lost Cause looked like a desperate sentimentality, one author from the period shows how *after* the Lost Cause white defeat mixes sentimentality with evolutionary theory in order to justify the collateral damages of industrialized capital. Here I demonstrate how Virginian novelist Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia* (1913) stages two parallel stories: the triumph of the New Woman over the Old, and the triumph of the New South over the remains of the Confederacy. If my first chapter was about what comes before the Lost Cause, this chapter is about what comes after. While *Virginia* rarely strays from its heroine's intimate psyche, in the periphery are set-pieces common to both Glasgow's contemporary audience and this dissertation—the Confederacy's defeat, the exploitation of the South under Northern investment after Reconstruction, and the rise of capitalist massification posed through the language of Darwinian thought. In this, Glasgow tells a story of socioeconomic historical change located not on the scale of the State but that of the individual. This becomes clear when one sees how Virginia Pendleton, as the prototypical antebellum Southern woman, embodies the distorted and aggrandized nostalgia of Lost Cause sentimental culture. Glasgow, as a suffragist and strongly independent woman, chafed under the sexist ideologies of the retrograde South. In staging Virginia's demise,

Glasgow offers a timely premonition about the eventual rise of the New South and, in this, the New Woman too. *Virginia* knowingly moves between generic forms, modifying nineteenth-century sentimentalism with Spencerian evolutionary theory and the language of literary naturalism in order to redefine Lost Cause genres as themselves retrograde and ill-suited for the inevitable triumph of modernity and the world it offered—one of reason, science, strong wills, and strong women.

This project is about how new genres of subjectivity emerged when stuck against the realities of capitalism in the U.S.²⁵ I locate this stuckness in all sorts of people—black, white, rich, poor, men, and women. My project then must backtrack through American literary archives to find what affects, and attendant affect worlds, attach to survival for those caught outside the upswell of American modernity. In order to document the atmospheres of living beyond one's frameworks of value, my project brings together several different strands of scholarship; from African-American history and American book history, to sociology, affect theory, Civil War history, and others. Judith Stein's scholarship, especially her work on the history of Populism in Kenneth Warren and Adolph Reed's *Renewing Black Intellectual History* (2010) is perhaps the most essential history for this project. She expertly delineates the ways that progressive racial allegiances built under Populism lost to the industrial plantation elite, a historical backstory that infiltrates all the episodes of this dissertation. Closely following this work I rely on T.J. Jackson Lears' influential *No Place of Grace* (1981), a now-classic study of turn-of-the-century

²⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

antimodernism in the United States. Like Stein's work, Lears' history tackles the many utopian reactions to capitalism and industrialization during the same period of this dissertation and his interest in the historical change from historical romance to realism overlaps with my fourth chapter. Indeed, I think of my entire project as a kind of corollary to Lears—one that tracks not utopian reactions to capitalism but the realist, stop-gap, and barren ones that, unlike Lear's work, are conspicuously devoid of ideology.

Along these lines, numerous scholars have recently become interested in the kinds of negative freedom that live on the other side of American capitalism. John Michael's *Identity and the Failure of America* (2008) investigates similar themes as he demonstrates how the U.S. has historically failed to provide justice for those who find themselves "other" to the white, male, political subject. Tom Lutz's meticulously researched *Doing Nothing* (2006) thematically chronicles the slacker, illustrating how history, since the enlightenment, has always featured those unable or unwilling to participate in the emotional and physical requirements of capitalism. As a corollary to this book, Scott Sandage's recent history *Born Losers* (2005) focuses specifically on nineteenth century U.S. cultural and literary history to demonstrate the nation's socio-historical relationship to work.

To uncover these stories I turn to an archival array from novels to memoir to newspaper editorials and self-help manuals. I rely on these diverse examples in order to attempt to pinpoint a range of historical experiences of grief, sadness, stuckness, and disappointment that have been lost in the official transcripts of social history—material expression of forms of everyday intimate obligation. Though the mixture of fiction, autobiography, and historical documentary might at first seem somewhat perplexing, I

believe that this breadth achieves several ends. These books form an archive of, to use Jill Lepore's words again, those "who don't thrive." Writing attentively and factually about the stuck and the defeated means broadening our approach to literature. Understandably so, novels are different kinds of objects than self-help manuals, but both at this time were written purposefully with a select audience in mind. The point is not whether what these novels work, or do not, but what exactly these books are doing for readers and how these ends indicate a larger social challenge surrounding the absence of a coherent politics, ideology, or even identity that marks the condition of a freedom that isn't free. Indeed, to attempt to understand what being stuck felt like means seeing all of those who were just that—from writers, journalists, failed lawyers, aspirational bourgeois readers, faded Victorian mothers, and indignant confederate girls.

In this my project is indebted to the outgrowth of sensory histories and ethnographies that have popped up across multiple disciplines in recent years. Mark M. Smith's *How Race is Made* (2006) is a terrific example of the ambitious ways that historians are attempting to uncover cultural texture as they consider how feelings and senses produce accounts of life under slavery, Jim Crow, and elsewhere. Anne Cheng's brilliant *Melancholy of Race* (2000) investigates the "deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living with a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be."²⁶ Her project aptly summarizes some of my concerns here. In describing the "painful negotiation" of the minority subject to ideologies of a "ruling episteme" Cheng's identifies something she calls racial melancholia.²⁷ Yet unlike Cheng, my project is not only

²⁶ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

interested in intimate subjectivity but in the genres and forms that emerge from, say, melancholia, to build (or not) provisional structures of attachment under the predations of modern capitalism. Outside of the discipline of history, anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis offers a particularly potent approach to sensory studies in *The Senses Still* (1994), a book that weaves nuanced ethnography through often personal introspection. This kind of personal scholarship is best exemplified in Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2009), an essential guide to thinking about the ways in which personal affective scenes work to motivate the daily maintenance of the self in the world.

This is crucial for this project as I am asking, again and again, what it is and how subjects survive when they fall outside of ideologies. For Stewart, ordinary affects are “the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.” They operate as a “shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges.”²⁸ Stewart's project attempts to register the kinds of low-level emotional attachments and shocks that operate like white noise in the background of everyday lived experience. These kinds of ordinary affects are “more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings.” This will be particularly useful in my first chapter when I consider what kinds of feelings come to replace Confederate utopian ideology, and again in chapter four when I think about the ends of sentimentalism. Here one might call this project a study in ordinary affects that follow all different kinds of defeat. They are not ideologies (or at least not yet) but, like in the case of women from the faded Southern gentry, feelings of isolation, disappointment, failed expectation, and sentimental attachment (see chapter four) that sets the stage for enduring past one's prime.

²⁸ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

Sadiya Hartman's masterful *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) is one of the most relevant scholarly works for my project. An essential foray into how the history of slavery in America is necessarily a history of liberalism and sentimentality, Hartman's book considers how "sentiment, enjoyment, affinity, will, and desire facilitated subjugation, domination, and terror precisely by preying upon the flesh, the heart, and the soul."²⁹ In this, Hartman offers a way to see how emotions, trafficked through Victorian sentimentalism, seemed radical but affected the kinds of mastery common to social oppression in the first place. The language of sentimentalism will be especially relevant in my last chapter on Ellen Glasgow and the problems of post-bellum white womanhood in the South.

Hartman's book anticipates Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (2008) and her follow-up *Cruel Optimism* (2011). It's safe to say that these two books are the chief inspiration to the conceptual architecture of my project. Both represent exceptionally careful and innovative critical insight into questions of becoming, being in relationship to fantasies of conventionality for a public, and the difficulties of maintaining oneself in the face of the good life. *The Female Complaint* describes "the unfinished business of sentimentality" by which she means the way in which the sentimental woman's sphere offers an "account of the social world as an affective space."³⁰ While her work on sentimental cultural will be crucial in my fourth chapter, her language on self-maintenance outside of politics can be seen throughout this project. Berlant's innovative work revolves around the questions of being in relationship to fantasies of conventionality for a public and the difficulties of maintaining oneself in the face of the loss of the good life. As she

²⁹ Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

³⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2.

describes in *Cruel Optimism*, “what happens in the time that we inhabit before new forms make it possible to relocate within conventions the fantasy of sovereign life unfolding from actions.”³¹ It is the beforehand that is the place of this project as well. Often subjects find themselves tethered by affective relationships to things that keep them inflated as much as it drags them down. Here I attempt to contextualize her critical definitions within historical archives from the end of the nineteenth century (see chapter two). In chapter four, I rely heavily upon Berlant’s understanding of sentimentality in order to demonstrate how it changes under the pressure of evolutionism at the turn of the century. Throughout one can find her language animating my thinking. This dissertation, in its dedication to social and intimate forms of maintenance, looks at primary source documents as emotional testimony.

Berlant and Stewart are two essential voices amidst a variety of resources for documenting affects and emotions. Their work also speaks to a steep learning curve when attempting a project that relies upon the language of affect theory. As affects, emotions, and feelings have recently filtered into all sorts of scholarship from cognitive psychology to literature, so too have these terms become so diversely used as to become synonyms or antonyms depending on the disciplines or even the scholar.³² When I speak about emotions, feelings, affects, and moods in my project, I am principally adopting the definitions offered so deftly by Jonathan Flatley in his monograph *Affective Mapping* (2008). While there are many essential primers, Flatley’s is amongst the most cogent and well organized. I may not have the space to say everything, but I can frame some of the more important distinctions in this project. *Affect* refers to a kind of feeling “always

³¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 7.

³² See Michael Epp, “Durable Public Feelings,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 41.2 (2011): 183.

experienced in relation to an object or objects.”³³ Where *emotions* are embodied in conscious thought and thus are personally idiosyncratic, affects are one step removed—as Brian Massumi’s defines, mere “intensities.”³⁴ In this, affects “amplify” or “dampen” one’s perceptions; they begin thought processes, shape behaviors, and participate in other systems of feeling that constitute one’s changing emotional ecology.³⁵ In chapter two my project takes a particular interest in moods, particularly discouragement and optimism. *Moods*, unlike emotions (which are personal), and affects (which are based upon objects) are circulated. As Flatley says, “we are never not in a mood.”³⁶ Moods, like discouragement, are “inhabited by others,” and circulated all around us unbeknownst to many. Thus to be in a discouraged mood means approaching something as mundane as a trip to the store with a sense of defeat, or dread, or fear because these are the attendant affects one has been charged to feel. This is important because moods, as I will demonstrate, are social testimony, and in that, they are historical.

This is, in a way, what I mean when I use Berlant’s idea of emerging transitional genres for survival. Just as Anne Cheng uses “melancholy” to describe a specific historical version of the lived black experience, so too does Flatley say much the same thing when he reads Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* as a self-help primer in the problem of melancholia for black subjects.³⁷ Just so, I will argue in chapter two that “discouragement” stands in for the same problem—though I believe it is a more apt description considering how frequently this neologism is used by black authors of the time. This is reminiscent of Laura Quinney’s

³³ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 443.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

work on “disappointment” in the British Romantic tradition. She points to the ways in which many scholars are now attempting to give more concerted thought to negativity, or, as Quinney defines the word, a “perpetual thwarting of the will.”³⁸ All of this language helps ground the conceptual movements of this dissertation as I ask how and in what ways people with lives broken by capitalism and white nationalism remain when they have no more stories to tell.

Just as the language of affect theory will help this project get to the bottom of certain individuals and public spheres who struggle to maintain a sense of life in the face of political or social catastrophe, so too has a trove of contemporary scholarship in queer theory used similar techniques to address similar questions. While it may seem odd, queer theory has often taken up questions of negativity that are central to the frame of this project. In particular, Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2007), and José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), all offer important contemporary perspectives that have helped inform the methodology of this project. Halberstam, moving from Foucault, wants to think about reforming pedagogy to bring new forms of knowledge and new sorts of questions. She claims that there are forms of failure that are not only acceptable but desired and constitutive of a new form of engagement with the world. Lee Edelman argues that negativity is an important form of ontology. For him, failing within the face of the normalizing conventions of the heterosexual, reproductively minded, creates a new space for a different politics of the subject. Failure, then, becomes constitutive but not redemptive. So too is Heather Love interested in reclaiming historical aspects of queer

³⁸ Ibid., 12.

experience that have been deemed to be too dark to serve any literary merit. She looks at early twentieth-century novels in the queer canon in order to give historical and theoretical weight to feelings of loss, depression, and loneliness. Finally, Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* might not initially seem an obvious source here considering the book's interest in refuting Leo Bersani's arguments in *Homo* and Lee Edelman's antirelational attitude in *No Future*. Yet Muñoz offers this project, especially in chapter two, a great deal of insight into the ways that hope (and optimism) work as "a backward glance that enacts a future vision."³⁹ He uses queerness as a kind of political heuristic, not an identity but a prospective position that can organize a future collective, where hope stands in as a strange kind of nonbeing—"present but not actually existing in the present tense."⁴⁰

Through this insistence on a queer kind of hope, Muñoz also defines some of the problematic arguments that this dissertation tries to resist. The archive of queer theory above offers groundbreaking methods with which to read against prevailing scholarly traditions. In this they are remarkable as they elaborate how in Virginia Jackson's words, "queer and trans modes of adaptation...become models for our common survival."⁴¹ Yet survival is not the same thing as flourishing, growth, or even resistance—specifically "collective resistance to capitalist exploitation" which Halberstam proposes over the course of her book.⁴² Edelman also discovers that negative queer futurity leads to *jouissance*, his psychoanalytic term that embraces the death-drive in homosexuality in order to lead "those of us inhabiting the place of the queer" to "cast off that queerness and enter the

³⁹ José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009). 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Virginia Jackson, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *L.A. Review of Books*, April 12, 2015.

⁴² Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 49.

properly political sphere”⁴³ We can begin to see that politics often becomes the remedial promise at the end of these queer inquiries into negativity. This is something my project tries to resist. Indeed, all of the following chapters are about those who no longer have recourse to political fantasies; that is the very point. Looking at how people scramble to live when their myths fall apart means finding unexceptional people who are stuck, not necessarily those that have successfully built new methods of self-identification and community in the aftermath.

As we will see, the characters in this dissertation—along with their authors and their audiences—are all already smitten with basic generic assumptions about how failure is supposed to be overcome to achieve success in the United States—a fiat that should be traced through the American Dream to early seventeenth-century Puritan typology.⁴⁴ So when a stigmatized and hurt black family (see chapter 3) limp back to the South in order to resubmit themselves to Jim Crow, their survival is exceptional but their return is not a redemption. When a white southern housewife (see chapter 4) is left behind by her children and husband, the hurt that she feels does not become the precondition for personal transformation but instead just leaves her bereft and alone. When an ex-confederate general (see chapter 1) disgraces himself for accepting defeat, he does not feel spiritual salvation but can only reflect on the evil that he’d caused, and when black self-help authors preach optimism “strained through the sieve of common sense” they are acknowledging that some dire and powerful political impasses are just that. These are the accounts that we will find in this dissertation—an American story about making do with

⁴³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 27.

⁴⁴The Jeremiad tradition held that failure was a sign of one’s election and essential grounds for personal redemption. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

broken lives and broken plotlines when the Pollyannaish promises of redemption, rebirth, and transformation will never reliably be redeemed. Looking between the cracks, then, means finding episodes of survival and endurance that resist being turned into narratives themselves. Ultimately, in this dissertation I hope to offer to historians several uncommon literary archives that deserve relevance as cultural objects, to literary scholars new readings that might reimagine the place of some popular and unpopular novels in the American canon, and to theorists some possible implications for reconsidering how moods and affects circulate historically. But, beyond this, I also hope that readers will find uncomfortable similarities between this work and the contemporary present where the defining challenges of class difference-turned-racial violence and predatory capitalism are still pushing men and women into places of suffering and abjection beyond the scope of American mythologies.

Chapter One: Reconstruction Stories: Defeat Before and After the Lost Cause South

1.

On the 23rd of February 1865, while the ruins of Columbia, South Carolina hissed and carbonized, Emma LeConte considered the possibility of losing her world. Facing an impossible truth, she studied what remained, asserting that “Somehow I cannot feel we can be conquered.”¹ The daughter of the prominent scientist and conservationist Joseph LeConte, Emma was only thirteen when the Civil War began, and seventeen when she would witness, first hand, the destruction of her city. Having already lost so much, she chafed under the thought of subjugation by *Yankee* rule, saying that the word is “a synonym for *all* that is *mean* despicable and abhorrent.”² Watching Columbia break before waves of Union soldiers, wagons, and artillery, LeConte negotiates this truth with disbelief. Her wartime diary offers scholars an intimate historical record of Sherman’s brutal march and the Confederacy’s last days. As Emma sits on the brink of adulthood—surrounded by grimness, dumbfounded by the collapse of the Confederacy, and impoverished to the promises of adolescence—she testifies to the terror of war and the loss of a political fantasy. Some Southerners—like Jefferson Davis at the fall of Richmond—might still hold to a vague hope for independence. LeConte, instead, squares herself to the knowledge that her life has irrevocably changed. When she pronounces, “somehow I cannot feel we can be conquered” she is producing a declaration of affective defiance over a political project. This minor, yet complicated, phrase synchronizes LeConte’s intimate feelings of disbelief with the promise of a mutually oriented collective. She declares the impossibility of surrender

¹Emma LeConte, *A Journal, Kept by Emma Florence LeConte*, DocSouth, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1998. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/leconteemma/leconte.html>. 46

² Ibid.

while insinuating a kind of limit to her affective ability to understand it. What, then, is the difference between knowing and feeling defeat? Registering what something “felt like” leads not only to a discussion of historical nostalgia. When the Confederacy failed in its attempt to establish an independent slave-owning nation in the South, hundreds of thousands of men lost their lives in the process but many others found themselves the immediate executors of a new and unorganized afterlife. LeConte’s diary is exemplary of what it feels like to be in this moment.

In the years following Appomattox, hundreds of Union and Confederate soldiers recorded their wartime experiences with an eye to historical posterity. Memoirs, military communications, private correspondence, and personal diaries, formed a growing record of the Civil War and all that surrounded it. This historiography began before Appomattox and, one could argue, has not stopped. Though many of these primary sources are well known to historians, few scholars regard these documents as literary constructions and few consider the dividends implicit in such a change of perspective.³ Moreover, Civil War life writing falls into a variety of subgenres—memoir, recollection, diary, and essay. These generic forms conventionalize the self into a narrative that appears coherent, stable, and teleological. By considering figures such as Jefferson Davis, Jubal Early, Alexander H. Stephens, and James Longstreet this chapter traces how political defeat gets mapped onto personal narrative. How do these former commanders and civil leaders negotiate their identities through writing? What kind of “failure” exists within this archive? How are these memoirs

³ Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs still engender a great degree of interest from historians and non-historians alike—along with Mark Twain, and Matthew Arnold, Gertrude Stein famously interpreted Grant in her book *Four in America*. Mary Chesnut’s diary is one of the most well-known accounts of the Civil War from a private confederate citizen in the south. See C. Vann Woodward’s *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). For some well-known Union memoirs see Elisha Hunt Rhodes’ *All For the Union: The Civil War Diary & Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), and Sam R. Watkins’ *Company Aytch* (New York: New American Library, 1999).

catalogues of self-making or self-unmaking? Confederate memoir engages the merely historical event from a different angle, relying on multiple forms of testimony, that all, necessarily, respond to the same affective moment of political failure. This chapter will be tracking both this moment of the political defeat of the Confederacy—as well as the kinds of echoes and reverberations that defeat sounds.

Any discussion of the aftermath of Confederate defeat means attending to the “Lost Cause South”—the provocative revisionist history that sprung up following the war and continues to persist to this day. The Lost Cause cultural program accounted for defeat with a self-righteous ideology that could weather the disgraces of Northern occupation, black suffrage, the end of the plantation system, and the inauguration of industrialized capitalism in the South—all under the banner of *Radical Reconstruction*. It knowingly distorted the events of the war, made unfounded arguments about the purity of Southern culture, and myopically valorized a landed, agrarian elite in order to match the bareness of failure with the promise of historical continuity and political righteousness. Sometimes this meant uniting contradictory historical interpretations to produce a coherent and optimistic conception of a Southern future. In all, the fall of the Confederacy became an always-accessible site for affective reinvestment. Southerners tethered their defeat (and the ongoingness of their defeat) to this backwards-facing recuperative narrative.

With this in mind, my chapter *is* and *is not* about the Lost Cause. By which I mean that here I face this cultural ideology in order to find the moments that precede, oppose, and outlast it. Lost Cause rhetoric was self-glorifying and, in that, rather simply, it triumphantly proclaimed success where there was defeat. Yet this chapter is interested in tracking what happens when this powerful generic script doesn’t exist, isn’t accessible, or

won't work. By looking past this rhetoric to the *unsymbolized* products of the Civil War I hope to demonstrate a heretofore overlooked but remarkable account of how people build perilous and temporary affective attachments where no master narrative exists.

After the political fantasy of the Confederacy in 1865 and before the Lost Cause in 1877, is a liminal moment—a gap. This gap is the archive for this chapter. I am interested in the affective working out of this failure—how being in defeat is not the same thing as the Lost Cause's nostalgic or melancholic attachments. Here I find that these autobiographical accounts, throughout, tell of living in a defeated (maybe deflated) world where ordinary temporal logic evaporates. Because Confederate religious language proclaimed the war to be divinely mandated, afterwards politicians, soldiers, and citizens could no longer use the promise of an independent South as the scene in which they could find value, purpose, or identity. At the bottom they find themselves in an expressed-yet-inexpressible condition that I argue expresses the affect of defeat. By employing formal techniques of literary analysis, this chapter cross-examines cases of writers struggling to form coherent accounts of their affective conditions. Emma LeConte, Jefferson Davis, Jubal Early, Alexander H. Stephens, and James Longstreet are all unable to narrate the state of feeling irreparable. Formal economy, narrative discontinuity, emphasis, elision, and aphasia all matter. While these anecdotes from diary, missive, essay, recollection, and memoir might be said to represent the same autobiographical form of expression, each different format implies different audiences and attaches itself to different publics. Together, these ex-Confederates illustrate what it is to be lost without a genre, a plot, or a script for identity.

To better understand the theoretical stakes, let's return to Emma LeConte and her difficult condition. Several weeks after the fall of Columbia, the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia fell. Lee surrendered his forces to Grant, and Abraham Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater. Upon hearing the news of Lincoln's death, LeConte ventures into a long meditation of the mean things to come. She considers how the fantasy of political and social autonomy for the South has been completely effaced:

They say *right* always triumphs, but what cause could have been more just than ours? Have we suffered all - have our brave men fought so desperately and died so nobly for *this*? For four years there has been throughout this broad land little else than the anguish of anxiety - the misery of sorrow over dear ones sacrificed - for *nothing*! Is all this blood spilled in vain - will it not cry from the ground on the day we yield to these Yankees! *We* give up to the *Yankees*! How *can* it be? How can they talk about it? Why does not the President call out the women? If there are [not] enough men? We would go and *fight* too - we would better all die together. Let us suffer still more - give up yet more - anything, anything that will help the cause - anything that will give us freedom and not force us to live with such people - to be ruled by such horrible and contemptible creatures - to submit to them when we hate them so bitterly. It is cruel - it is *unjust*. I used to dream about peace - to pray for it - but this is worse than war. What is such peace to us? What horrible fate has been pursuing us the last six months? Not much farther back than that we had every reason to hope for success. What is the cause of this sudden crushing collapse? I *cannot* understand it - I never loved my country as I do now - I feel I could sacrifice *everything* to it - and when I think of the future - Oh God! It is too horrible. What I most fear is a cancellistroy [sic] policy from the North - that they will offer to let us come back as before - Oh, no - no! I would rather we were held as a conquered province - rather sullenly submit and bide our time. Let them oppress and tyrannize, but let us take no favors of them. Let them send us away out of the country - anywhere away from them and their hateful presence. We are all very wretched⁴

LeConte's dismayed thoughts question an uncertain future. Her writing mediates her emotional sensorium with her failed political ideology. One need only see how she begins the entry to understand her paradox. If her cause was *right*, and right always triumphs, then why does she sit among the ashes of a ruined city waiting for Union forces to impose a

⁴ LeConte, *A Journal*, 64.

new world? Tellingly, she has no answer. The questions continue as she measures the value of suffering: “brave men fought so desperately for *this*?” She asks “how *can* it be?”; “what is such peace to us?” and; what is the “cause of this sudden crushing collapse?” Her disbelief is surprising—the Confederacy had been in shambles for the past two years—but it is also equally revealing. Self-deception is a powerful tool and when its object has been destroyed, it is no wonder that LeConte’s world is suddenly inexplicable. Indeed while she may have “prayed for peace,” at this moment she unwittingly discovers that she had always prayed for “victory” instead. Her logic evaporates as everything in which she had invested herself has disintegrated. If God ordained the Confederacy as just and good where is he now? The questions echo an entire cultural philosophy. By using the first person plural in saying that “we would better all die together” LeConte positions herself as a representative of an always-available public feeling. Yet in claiming that she “never loved her country as much as she does now” she has deeply internalized a fantasy of Southern independence into a form of emotional cathexis. It would seem that for this adolescent girl, love holds the enduring promise of keeping her attached to a political idea while also doubling as a form of grief.

Throughout, LeConte’s sincerity matches her disorientation. When she asks vainly “what horrible fate has been pursuing us the last six months?” she may be alluding both to the physical presence of Sherman’s army which had wreaked particular vengeance on South Carolina, or to the growing inflation, hunger, and poverty that anticipated Confederate collapse. Or, perhaps, she is just conflating Sherman with fate itself. “Fate”, then, becomes divested from its religious doctrine. One sees the waning shadow of LeConte’s religion. Notice how she stresses that all has been sacrificed for “*nothing*” and

that the fate that awaits the South is “*unjust*.” This is the moment of discovering no reparation for one’s effort—overturning that age-old Protestant adage that salvation rewards suffering.⁵ In the wake of a failed national intention LeConte reconsiders the religious and social institutions that gave credence to the Confederacy and its purpose as that of a holy war.⁶ If divine justice seemed to have disappeared, Christian ministers struggled to prove that their newfound abjection was actually a continued “trial from God.”⁷ Justice, based upon principles of legal authority and cultural convention, had been upended. And when LeConte says that she “*cannot* understand” the cause of defeat she protests both the murkiness of the immediate political situation while also possibly protesting the very feeling itself. This is to say that she both doesn’t know and doesn’t *want to know*. In these negotiations between the impossibility of living on and the terrifying guarantee of it, LeConte at once detests the idea of acquiescing to what she regards as Northern oppression while simultaneously investing herself in the thought that her continued emotional resolve could form a kind of political resistance. Ultimately, she provides one final assessment: “we are all very wretched.” Fitting, for it defines the South’s great misery while it, if unlikely, alludes to the possibility that sin clings to both civilians and soldiers alike. Two weeks later, LeConte internalizes surrender by mulling over the meaning of a futureless world. She writes: “Nothing good can come - fate has heaped upon us miseries and misfortunes that could not even have been dreamed of by us. The only question now is not ‘What hope?’ but ‘what new bitterness?’”⁸ Sublimating hope into a *new*

⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 25.

⁶ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865 – 1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

bitterness will become an important formula repeated again and again throughout the documents of this chapter.⁹

Though Emma LeConte's diary was not published until 1957, it is indicative of hundreds of similar catalogues that would, in part, fuel the rising sentiment and regional historiography that structured the Lost Cause.¹⁰ Yet as the above reading demonstrates, when these documents are taken not just as historical markers of Southern defiance, one uncovers what could be called an *unrecuperative* account of losing one's world. LeConte repeatedly finds it impossible to both understand the events of the past and presuppose the conditions of the future. She is stuck without attachments, floating helplessly in the present. It is this resignation, this stuckness, this unavailability of political fantasy that matters so much to the scope of this project. LeConte's diary suggests that *loss* is a paltry marker for this atmosphere. Instead, loss carries a surplus; what I call defeat. Though these two words are synonyms, defeat can mark both a feeling and an event. *Loss*, on the other hand, is the moment of recognizing that one's previous affective engagements in a political world have become extinguished or exhausted. But loss, in and of itself, can form melancholy, nostalgia, anger, or even relief. Feeling defeated, as I hope to demonstrate here, lacks any of the ameliorative promise of loss because it does not open up a space for new attachments to new worlds. It is constituted, then, by a complete detachment from meaningful forms of living that provide identity, political promise, and history.

For the stakes of this and the following chapters, it's particularly important to nail down my terminology. One might initially want to conflate the Confederate defeat inherent

⁹ See my treatment of the characters of Bud Johnson and Sadness in chapter three.

¹⁰ See Emma LeConte, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte*, ed. Earl Schenck Miers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

to this chapter with other forms of trauma. While this wouldn't be wrong, the distinction I am making means first understanding how trauma can induce new forms of habituation because it marks an event that continues to reassert itself well after the initial shock. But, as I will show, defeat is more than an event and thereby, exists apart from a discussion of initial trauma or suffering. Perhaps here defeat figures as a sort of *anti*-event. So, considered in light of Badiou's *Ethics*, the event is the moment of absolute shock that, in its shock, produces subjects around it.¹¹ In this, events are moments where animal beings are fashioned into constitutive social and political bodies in relation to the structures of history around them. Yet for Badiou, the event is, inherently, a moment of positive or at least formative recognition. What happens when the *event* is not as wonderfully empowering as Badiou imagines yet not as overturning as trauma theory posits? One may want to say that defeat then is a "situation"—to borrow a useful term from Lauren Berlant. Loosely defined, a situation is a state of suspension that is looking for its genre.¹² While the defeat of the Confederacy is readily apparent, it is not always completely understood, and, in the case of Emma LeConte, only marginally real. What this means is that talking about defeat is inherently difficult because the feeling of defeat, in itself, garbles temporality, ontology, and all other kinds of affects around it.

Another way to address this challenge is through a question. What does it mean then to lose the promise of becoming that had organized one's thoughts and desires for so long? My chapter claims that the affective responses to the Confederate defeat, i.e. feeling defeated, are not a single feeling but a particular phenomenology of living in a kind of

¹¹ Alan Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 41.

¹² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Raleigh N.C: Duke University Press, 2001), 5.

afterworld. This is to say that *defeat* is not so much an affect as it is a range of feelings (such as indignation or grief) as well as more general, less differentiated, emotions like *badness* and *sadness*. Defeat can't find its genre—as expressed by question, experimentation, confusion, and incoherence that characterizes the archive of this chapter.¹³ In feeling defeated, objects get evacuated of their contents and subjects get scrambled in a way where it becomes impossible to imagine the reconstitution of either. Perhaps the word “resignation” also works here.¹⁴ As a political pun, Longstreet, Davis, Stephens, and Early had all resigned their commissions as military and political agents of the Confederacy—as all former Confederate leaders were obliged to swear oaths of loyalty to the Union. But they have also, at the moment of their writing, resigned themselves to their defeated present—a present that is both too fearful and too incoherent to be adequately articulated through writing.

2.

This kind of incoherence was not local to Emma LeConte. In fact these contradictions characterize even the most canonical sources of Lost Cause ideology. This is its genre. In the writings of Jefferson Davis and Jubal Early—the two central proponents of this emergent fantasy—one might see how even the foundational texts of this tradition struggle with their historiography as they both bitterly detest the factual events of the war while simultaneously rewriting them. Thinking about how these authors refuse an understanding of the present and imagine the future with semantic incoherence

¹³ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

¹⁴ I'm indebted here to Thomas L. Dumm's "Resignation" *Critical Inquiry*, 25.1 (Autumn, 1998): 56-76.

demonstrates how the ongoing incoherence of defeat finds unwitting expression in public history.

In the months following Appomattox, now former Confederates began to recognize their newfound reality: the rail infrastructure of the South had been devastated in the war, freed slaves had been granted equal protection under the law, and Union military governors now held supreme authority over the now confiscated remnants of the South's great plantation system.¹⁵ In the aftermath, newly organized memorial associations such as the Southern Historical Society—as well as the United Confederate Veterans, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy from the end of the century—formed the basis of the Lost Cause protest.¹⁶ By the late 1870s literary rebuttals in support of Lost Cause ideology sprang up. Historians often agree on several key texts; Edward Pollard's *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1867), Jubal A. Early's published articles in *The Southern Historical Review* (1876), and Jefferson Davis's *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881), founded the initial cultural appeals. These three texts demonstrate the great variety of post-Confederate appeals that would filter into later works in the tradition: the deification of Robert E. Lee; a belief in the Confederacy's impossible military odds; an insistence that the war was fought only over the constitutional question of States Rights; a commitment to elaborating a kind of cultural medievalism of the South that stressed honor, duty, and masculinity; and an overwhelming vilification of a select few Confederate Generals deemed to have lost the war by their incompetence and cowardice. And, of these disgraced generals, James A. Longstreet became public enemy

¹⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 51.

¹⁶ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of The New South 1864 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

number one (I will speak more on this later.) By the 1890s, serialized fiction and popular novels like Thomas Nelson Page's *Marse Chan* (1884) and *Red Rock* (1898) along with Thomas F. Dixon Jr.'s famous *The Clansman* (1905) took up the mantle of the Lost Cause perhaps providing the tradition with its most effective and lasting form of cultural propaganda. From historical writings, literature, and essays, to social institutions and public memorials, the historiography of the Lost Cause was a diverse ideological project.

Yet this was not a uniform program, but a continuum of attitudes from the most zealous deniers of the Confederacy's weakness or blame to those simply mourning the heroism of the dead. In his work on Civil War historical memory, David Blight condenses the sentiments of historians into three different explanations for the phenomenon of the Lost Cause ideology:

As public memory, shaped by a web of organizations, institutions, and rituals; as a dimension of southern and American civil religion, rooted in churches and sacred rhetoric as well as secular institutions and thought; as a literary phenomenon, shaped by journalists and fiction writers from the diehard Confederate apologists of the immediate postwar years through the gentle romanticism of the 'local color' writers of the 1880s to the legion of more mature novelists of the 1890s and early twentieth century who appealed to a national audience eager for reconciliation.¹⁷

This ideology, by the end of the century, was deeply entrenched in all facets of cultural life in the South, from the church, to the schoolroom, the fraternal lodge, and the library. The Lost Cause represented a way of reinterpreting the trauma of the past into a sort of conventionalized and generic fantasy that eschewed real questions of racial oppression, of political insurrection and violence, and of the largely ignored class dynamics of the South in favor of a portrait of antebellum life that idealized honor, reinforced gender roles, and

¹⁷ David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & The American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 100.

painted a deformed and idealized portrait of black people and the institution of slavery. However influential this tradition may have been, as Gaines Foster puts it, “most white southerners...were far too realistic to let bitter memories get in the way of rebuilding their society.”¹⁸

While not all Southerners may have been bitter following the war, many others found that bitterness mixed with newfound nostalgia were suitable ways to reconnect to the defeated Confederacy. It is important to remember that in the decade before the war the Southern slave states shared bold fantasies of spreading their slave empire south into Central and South America.¹⁹ While this empire may have been imaginary, the affective afterglow was not. This is just one of many reasons why Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee became canonized as idols of Southern masculinity and courage long after the war.²⁰ This is why, also, facing the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, Southern ideologues answered with an oppressive racial dogma in a two-pronged approach: the first that emancipation was a great evil for both white and black as it destroyed the heretofore beneficial relationship between paternal white slave-owner and his morally inferior slave; the second that the institution of chattel bondage in the South was, in the words of Jefferson Davis “confessedly the mildest and most humane of all institutions to which the name “slavery” has ever been applied.”²¹ The absurdity of his statement cannot be emphasized enough. In fact, Davis, in his near-obsessive 635-page account of the arguments for and causes of the war for Southern independence, spends roughly eleven

¹⁸ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 5.

¹⁹ Southern politicians and the plantation elite in the 1850s had vast aspirations of spreading their empire south through Mexico all the way to Nicaragua. For more see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 15.

²⁰ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 19.

²¹ Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (Da Capo Press, 1990), Kindle edition, 78.

pages discussing slavery. He declares that “the question of the right or wrong of the institution of slavery was in no wise involved in the earlier sectional controversies” and that his study will not be distracted “by irrelevant issues and the glamour of ethical illusions.”²²

Davis’s near monomaniacal pursuit to prove the righteousness of the war was a rhetorical tactic shared by his contemporaries. His combination of narrowly focused legal argument and overwhelming intransigence resonated for many Southerners who, even years after the fact, still burned with bitterness about the war.²³ Or as Foster describes, he “could never fully reconcile himself to defeat. He clung to and defended the dreams of the past.”²⁴ Many of the dreams commonly propagated by Davis and other Lost Cause authors were explicitly contradictory in their reasoning. Jubal A. Early, for example, argued that the war was lost because of the overwhelming manpower of the North while, at the same time asserting that the war was lost over a handful of battles whose outcome hinged upon bad luck and the incompetence of two or three traitorous commanders. Indeed in Early’s foundational essay on the subject, he argues that the Union possessed upwards of 2.5 million troops while the South possessed only a mere 600,000—leading him to ask “Is anything farther necessary to show the tremendous odds against which we fought?”²⁵ Yet, in seeming contrast, Lost Cause historian Edward A. Pollard claims “it often depended upon the issue of a single field, and that one or two defeats might put the whole of the enemy’s

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 74.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jubal A. Early, *Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War Between the States* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1912), 469.

forces back upon the frontiers of the Confederacy.”²⁶ Side-by-side these statements illustrate how even as a revisionist agenda, the Southern response to the defeat of the Confederacy encompassed a wide range of often competing arguments that struggled to separate legitimate historical analysis from blunt emotional appeals.

The incoherence of many of these arguments should be of no real surprise. Nor should one expect them to be such. Reactions to the Confederacy’s defeat were couched as legitimate historical analysis while often devolving to emotional or irrational appeals. Immediately following the war, scholars, armchair historians, and military strategists sprang out of the ashes of the South began campaigns of historical interpretation and revision crying foul and looking, often, for scapegoats. Take, for example, Pollard’s assessment of the condition of Southern culture at the end of the war:

But the military condition of the Confederacy must be studied in connection with the general decay of public spirit that had taken place in the country, and the impatience of the hardships of the war, when the people had no longer confidence in its ultimate results. This impatience was manifested everywhere; it amounted to the feeling, that taking the war to be hopeless, the sooner it reached an adverse conclusion the better; that victories which merely amused the imagination and insured prolongation of the war, were rather to be deprecated than otherwise, and that to hurry the catastrophe would be mercy in the end. Unpopular as the administration of President Davis was, evident as was its failure, there were not nerve and elasticity enough in the country for a new experiment.

Pollard’s argument here is striking for two reasons. If his history of the Lost Cause amounts to a continued elegy for what might have been and for the heroes who exemplified the highest stations of honor, courage, and duty, then this moment is telling precisely because it seems to indict the Southern people for lacking these same qualities. This isn’t to say that

²⁶ Edward A. Pollard, *The Lost Cause; A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (New York: E.B. Treat and Co., 1866), 646.

Pollard is wrong. Contemporary Civil War historians all hold this to be accurate.²⁷ By 1865 the writing was on the wall. Campaigns against the southern railroad network, the continued embargo of all ships to Southern ports, and the campaign of devastation heaved upon the “breadbasket” of the South by Sherman had crushed the Confederacy’s ability to feed and clothe its soldiers—let alone its struggling population.²⁸ In effect Pollard’s portrayal of the “decay of public spirit” admits to the breaking of the Confederate will—something that had happened for quite some time. This is less as an excuse for defeat as it an observation. Effectively, the political fervor that had driven so many Southerners to secession and that had anointed the Confederacy as both legally just under the guise of the United States Constitution and morally just in the eyes of God, had run aground.

Pollard’s assessment of the psychological state of the Confederacy is on point. The conception of a unified Confederacy, fighting to beat back the Northern invader and maintain a cherished peaceful plantation life, was always a calculated fabrication. Former Confederate Vice-President Alexander Hamilton Stephens explains the cause for Southern independence was given up “because they saw and felt that the cause in which they had enlisted was not that in which they were now called to risk their lives and shed their blood. This is the real and true reason why the great masses of the Southern people have so generally and quietly accepted the present state of things.”²⁹ Eric Foner focuses a significant amount of attention through his work *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* on the very heterogeneous populations of poor white southern sharecroppers,

²⁷ See Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 19 for a good synopsis of scholarly opinion.

²⁸ J.G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co, 1969), 429.

²⁹ Alexander Stephens, *Recollections of Alexander H. Stephens; his diary kept when a prisoner at Fort Warren, Boston Harbour, 1865*, ed. Myrta Lockett Avery (New York, Da Capo Press, 1971), 170.

upcountry farmers, and border state citizens who often held no land or slaves, and who joined the Confederate war effort merely out of a sense of local civic duty—if they joined at all.³⁰ Unlike the characters of this chapter, many Confederate soldiers did not feel the same sense of overwhelming identification with the cause of national independence, and many still felt ambivalent about the institution of slavery. This is why, after the war, many Southerners were already resigned to their defeat and ready to begin the task of repairing and reconstructing after four years of intense battle. As historian Gaines Foster puts it: “In short, southerners returned to a loyal place in the Union without slavery, but struggled to retain as much political power as possible and fought to enforce white supremacy.”³¹

I’ve been tracing, quite generally, the mentality of the Lost Cause South. And, as historians have made clear, the Lost Cause was not as stultifying or as powerful a doctrine as some might hold. Many in the South weathered defeat and Reconstruction with a surprising amount of understanding and resolve. Failure of the political promise of the Confederacy, then, came to many as the passing of a sort of anxiety-ridden dream. But, as I’ve been alluding to, the actual substance of Lost Cause appeal often relied upon confused logic and emotional appeals. These inconsistencies are important not because they prove these authors right or wrong, but because this confused logic indexes the attendant affects that define the genre of Confederate writing *before* the Lost Cause. In watching the political become private and large-scale expectations become internalized, I hope to demonstrate how people scramble to survive when they’ve been defeated.

³⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 185.

³¹ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 20.

Let's think back, for a moment, to Edward Pollard's assessment of the Confederate mentality at war's end. Most citizens and soldiers were struggling with hunger, cold, and exceptional currency inflation and many anticipated the defeat of the Confederacy with relief.³² By this time all knew how difficult the challenge of winning the war was, and how impossible it now appeared—it had been that way for the past two years. Maybe this is why Jefferson Davis's final missive to the Confederacy—circulated as an open letter to all of its citizens—is so arresting to contemporary readers. Six days before Lee's surrender, Davis penned his last directive while in exile from the now-razed capitol of Richmond. Illustrative of Davis's tactical imaginary and the continued power of religious ideology to support a cause that was all but given up, he declared that Richmond's fall might actually be an act of divine providence by allowing the remaining Confederate troops to transition to guerilla fighting tactics in the West instead of standing guard over the capital.³³ Davis claims that, "nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain but the exhibition of our own unquenchable resolve. Let us but will it, and we are free; and who, in the light of the past, dare doubt your purpose in the future?"³⁴ It is no longer a question of the exigencies of the military, the dwindling supplies that have crippled the South—but merely a question of will. Indeed, such guerilla tactics were never part of any Confederate strategy and were, as Gary Gallagher has explained, totally anathema to a public "overwhelmingly devoted to the idea of carrying the war to the enemy."³⁵ He then calls on his citizens to show an "unquenchable resolve" where there never was any. This optimism was ironic not just for

³² Randall and Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 262.

³³ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 5.

³⁴ Jefferson Davis to the people of the Confederacy, 4 April 1865, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* at Rice University, <http://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/>

³⁵ Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 127.

the great privation that had overwhelmed the nation, but also for the now well-documented lack of Confederate public sentiment to continue the war. His readers had long before this given up their willpower.³⁶ What I want to address is not merely Davis's floundering, but the extravagant form that it takes. It's reasonable to imagine that he believed the force of his own lyricism might be able to arouse the sentiments of a beaten nation.

When he turns to the possibility that the South might very well be overrun by the Union army, Davis exclaims that "again and again will we return, until the baffled and exhausted enemy shall abandon in despair his endless and impossible task of making slaves of a people resolved to be free."³⁷ The irony here of identifying the Southern people with slaves was not new. Indeed, this kind of perversion of the terms of victimhood was already common in prewar political rhetoric and would form a cornerstone of Lost Cause language to come.³⁸ But what is also so interesting is the relative fluency with which he turns a master caste into possible slaves without any hesitation.³⁹ It is also important to note that Davis's fear of "slavery" was practically baseless—even if it is right after Appomattox. Yet his fiat of the "impossibility" of submission makes sense only as a declaration of belief and not of action. In a way, the resistance that Davis calls for has, already in this final missive, begun the process of sublimation from physical force to

³⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ During Reconstruction this was an especially common grievance as northern scalawags descended upon the region looking for quick profits and black men saw historical gains in state legislatures. One southerner in the 1880s declared that the war was a "a grand and immortal protest...[against] the oppressive and usurpation of a people who would recognize as higher law...their ambition and unrighteous prejudices." See, Keith S. Bohannon, "These Few Grey-haired, Battle-Scarred Veterans: Confederate Army Reunions in Georgia (1885 – 1895), *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* ed. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2000), 96.

³⁹ For some historical background on white attitudes on race, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, "An Unthinkable History" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 70 – 107.

literary sentimental appeal. The process is complete by the final line, "Let us not, then, despond, my countrymen; but, relying on the never-failing mercies and protecting care of our God, let us meet the foe with fresh defiance, with unconquered and unconquerable hearts."⁴⁰ Here he sets the stage for forms of affective resistance that might come to pass. While one's plantation, or Richmond Virginia, or the entirety of the South might soon be conquered, citizens can still remain faithful in their affective contracts to the Confederacy through practicing unremitting love.

Nineteen days later the war was over. While this final message certainly sparks with indignation, Davis would not return to these defiant affects until years after the war. In the interim months, as he faced the possibility of court-martial and capital punishment, his tone changed quite abruptly. Indeed, Davis could learn something about determination from Emily LeConte, as after surrender Davis's unconquerable convictions have rapidly melted away. In a letter to his wife Varina, Davis considers the terms of surrender: "On one hand is the long night of oppression which will follow the return of our people to the 'Union'; on the other the suffering of the women and children."⁴¹ The two sides that he presents are not really opposed at all but synonymous. Even here one can see a window into Davis's psyche where, in lieu of any more choices he begins to create them out of thin air. There are only consequences to endure now. Though Davis fears that continuing the war will prolong the suffering of the Confederate people, LeConte's diary proves that at least some women found the return to the Union to be a similar kind of suffering.

What one sees here is that while Lost Cause defiance might have been in its infancy at the very end of the war, even the Confederacy's staunchest figurehead and defender

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jefferson Davis to Varina Taylor Davis, 23 April 23 1865, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*.

could not keep up his confident exhortations for very long. It is no surprise that the Lost Cause really begins to come to life until after Reconstruction. In some ways this marks the enduring half-life of something like defeat. This interim was not only one of political shame and military rule, but also, as one can see in Davis, a long period of affective catastrophe where consciously cultivated emotions such as indignation and faithfulness are insufficient defense when external events and socially circulated suffering come calling.

These moments of aphasia are a strange yet not uncharacteristic facet of Confederate historiography after the war. Indeed, internal inconsistencies and dizzying affective responses become essential in Confederate life writing. Like Davis, former Confederate commander Jubal A. Early would call for emotional resistance to what he termed Northern occupation throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Often credited by historians as one of the foundational figures in producing the cultural mythology of the Lost Cause, Early had originally opposed Southern secession and only joined the military at the last minute.⁴² As a commander, he was known to be hard-fighting yet incompetent. Lee, in his letter relieving Early from command for losing his entire force at the battle of Waynesboro, described the Lieutenant General as “zealous” twice in one paragraph⁴³ --a word that Jefferson Davis also used to describe him.⁴⁴ His zealous attitude didn’t abate after the war either. Soon after the Confederacy fell Early turned his attention to stridently revising the

⁴² William Garrett Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History* (Athens GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 119.

⁴³ Early, *Autobiographical Sketch*, 469.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

historical record. This time he sought to account for the defeat of the Confederacy by making a few already stigmatized officers—such as James Longstreet—the arch villains in his tragic revision. His articles in the *Southern Historical Society* (1876) explain how, unlike Davis's fear, the Confederacy failed not because of lack of military skill, public conviction, or divine favor. Instead, Union victory was totally inevitable from the start: the North's overwhelming advantage in soldiers and material assets necessarily was too much to contend with.⁴⁵ That the Confederacy came so close to winning the war at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg—all with significantly fewer troops than the Union—is a testament to the South's incredible prowess in field command and martial strategy.

After detailing the numbers of soldiers on both sides of the battles and discussing the skill and bravery of General Lee in command of the Army of Northern Virginia, Early turns to the present and considers the state of the South during Reconstruction:

Yet we have not had peace. The heel of the military power, supplanting all civil government, is scarce yet withdrawn from our necks, and our venerated and beloved commander has gone down to his grave with his great heart broken by the sufferings of his people—sufferings which he found himself powerless to relieve. We have just witnessed the elections throughout several States of this "Free Republic," some of which are called "loyal States," superintended by armed agents of the United States Government, backed by United States troops, for the purpose of perpetuating the power of the ruling faction, through the instrumentality of the ballot in the hands of an ignorant and inferior race. This thing has been tamely submitted to by the descendants of men who rushed to arms to resist the stamp act, the tea tax, and the quartering acts of the British Parliament. We look on in amazement at the spectacle presented, conscious that, come what may, we have done our duty in endeavoring to maintain the principles of our fathers, and aware of the fact that we are now powerless and helpless—our only earthly consolation being that derived from a sense of duty performed and the

⁴⁵ Jubal A. Early, "Relative Strength of the Armies of Lee and Grant," *The Southern Historical Society* 2.1 (1876).

conviction that the world will yet learn to do justice to our acts and motives.⁴⁶

Early, ever-zealous, burns with indignation. Eleven years after the war, he—like many Southerners—chafed under the continued presence of the United States Military in the secession states of the South. This fact stings as much as the failure of the Confederacy itself—and might serve as an even more intensified wound for a failed general who felt as if he had something to prove. He deifies the late Robert E. Lee, calling him both a patriarch and a martyr: “our beloved commander has gone down to his grave with his great heart broken by the sufferings of his people—sufferings which he found himself powerless to relieve.” In fact this essay (as well as most of Early’s writings in the 1870s) did much to cement Lee as an idol in Lost Cause Southern culture.⁴⁷ While Early implies that Lee went to his deathbed broken hearted over his defeat, this was very much a fabrication. Unlike Early and the rest of the retrograde Lost Cause proponents, Lee was largely an advocate for social reforms under the New South and had found relative peace and success after the war as president of the newly renamed Washington and Lee College in Lexington, Virginia.⁴⁸

The image of a suffering and broken-hearted Lee, brought to his knees by continued grief over the “sufferings of the people,” is an important invention here. Drawing Lee as heartbroken in his old age, establishes a kind of emotional bribe where because Lee bitterly suffers for you, you must suffer also for him. This certainly Christian inflection will become an essential feature of Early’s pure Southern identity, and, as I show in my last chapter,

⁴⁶ Ibid..

⁴⁷ Gary W. Gallagher, “Jubal A. Early, The Lost Cause and Civil War History, A Persistent Legacy,” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* ed. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2000), 39.

⁴⁸ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 48. See also Peter J. Carmichael’s chapter “New South Visionaries: Virginia’s Last Generation of Slaveholders: The Gospel of Progress and the Lost Cause,” in Gallagher and Nolan, 121.

these sentimental appeals become particularly nuanced by the end of the century.⁴⁹ Instead of acknowledging the South's culpability in initiating the war, Early turns to legendary *American* tropes to prove his point. Implicitly he argues that the South is, in some ways, *more* American than the Northern troops who have installed anything but "freedom." By turning around the symbolic objects of American identity, Early is also showing what it looks like to feel as though one's been failed by history. He was supposed to enter into another kind of typology—to re-embody those heroes of '76 who secured their own independence. Instead, he finds himself "helpless and powerless"—bitter pills.

But what is most confusing—or at least most telling—are his last words. Early claims that "our only earthly consolation being that derived from a sense of duty performed and the conviction that the world will yet learn to do justice to our acts and motives." Here one can see Early contributing to the growing sense of Southern honor—that staple of a Southern secular religion. As Foster explains, "Just as they had declared themselves sinless but felt a need to do so repeatedly, they proclaimed their honor secure and seemed inordinately determined to assert it. Indeed their defensiveness rendered their claims to a secure honor a little less convincing than their affirmations of righteousness."⁵⁰ While Early leans upon European historical virtues like feudal duty and social grace, his final declaration seems somewhat out of place: "the world will yet learn to do justice to our acts and motives." What would it mean to do justice to the South's acts and motives? Maybe here Early wants to say that the Confederacy might gain international recognition as a sovereign nation (a feat that had hinged, at one time during the war, upon their

⁴⁹ See chapter four, note 42. In Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America*, he argues that by the end of the century Lost Cause authors used the rhetoric of sentimentalism to turn the South into the colonized and the North into the colonizer.

⁵⁰ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 26.

performance at Gettysburg).⁵¹ But that was during the war, not after. The law—now, once again, U.S. law—is the guarantor of justice. Instead Early is trying to produce an aspirational nationalist fantasy about the millennial recuperation of the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis would assert that “much of the past is irremediable”—which is to say that not *all* of it is beyond such remediation.⁵² Early, too, insists in his reparative project, proclaiming that “the world will yet learn,” as though nationhood might be bestowed *retroactively* or as if the acts or motives of the war are under any dispute. Maybe this enigmatic promise holds that the continued suffering and rising opposition of the Southern people will serve as a historical lesson in cultural will and political insurgence. Referring to the “world” and not “the North” or “the nation” means that Early is concerned less with real structural upheaval and more with the historical posterity. Really, what he hopes for all along, is a kind of ethical obligation from “the world” to Southern suffering, and, perhaps, his own. Just like Davis’s final missive to the Confederacy, historical projects have become affective ones where the events of the past exist as an occasion for some kind of futurity based upon “unconquerable” hearts.

One could say that Davis and Early are trying to find suitable generic expression to their affective and temporal bewilderment. When Davis writes to the Confederate public, his language, though inflated, is still bolstered by a lyrical tone. When he writes to his wife Varina, all lyricism has died away, replaced instead by an unsteady hand and unfinished thoughts. Early, too, establishing a recuperative historical project, leans on a final lyrical

⁵¹ Britain and the Confederate South shared long-standing economic alliances based upon the transatlantic trade in cotton as well as other resources. As Howard Jones as shown, ironically Britain was waiting for a decisive Confederate victory, but with Gettysburg realized that their intervention would be too little too late. See Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 227.

⁵² Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, ix.

gesture to inspire public sentiment through sentimental gestures. Yet he, like Davis, struggles to make his thoughts coherent because they must rectify penance and defiance. One could call this a kind of defeated sentimentalism, one that needs the abjectness and suffering of the Southern people as fuel but must also reject this suffering for want of honor and pride. In another way this is a temporal problem. What artifice looks like when it attempts to conceive of the present by making the future influence the past.

3.

The language of LeConte, Davis, and Early argues that defeat induces subjects to inhabit an incoherent or non-existent temporality. Though Davis and Early would be the least likely candidates to admit culpability, both have trouble adequately expressing how exactly they conceive of Confederate recuperation after the war. If there is an affect in play here, one might simply call it *dumbfoundedness*—appropriate given their desires to *found* a world and the *dumb* logic that follows. Yet dumbfoundedness is not the only affect that defeat inaugurates. Instead, as their defeat continues to resonate, it begins to break down even the strongest artifices. What would happen if, say, Emma LeConte's diary continued, frozen in its moment, for weeks—months even? What happens when one isn't allowed to begin Early's reparative projects of belonging? This is the purgatory in which Alexander Hamilton Stephens finds himself.

If Jubal Early and Jefferson Davis were central contributors to the Lost Cause, Davis's former Vice-President Alexander Hamilton Stephens might be considered one of its most famous critics. Stephens was one of the more moderate and conciliatory proponents of reunification after the war—calling for the South to adopt the terms and conditions of Reconstruction. Stephens was always politically distant from Davis (Stephens strongly

decried secession and war),⁵³ and the president and the vice-president were completely at odds by the final year of the Confederacy.⁵⁴ Regardless, Davis, Stephens, and all other major military commanders and civil officials faced an uncertain future after the war. While Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, would eventually become quite lenient toward former Confederates, during the war he took a hard-nosed approach to the question of Southern Reconstruction and the allowance of Confederates back into the Union—a thought that might have crossed Stephens mind.⁵⁵ The highest-ranking Confederate officials were taken into custody in the weeks following Appomattox. Alexander H. Stephens was transported to Fort Warren in Boston Harbor where he spent five months awaiting his sentence. In prison he kept a journal of his days—a book later published in 1910 as his *Recollections* that serves as an astonishing record of the emotional trial of defeat and imprisonment.

Ten days after Emma LeConte seethed over the destruction of her city, Alexander H. Stephens began his diary. The record quickly became a map of his affective states—moving from indignation, to peace, to despair, and then sadness. During his first night in captivity Stephens gazes past his cell window contemplating how “sorely oppressed” he is at heart with the “full realization with myself among the victims.”⁵⁶ He continues by thinking, “how strange it seems to me that I should thus suffer” and finally concluding that “In all, I have done nothing but what I thought was right. The result, be it what it may, I shall endeavor to meet with resignation.”⁵⁷ This question of *righteousness* will overcome Stephens in the

⁵³ Randall and Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 139.

⁵⁴ Stephens, *Recollections*, 521.

⁵⁵ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 43.

⁵⁶ Stephens, *Recollections*, 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

following weeks. On numerous occasions he contemplates what he did to deserve the life he finds himself living, pondering: "I do not see that I could have acted more rightly or more in accord with duty, or that I should act differently under like circumstances if my life was to go over again"⁵⁸ and then a few days later declaring "I do not feel myself morally responsible or accountable" for the war.⁵⁹ Some time after this Stephens insists that "... I do feel that I have labored more during my feeble, suffering life for the comfort and happiness of others than for my own."⁶⁰ But the longer he stays in prison, the more doubt he begins to feel about his moral credibility. These defiant statements of moral rectitude turn into questions: "Did I not at all times act the part of a father to the poor? And have I not often searched out cases of distress?"⁶¹ As well as: "What have I done that I should receive such treatment? Did I bring on the war?"⁶²

In many ways this line of probing self-conscious interrogation is not unexpected. The consequences of the war and the condition of his confinement would be enough to drive even the most innocent, now held captive, to question how they could have strayed so far as to be incarcerated with only vain hope for parole. Indeed, Stephen's diary highlights some of the essential qualities of the genre of autobiography. Though there is always a question as to whether it is appropriate to read something like a prison diary as art, fiction, or factual record, my access to Stephen's diary doesn't require an answer one way or the other. As Nancy Miller has claimed, in the field of autobiographical studies (or *autobifictionography* or *auto/biography* or simply *life writing*) authors "go public with

⁵⁸ Ibid., 177.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 201.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 266.

⁶¹ Ibid., 291.

⁶² Ibid., 324.

private feelings” and in so doing produce a “relational” self to be made legible for public opinion.⁶³ This kind of speech act becomes a “complicated acknowledgement” that the writer has “ethical obligations to others”—obligations that cannot be shirked.⁶⁴ While, as Philippe Lejeune remarks, any life writing may be “shrouded in inventional and fictional technique” it nevertheless still “implies...an authentic revelation” to the author’s life.⁶⁵ Regardless of the artifice—or even because of it—contemporary readers can still see a man performing dire acts of writing in relation to personal catastrophe. And as Miller says, in this process of survival, through autobiography, ““You conjure the reader to prove that you are alive.”⁶⁶ Stephens finds, as he sits in prison, that the great artifice of his representative life begins to erode under the psychological pressures of isolation and privation. The more he thinks the more he questions how his religious and social institutions have failed to produce the kind of success he thought to be all but guaranteed to a man of his social, economic, and moral pedigree.

For Stephens, reconciling present conditions with personal convictions proves difficult. His initial resolve is worn down by endless hours of isolated contemplation. He reads the newspaper daily—at times recording lengthy responses to accusations made in the press; he tracks his spending, makes inventories of his belongings, and quibbles about the price of provisions; he logs what and when he eats; he worries about his failing health; he dreams, often, about his brother. Amidst this ongoing chronicle, Stephens lapses into sudden moods of loneliness, loss, and abject. On May 27th, Stephens “wept bitterly” as

⁶³ Nancy Miller, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir,” *PMLA* 2007, 544.

⁶⁴ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁶ Miller, “The Entangled Self,” 545.

“words fail to express the soul’s anguish.⁶⁷” When he describes looking out upon a scene of Boston Harbor “a deep, sad voice seemed to come up from its silence, responsive to the melancholy brooding in my heart. To me all things in nature looked sad.⁶⁸ This great affect that has inflected his perception lingers. A few days later, Stephens would be in conversation with his jailor when “recollections of home, and remembrance of kind attentions I have ever had when sick, rushed upon me so suddenly that with such force that before I was aware of it, I was weeping.⁶⁹ His uncontrollable weeping continues through the remainder of the day: “The crevasse was broken and the current continued to flow in spite of all my efforts to stop it. [...] Everything around seemed sad. I looked out upon the far-off sky; the fogs and clouds are now gone; but the sky looked as sad as all things else.”⁷⁰ It is not, in his formulation, that he is merely sad. It is that he now inhabits a world of sadness—as if some sort of filter has fallen over his sight and inflected all. And though the kinds of severe emotional and physical trials that Stephens endures alone in his cell are of little surprise, one must question what he means by “sadness.” This is not just misery, not merely depression, not exactly indignation or grief. The fact that sadness is such an amorphous affect is the point. His anguish comes not just from one moment of trauma or one unachievable ideal (such as freedom) but from an entire litany of causes—his family’s hardship, his love for his brother, his resentment over his imprisonment, his frustration over his confinement, as well as his inability to stop the war, his failure to achieve victory, and his failure to be the sort of representative political figure that he had so imagined himself to be.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 133

⁶⁸ Ibid., 338.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 366.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 368.

The question of identification and representativeness persists for Stephens. In his political defeat he looks to historical and religious works—principally the Book of Job—in order to naturalize his life into allegory. This book becomes a sort of shadow-text for Stephens, representing his gross indignation and overwhelming confusion. Job seems to anticipate every feeling he encounters, touching “every chord and fibre” of his heart.⁷¹ Opening his Bible he lands serendipitously on a passage from Job and feels like every line is applicable to him.⁷² The next day he reads the passage again.⁷³ This identification becomes not merely affective but phenomenological: “Read in Job. My spirits underwent the changes of the tide. At low ebb, they chimed in with the sentiments of the third chapter; and they rose to the point of fortitude, patience, hope and faith as I reached the close of the fifth.”⁷⁴ The book echoes his condition while also scripting his feelings through a process of aesthetic engagement. As he reads he attempts to connect with the story’s pedagogy—namely that one must have faith in God despite the cruel and unfair practices of the world. Indeed, Stephens tries to understand his affective burden by turning to others. In addition to Job, Stephens also compares himself to Seneca and Socrates, attracted by their philosophical resignation to suicide in the face of an unjust political apparatus: “I feel as if I can meet death, if such fate as a punishment awaits me, with as much calmness as did Seneca or Socrates.”⁷⁵ Their historical stature and their stoicism matter here. The past provides an account of personal integrity in the face of political failure. In this Stephens finds a kind of typology that might fasten his suffering with a world narrative of the

⁷¹ Stephens, *Recollections*, 290.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 362.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 366

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 139

unjustly defeated. Yet these moments of historical fantasy are not enough to keep him inflated. Even his obsessive rereading of Job may be as much an account of his devotion to the story as it is his insistence to try and make rational sense out of it. His previous defiance begins to erode as he contemplates his situation, saying “Isolated and almost alone in the world, a strange creature of destiny at best, with but few ties to life, why should not I be one of the victims?”⁷⁶ Consider how Stephens says that he is a creature of destiny “at best”—which is to say that he hopes that there is some divine plan for his future. Though it seems that he knows that he may indeed be living in a world bereft of providence and fate. Ruminating over Jefferson Davis, Stephens concludes “I am, with him and thousands of others, a victim of the wreck.”⁷⁷ The pedagogy that Stephens does find, however, is a lesson in being at the bottom. What was Job other than the sorry patsy for God’s petty feud with Satan? The lesson of Job is that suffering happens—sometimes as proof of God’s omnipotent power over the belief of man. Indeed, as Stephens finds, this is “at best.”

When Stephens cannot square his relation to political defeat through religious or philosophical forms of identification, he turns to more experimental forms to recontextualize himself into a new literary order. Indeed, as the meaningful religious and political contexts fail to describe his defeat, he begins compulsively making records. In a way this mirrors how Ben Highmore speaks of lists: appearing “exhaustive and rigorous” but actually quite “systematically unsystematic.”⁷⁸ Stephens, without much contact with the outside world, begins by reproducing his correspondences. Then, about two months in, he starts to record sporadic vignettes where he naturalizes his thoughts into the conventions

⁷⁶ Ibid., 220.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁷⁸ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2001), 84.

of dramatic dialogue. These vignettes often amount to little more than a sort of Socratic dialogue where he gives formal expression to his thoughts on Reconstruction, the late war, and the nature of his involvement in the Confederacy. He adopts the character of *Prisoner* and imagines that he converses with an old friend of the family, *R.M. Johnston*. Here is a short excerpt from one:

Prisoner. That cannot blot the facts from their memory. I was and am willing to accept the fate of war and to abide by it, but to supplicate them for mercy I never shall.

Johnston. You are getting too serious again. I would rather have your humorous vein.

[Enter *Geary* with *Prisoner's* dinner. *Johnston* exits through window of imagination, causing *Prisoner* to laugh at the anxiety depicted on his countenance in his hasty retreat lest he should be seen by *Geary*.]⁷⁹

It's a bit unclear as to whether Stephens laughs at his own face or the face of Johnston. Regardless, this moment suggests that his grasp on reality fades the more he invests himself in his dialogue. There are nine more dialogues like this one in his recollections. Stephens uses the conventions of playwriting to both keep his intellect active and to help narrate his time in prison. Why does Stephens return, every few days, to this sort of genre? Why not merely produce, as he has been doing, either a free-flow of thoughts or a mere description of the events of his day? Conversing with a semi-fictitious confidant and abstracting his identity into the persona of "*Prisoner*", Stephens produces a discursive shift away from his usual essayistic prose. These dialogues allow him to stage arguments and express his ideas through conversational, everyday, speech. But what is so fascinating—or at least what cannot be overlooked—is the purported intention of Stephen's dialogue. For whom does he write? A potential audience after his diary's publication? Or an audience

⁷⁹ Stephens, *Recollections*, 302.

imagined to be sitting on the other side of those iron bars at Fort Warren? Though it is impossible to precisely know, one might say that Stephens slips into these moments of theatricality if only to feel the justification that comes through exemplary performance. Being on stage means being public. Theater, as an aesthetic medium, operates through the undeniability of the bodies on stage and the suspension of disbelief that allows for actors to inhabit characters and for props to achieve—if briefly—animated life. Being *Prisoner* means not only having meaning, but also holding an embodied representative position like he had as Confederate Vice-President.

After several months in prison, Stephens's consternation turns to something like recognition. In his defeated state he begins to imagine who else might share his same feelings. Recounting an interaction with a surgeon, he claims "I have felt here at times much as I have often imagined a well-bred Negro in our country felt toward those who set themselves, in their own estimation, above him. I stood quite upon my dignity as those who seemed to think that it would be condescension on their part to take my hand or offer theirs."⁸⁰ This kind of insight is, in many ways, astonishing. Though Stephens thought himself quite moderate in his treatment of his thirty-five odd slaves,⁸¹ he firmly held (both in his diary and in his previous political platform) that black people were a naturally inferior race.⁸² Yet in spite of this Stephens acknowledges the feeling of being unjustly thought of as inferior and powerless. Through the casual gesture of a handshake Stephens realizes that military officials and surgeons condescend to him. He finds that to be a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 357.

⁸¹ Ibid., 136

⁸² Ibid., 173, 198, 207, 249.

prisoner means to be “no better than” a common conscript.⁸³ And though he might think himself innocent of all charges, the circumstances surrounding his imprisonment are enough to code him as potentially evil, wrong, and different. This is what it feels like to be at the bottom. Reading Ecclesiastes several days after this he decides “adversity makes men better or worse. It is never negative. It is a terrible crucible.”⁸⁴ If he were a firm believer in the teachings of Job, he should well conclude that adversity is a test of faith and that through suffering one is brought to an even humbler and stronger connection with the divine. But Stephens’ conclusion here is much more striking for its honest ambivalence. Adversity makes men better *or worse*. Which is to say that while some men face adversity and are made better, some too are destroyed by it. Identity is mutable when faced with overwhelming odds and sometimes one is destroyed outright by the challenges of life. Notably, Stephens does not say which class he falls into. Maybe this admission, a month later, tips his hand: “We poor mortals show our short-sightedness in nothing more than in choosing what we suppose to be best for us. It may be best for to me remain here – without [my brother]—in this damp low room, on this hard stone floor with all the other discomforts.”⁸⁵

The thought that Stephens has about what it means to be black is, in some ways, an extension of the great paradox of his diary. Recall the trouble that Emma LeConte faced in answering how the divinely mandated South might find itself in the midst of such privation. So too does Stephens inflect this kind of paradox—but through a personal dogma—not a political one. This is a way of saying that for however much surety he seemed to find in

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 456.

identifying himself with history, the nagging specter of loss and defeat might not be so easily extinguished. Stephens considers the governing principle that, heretofore, had served as a personal credo:

A favourite maxim in my life has been, "The world treats a man very much as he treats it," or, "Whoever kicks the world will be apt to be kicked in turn." This was given me soon after my majority, by a man of experience, while I was chafing under some ill usage. I have repeated it to many young persons since. It recurs to me often since I have been here, obtruding itself upon the mind as Job's comforters pressed their consolations on him. The inquiry springs up: "Do you hold to your maxim? If so, must you not admit that you have acted a very bad part toward the world?" With the firmness of Job, I neither make the admission nor repudiate the maxim.⁸⁶

Here lies the very crux of Stephens' dilemma. Throughout his memoirs, he has absolved himself of responsibility for the Confederacy and its loss. Yet regardless of how spotless his record may seem, the weight of failure and the real conditions of captivity have made him reconsider the most basic assumptions he holds. With labored irony Stephens remembers that old maxim by which he lived and with which he produced advice for those who sought his same social and material success. "The world treats a man very much as he treats it" is nothing extraordinary as moral platitudes go—really just a reiteration of Benjamin Franklin's Protestant work ethic where providence rewards the just and the diligent. But Stephens finds that he now sits ignobly outside of the equation. The words "recur to him often" as he sits in prison, acting as "Job's comforters" which would mean that they hound him when they should be comforting him. What happens when the maxim by which one lives becomes, in essence, proof of one's very perdition? Stephens finds mean comfort in mind. The irony is striking—even more so because he knows that he has no answer to this question: "with the firmness of Job, I neither make the admission nor repudiate the maxim."

⁸⁶ Ibid., 146.

Once again he finds comfort in identifying with Job. Yet the difference is that he is *both* Job and his comforters. Following this identification means that Stephens comes to the limits of his self-knowledge. Job's famous "firmness" was his ability to weather the traumas and indignities heaped onto him by God. This firmness marks Job's countervailing faith and serves as a pedagogy for all believers. Importantly, Stephens cannot bring himself to do away with the ideology of the privileged and the powerful. That the world gives back what you put into it is the sort of ethos to which all Americans might like to subscribe but the sort of empty promise that is made too manifestly false in the eyes of the poor, the dark, the weak, and the different. This is always the question that attends not knowing and not having. If Stephens believes that there is a just God who has created a just world, and if he believes that he has acted faithfully to the precepts of such a world, then why does he face such sadness?

In many ways Alexander H. Stephens has struck upon the central condition of what it means to internalize being defeated. For as unwavering he is in reflecting on his moral righteousness, political innocence, and ethical obligations, he still is unable to shake the nagging *feeling*—the affective condition of being at the bottom. At the conclusion of his memoir, when he returns home, Stephens wonders how "the house and lot looked natural and yet withal sadly changed in some respects. I seemed to myself to be in a dream."⁸⁷ One might think back to those frequent moments—like his description of Boston Harbor—when the world was colored by an ineffable sadness. Just as frequently does Stephens recall the many vivid dreams he has of his lost life when incarcerated. So too, now, is his triumphant return home haunted by a mood of alterity. Something just isn't *right* about

⁸⁷ Ibid., 540.

here. Something still feels sad. Something still feels false. This is the unshakeableness of being apart from the world—these are the new colors that he wears.

4.

Stephen's diary ends shortly after he is released from prison. He leaves the reader with a question about how sadness has overwhelmed his usual forms of habituation. Eventually Stephens returned to politics, serving as a House Representative, and later Governor of Georgia. It's impossible to know whether this sadness continued to haunt the man. But Stephens' recollections illustrate the kind of challenges of negotiating the self with the world while living in the medium of defeat. If this personal failure haunts Stephens for the months after the war, then how does one deal with the ghosts of failure for years—decades even? As I alluded to previously, Lieutenant General James A. Longstreet addresses this question as no other figure from the former Confederacy could. Perhaps the most reviled and misconstrued of all Confederate commanders, Longstreet, to this day, is still a contested historical figure. Judith Lee Hallock's *General James Longstreet in the West: A Monumental Failure*—written within the last quarter century—spends most of its energy lambasting the late General; its last line declaring that “his incompetence was exceeded only by his arrogance.”⁸⁸ Why does this man, 150 years after the war, still engender such fervent judgments? The answer to this question begins during the Civil War. Second in command to Robert E. Lee, Longstreet specialized in forward-thinking defensive military tactics and was largely responsible for key victories at Williamsburg, Antietam, and

⁸⁸ Judith Lee Hallock, *General James Longstreet in the West: A Monumental Failure* (Fort Worth: Ryan Place Publishers, 1995), 84.

Fredericksburg.⁸⁹ In spite of his many successes, Longstreet was thought to be stubborn—a trait put him at odds with many other officers in the Confederacy. Towards the end of the war things began to unravel when, angry at the favoritism Lee showed to his fellow Virginians, Longstreet openly criticized the promotion of Braxton Bragg.⁹⁰ Following an unsuccessful independent campaign through Tennessee, Longstreet relieved one lieutenant from duty and attempted to court-martial two others under his authority.⁹¹ Though these court-martials were eventually overturned, his recalcitrance and backbiting compromised the Confederate military command.

Yet it was not his pettiness and insouciance in the Tennessee campaign that would seal his legacy, but his participation at the battle of Gettysburg. In the years immediately following Appomattox, Longstreet found his military character called into serious question by his comrades and the Southern public. In an attempt to pin the failure of the Confederacy on an already compromised individual, former generals William Nelson Pendleton, Jubal A. Early and Fitzhugh Lee (Robert E. Lee's son) embarked upon a literary campaign to blame the defeat of their burgeoning nation on Longstreet's purported hesitance at Gettysburg. They claimed that Longstreet failed to act on Lee's direct orders, waiting until noon to launch an assault that was supposed to begin at sunrise.⁹² In addition, Fitzhugh Lee insisted that Longstreet was solely responsible for not countermanding Pickett's famous charge against an entrenched Union line on the third day of battle. For this, Longstreet bore little responsibility, but great emotional weight. Several accounts suggest that Longstreet, so pessimistic about Lee's order, took a nap during the battle and

⁸⁹ Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*, 19, 26, 37.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 129.

attempted to pass off the decision to advance onto a young artillery officer.⁹³ He returned to battle in time but could not speak the order, instead only indicating “it by an affirmative bow.”⁹⁴ In an article for *The Century* magazine some years later, Longstreet writes:

“Gettysburg was one of the saddest days of my life. I foresaw what my men would meet and would gladly have given up my position rather than share in the responsibilities of that day.”⁹⁵ Though Lee would take responsibility for Pickett’s Charge and the defeat at Gettysburg, Fitzhugh Lee and Jubal Early would help to protect their venerated leader from the tarnish of incompetence. Longstreet was the perfect scapegoat.

The criticism came undeserved though not unexpected. Immediately after the war Longstreet was asked by a local newspaper in New Orleans to weigh in upon the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment—securing the rights of citizenship to all Americans, black or white. In a written response, Longstreet takes a moderate stance on the passage of these new rights, saying, “The acts have been passed, are parts of the laws of the land, and no power but Congress can remove them.” Only by “recognizing the acts of Congress” might the South, in the future, “have Congress correct the error.”⁹⁶ As pragmatic as Longstreet’s opinion was, it grated upon the emotionally charged sensibility of a public whose new world order was being shaken to its core. To make matters worse, Longstreet then accepted the office of Surveyor of Customs in New Orleans from newly elected President Ulysses S. Grant—an old friend from before the war.⁹⁷ Now labeled a *scalawag*, Longstreet unwittingly volunteered himself for the role of “Judas” to Lee’s “Jesus”—providing an

⁹³ H.J. Eckenrode and Bryan Conrad, *James Longstreet: Lee’s War Horse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 203.

⁹⁴ James A. Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co, 1896), 434.

⁹⁵ James A. Longstreet, “Gettysburg: Lee’s Invasion of Pennsylvania,” *The Century Magazine*, February (1887), 632.

⁹⁶ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 636.

⁹⁷ Piston, *Lee’s Tarnished Lieutenant*, 123.

important scapegoat for the religious typology of the Lost Cause.⁹⁸ In 1874 Longstreet led a nearly all-black militia against the Crescent City White League, an armed insurgent group seeking to overthrow the municipal government of New Orleans.⁹⁹ He was wounded, captured, and quickly released but the event had a lasting impact. Shortly thereafter he was labeled a traitor, a coward, an imbecile, and most tellingly, a “Black Republican.”¹⁰⁰

This backstory is essential to unpacking Longstreet’s memoir *From Manassas to Appomattox* (1896). Written at the end of his life, some thirty years after the war, his memoirs offer a direct and impersonal account of his involvement in the Army of Northern Virginia. Throughout, Longstreet provides measured and detailed information. Each chapter ends with a complete roster of the soldiers and commanders under his charge. He carefully refrains from lapsing into lyrical or autobiographical expression. Much of his attention, however, focuses on the many accusations made by those “Knights of the Quill”—the Lost Cause Confederates who had, for many years, heaped so many injuries on his shoulders. One learns surprisingly little about his family life, his home, his children, or his emotions. In a chapter devoted solely to answering Fitzhugh Lee’s accusations of gross mismanagement during the battle of Gettysburg, Longstreet (from the remove of several decades) tackles each claim meticulously and rationally. Even when he is shot through the neck at The Battle of the Wilderness (an injury that significantly affected his health for the rest of his life) Longstreet elides over his colloquy with death with just a few sentences—as if it were immaterial.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁹ Eckenrode and Conrad, *James Longstreet*, 375.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 374.

Maybe this is why, after reading through six hundred some-odd pages of autobiographical narrative readers might be so stymied by the very last lines of Longstreet's book. The final pages summarize his time after the war, briefly noting his infamous response to the New Orleans' newspaper that would cement his reputation for decades to come, while stating a few things about his employment in the intervening years. Longstreet finally concludes with a few words on the family estate he left so many years before in Macon, Georgia and the slave-turned-servant who had attended him and his family since he was a small child. Longstreet writes of this servant, Daniel:

He calls promptly when I visit Macon and looks for "something to remember you by." During my last visit he seemed more concerned for me than usual, and on one of his calls asked,
— "Marse Jim, do you belong to any church?"
"Oh, yes," I said, "I try to be a good Christian."
He laughed loud and long, and said,—
"Something must have scared you mighty bad, to change you so from what you was when I had to care for you."
In a recent letter he sent a message to say that he is getting to be a little feeble.
Blessings on his brave heart!¹⁰¹

Daniel asks Longstreet if he "belongs to any church" and Longstreet replies by saying that he tries to be a good Christian. Why does Daniel preface his observation with the question of whether or not Longstreet belonged to a church? Maybe Daniel fears for the salvation of his former master, believing that Longstreet's soul is now in jeopardy. Raised Episcopalian, Longstreet came back to religion late in life only to find that he had been ostracized by the local New Orleans parish because of his public reputation. He was forced, instead, to join a Roman Catholic denomination.¹⁰² Addressing Daniel's initial question he admits that he

¹⁰¹ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 710.

¹⁰² Eckenrode and Conrad, *James Longstreet*, 377.

tries to follow the moral precepts of the church. To this Daniel responds “Something must have scared you mighty bad, to change you so from what you was when I had to care for you.” Tellingly, Longstreet doesn’t offer any further response. What is going on in these final lines? What kind of moral to the story is this—if it even is one at all?

While it is possible that Longstreet thinks Daniel’s reaction is merely the lighthearted musings of one oblivious to the great historical events, this kind of anecdote is out of keeping with the rest of the memoir. Certainly Longstreet must believe that their colloquy expresses something essential enough to end his memoir here. Daniel finds what the old General thought laid so well hidden. Although Longstreet had become a religious man, Daniel’s initial question implies that he was ignorant of his friend’s recent conversion. When Longstreet responds that he has, indeed, become a good Christian, Daniel laughs not good-naturedly, but maybe bemusedly: laughing at the ways in which even the most stubborn or most impious cannot, ultimately, doubt that the world has compromised them. Daniel already *knows* that the something has changed Longstreet, before the former Confederate has uttered a word. In noting Longstreet’s *change*, Daniel may be alluding to his new piety or, also, his new wretchedness. Affirming that the war scared Longstreet “mighty bad,” Daniel articulates the problem of living after great loss. Longstreet *has* changed; Daniel *sees* this change written on his face though his old master cannot say it himself. Through Daniel, Longstreet suggests that war had altered him maybe, possibly, for the worse—becoming spiritually jeopardized by the events of his life. Failure—that wretched condition of being at the bottom of time—seems to still hang on (or cling to) to him.

Though Longstreet bore little responsibility for the loss of Gettysburg and never deserved the criticism that befell him, he did bear responsibility for other moments. His record was far from spotless. He acted, at times, selfishly, and at other times cowardly. For four years he supported the cause of the Confederacy while, at times undermining its command. He watched men die by the hundreds as they threw themselves against a wall of rage on the third day of Gettysburg.¹⁰³ While stationed in Richmond during the war he requested for his family to join him at the capital, only to watch his two young children suddenly die from scarlet fever.¹⁰⁴ He had been responsible for the death of thousands of men, and, most likely, had been responsible for violence upon scores more civilians. He squandered away a small fortune in a fraudulent real estate endeavor. He lost the use of his voice and his right arm.¹⁰⁵ Such cruelties—deserved or not—must take some toll. In attempting to maintain a sense of himself—be that a sense of integrity, honesty, or moral rectitude—Longstreet instead finds dogmatic opposition, social stigma, and the possibility of damnation. While he found, at the very end of his life, some kind of modest redemption in revised Lost Cause histories of the war, it must not have been enough to temper the final thoughts of his memoir.

Whether by choice or by circumstance, Longstreet was forced out of the powerful sentimentalized ideology of the Lost Cause, the same ideology that had certainly aggrandized such controversial and semi-incompetent figures like Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson to demi-gods. Whether or not Longstreet wanted in, so to speak, is beside the point as the thirty years after the Civil War attest to a man who chose the

¹⁰³ Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 140.

¹⁰⁵ Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*, 152.

difficult business of political pragmatism, cooperation, racial unification, and religious devotion. That Longstreet is not the same person he once was is both a trite platitude and a profound truth. As much as one might imagine that Longstreet dismisses the goodhearted remark of his former slave, the fact that he provides no excuse or posits no interpretation—at the end of a book which was, throughout, a detailed explanation—implies not just that Longstreet has turned back to God in his old age, but that he has indeed changed—whether for better or worse.

In presenting this intimate dialogue with Daniel, Longstreet suggests that he believes that Daniel understands his plight—looking to Daniel not just for companionship but also for solace in that Daniel might possess a deeper knowledge of Longstreet’s own soul. It is impossible to know just how sincere or deep this purported intimacy is between the two. But what matters here is that the exchange occurs not between Longstreet and his kin or a former comrade, but between him and his black servant—a man who had adopted Longstreet’s last name not long after the war.¹⁰⁶ One can say that Longstreet feels the tremendous weight of his defeat—and is continued defeats—hanging about his soul and believes (or projects) that Daniel is the only one who really understands him. (Yet, as always, this leaves open the question of whether Daniel truly reciprocates.)

Thinking back to this chapter’s writers, we recall that Early and Davis quickly acceded to the ideology of the Lost Cause. The conditions of their defeat garble and suspend their ability to tether themselves to the past or the future—but it is difficult for one to say that they learn anything from this. What defeat can do may have been too fugitive to produce the kind of acknowledgement that might lead to an ethical conversion amongst the

¹⁰⁶ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 710.

two diehard Confederates. In this, the Lost Cause's promise of recuperation was very much welcomed by them. During his time in prison, Alexander H. Stephens does learn that he cannot square his personal dogma with his current condition and that *sadness* is the attendant affect that follows when one is out-of-sorts with a world into which one was formerly invested. But Stephens' recollections last a mere five months, leaving one to ask if the burgeoning knowledge he found as a prisoner actually amounted to a lasting newfound subjectivity. Longstreet, however, writes his memoirs after the decades of cumulative defeat and stigma. The lesson expressed at his conclusion suggests that his persistent negotiation of unbecoming—of being made evil, culpable, obscene, and stupid—has divorced him from former friends, foreclosed avenues of achievement, and led him, ultimately, to a moment of purported intimacy reserved only for Daniel. Maybe living in failure has enlarged Longstreet's ethical sensitivities. Maybe failing produces the kinds of ethical insights that promise real radical reconstruction. Maybe there's something to be said in the way that this former Confederate General reads himself—resigns himself—to Daniel. Maybe, in being spiritually compromised, Longstreet has become baser, poorer, meaner, but also maybe larger, cooler, even wiser. And, maybe, he is not just another lost cause.

Chapter Two: Self-Help as Self-Making: The Rhetoric of Black Moods in the Early Twentieth Century

1.

In my previous chapter I asked whether James Longstreet, at the conclusion of his memoir, tacitly asks whether or not he's changed for the better or the worse. Indeed, at the moment of Longstreet's memoir, these kinds of retrograde feelings were an integral facet of the black publishing sphere of the period. Phrases like "you have no business to be discouraged"¹; "Why should the Negro . . . be sullen and not generous, discouraged and not hopeful," and "one of the greatest causes for failure in life is discouragement"² formed an important subtext to black life. These three bromides from three different African American publications of the early 1900s insist that discouragement corrodes optimism, thus preventing black readers from achieving in the emerging world of market capitalism. Yet what was the ground for this mood? Perhaps an editorial from one of the nation's most prominent black newspapers clarifies the point. Responding to recent allegations that higher education had failed to "disquiet the evils of the race," the editorial explains, "The Negro is not naturally lazy, but many of us are discouraged and broken in spirit because knowledge gained and stored-up in physical energy are [*sic*] so often dead capital if bound up in a black skin."³ Discouragement is an index to the difficult phenomenology of blackness. For black readers—especially those living in the South—a corrupt logic underwrites the calculus of success in white, Victorian, Protestant, bourgeois America. Though hard work and sacrifice might promise material and spiritual achievement, for

¹ William Murray, "The Upward Struggle," *The Colored American*, September 1905.

² Joseph R. Gay, and Kelly Miller, *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* (Washington, D.C.: Austin Jenkins Co, 1913), 190.

³ "The Negro's Case in Equity," *The Colored American*, May 12, 1900.

black men and women physical toil and intellectual accomplishment ultimately always becomes “dead capital.” Forty years after the Civil War, a generation of African Americans still struggled for freedom. *Discouragement*, then, names the malignant institutions of power—formal, informal, local, national—that keep black people from political action and social flourishing. By asking what the atmosphere of the present was like for African Americans, one finds answers, for the very first time, from a provocative literary history central to not only to understanding the black experience, but to understanding, more abstractly, the difficulty of living inside of moods, and the impossibility of trying to replace them all together.

This chapter is about how some black writers, readers, and consumers responded to the political defeats of the Jim Crow era by not attempting to change the world, but their attitudes about it. I tell this story by focusing primarily on two self-help guides, produced by and marketed toward black consumers throughout the United States. *The College of Life: or Practical Self-Educator* (1895) and its later cousin *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* (1913), along with similar self-improvement rhetoric from magazines, editorials, and newspapers all attempted to convert discouragement into optimism through practical instruction and moral guidance. By allowing these self-help guides to frame my period of inquiry, I trace a dynamic discourse about optimism as it evolves over the course of twenty years. While W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and their factions proposed different strategies to improve conditions for *all* black people, writers and thinkers such as Kelly Miller, Irvine Garland Penn, and Joseph R. Gay argued that racial advancement comes not through the social but by diligently practicing new regimens of self-maintenance. Here, fighting prejudice was a personal responsibility—not a political one. These manuals

promised to ameliorate feelings of discouragement through self-education rhetoric designed to reform the political subject's intimate attitude to the material world by following Protestant conventions of self-denial. Mostly identical to their white counterparts, black self-help books directly appealed to black readers through specific sections on overcoming the traumas of the past and managing those of the present. This instruction often hinged upon inculcating new emotional attitudes by which readers replaced discouragement with optimism.

Black self-help guides differ from white guides in important ways. White guides, as Judy Hilkey argues, were “part of the cultural apparatus that helped legitimize and establish the hegemony of the new industrial order in the Gilded Age.”⁴ These manuals used Victorian morality to quell readers' anxieties about the emergence of industrialized capitalism in the United States. As communication and transport systems developed, commerce and trade quickly followed suit, leading to unregulated speculation in international markets (often staked upon material resources) that led, ultimately, to a national economy trapped between rapid cycles of boom and bust.⁵ Readers (often men) turned to success manuals to “reconcile [themselves] to the uncertain, sometimes unpromising possibilities” that the future represented.⁶ For readers of black self-help guides, the “incorporation of America”—to borrow Alan Trachtenberg's term—was only one of many sources of anxiety. With the Compromise of 1877, Southern white plantation owners and Northern industrialists joined their economic interests by further exploiting black subjects through sharecropping and wage labor. In response, the Populist Party of the

⁴ Judy Hilkey, *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

1880s challenged the new economic hegemony through labor activism that united poor white and black farmers. Though many black men believed Populism to be the political answer, by the 1890s the party could no longer amass the required political capital to sufficiently challenge the Southern Democrats.⁷ After Populism's defeat came waves of Jim Crow laws throughout the South, whose literacy tests, poll taxes, and legally sanctioned mob violence successfully disenfranchised virtually all black men. Add to this *Plessy v. Ferguson* which further sanctioned already de facto institutionalized inequality and one can see how, by 1895 the future may have looked particularly bleak. As Claudia Tate summarizes, "The frustrated optimism among African Americans of the post-Reconstruction era rapidly became chronic despair, as degenerating race relations descended deeper into the 'nadir' with the advance of the twentieth century."⁸ Against this backdrop of "African American cultural grief," black readers would have purchased black self-help guides already primed with despair or burdened with grandiose expectations.⁹ Accordingly, these manuals offered aphorisms fitted not only to modernity's transformations, but also to this long history of social violence and political malfeasance that had made the present, for African Americans, feel like it did.

To follow this history of black moods, one must first understand the relationship between self-help and uplift literature in the political context at the turn of the century, namely between Du Bois and Washington. By 1901, after his Atlanta Speech and the market success of *Up From Slavery*, Washington, in the eyes of many, had become the spokesman for all African Americans—especially those in the South. Both lauded and criticized for his

⁷ Judith Stein, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," in *Renewing Black Intellectual History*, ed. Adolph Reed and Kenneth Warren (Boulder CO: Paradigm Press, 2010), 41.

⁸ Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15.

⁹ Ibid.

accommodationist program of race relations, Washington was as invested in the economic improvement of black people as he was in their emotional attitudes, repeatedly addressing the social “bitterness” and its threat to incite potentially disruptive political action amongst black people. Du Bois—Washington’s most strident opponent—was equally invested in reforming black affect worlds after so much historical suffering. One need only look to the preface of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) where he famously sneers, “how does it feel to be a problem” to see. Though his book looks to answer this question through diverse methodologies and historical data it also, in more lyrical ways, attempts to answer the obverse too: “how does a problem feel?” In taking up *this* question, this chapter might find a new frame of inquiry into the affective lives of black people of the period.

My claim below is that black self-help guides (along with prominent uplift materials, and other similar self-improvement tracts) reveal a historical problem centered upon social moods. Though seemingly counterintuitive, African American success literature is the best place to find an account of the affects that follow defeat, disenfranchisement, and pessimism. For black self-help guides of this period, making a new self means remaking the reader’s relationship to the world—an alchemy that seeks to turn feelings of discouragement into optimism. As the material will demonstrate, the difficulty of this alchemy proves an important distinction: that discouragement is not an *affect*, but a *mood*. In the language of affect theory, moods constitute an “affective atmosphere” that creates the world in which one finds oneself at any moment. Jonathan Flatley explains, “We only have access to the moods that we find around us, the moods into which we have been educated, and the moods that have been shaped or determined by the concrete historical

context in which we coexist.”¹⁰ This is why Du Bois, in “Strivings of the People” from 1897, claims, “before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systemic humiliation...before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom “discouragement” is an unwritten word.”¹¹ Though he claims that black people, unlike any other race in similar circumstances, are *not* discouraged by their historical circumstances, he is also providing further evidence to my claim that “discouragement” was an essential topic of conversation in black intellectual discourse of the time. Discouragement, apart from more acute affects like despair, sorrow, or bitterness, is intuitive and ubiquitous. In fact, it often sets the stage for these acute affects but is not, in itself, one of them. Following Du Bois, I call “discouragement” a mood to suggest that it is an atmosphere that the black readers of these guides find themselves in. This is why the task of these self-help guides is so difficult—and so interesting. Moods overtake people and not the other way around. Self-help guides answer the problem of discouragement by proposing the impossible: to make a *new mood* of optimism through the language of self-abnegation, patience, and emotional reform. Black self-help implies that *if* there is a political problem it will not be solved in a political idiom but by through a personal one with new feelings for a purportedly new world.

2.

Self-help guides and success manuals developed in the mid-nineteenth century as secularized versions of essentially religious and moral instruction which have existed in

¹⁰ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 16.

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the People,” *The Atlantic*, August (1897): 194 – 197

various forms since ancient Greece. Conduct guides specific to African Americans have been around since the end of the Civil War. Some of the first were printed sermons and religious tracts like Clinton B. Fisks's *Plain Counsel for Freedmen* (1866), and Lydia Maria Child's *The Freedmen's Book* (1865), which offered strident moral precepts for the new class of freed bondsmen. By the end of the century, etiquette guides, civics books, and self-improvement manuals all authored by and published for a black audience competed in a rapidly expanding publishing market.¹² Written for general or specific audiences, these books offered practical instruction in normativity (be it political, racial, or gendered—or often these things combined).¹³ By the 1930s hundreds of guides offered advice on political participation, domestic well-being, business success, and moral improvement.¹⁴ Between 1890 and 1910 African American social strategies proliferated while the success manual genre rapidly flooded the U.S. print market. Of the six non-fiction bestsellers sold between 1870 and 1910, two were success manuals: Thomas L. Haines' and Levi W. Yaggy's *The Royal Path of Life* (1879) and Frank Channing Haddock's *The Power of the Will* (1907).¹⁵ The market success of white self-help guides can be attributed to new methods of sale and distribution. Beginning in the 1870s, publishers discovered a burgeoning consumer base in rural, agrarian, and predominantly white counties throughout the United States. Door-to-door subscription agents could make serious profits by selling these massive, handsomely constructed—and often exorbitantly priced—guides to rural whites who lived days away

¹² See Kaestle and Radway, *History of the Book in America: Volume Four*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004)

¹³ See Charles F. Doyle, *The American Citizen*, (1896) and *The Citizen and the Neighbor* (1893).

¹⁴ The genre of black self-help has since grown in scope and profit to include popular contemporary titles such as Dennis Kimbro's *Think and Grow Rich: A Black Choice* (1991), Steve Harvey, *Act Like a Success, Think Like a Success* (2010), T.D. Jakes, *Instinct: The Power to Unleash Your Inborn Drive* (2014). For an account of Oprah Winfrey's prolific self-help empire see Trystan T. Cotten and Kimberly Springer ed. 2010, *Stories of Oprah: The Oprahfication of American Culture*.

¹⁵ Hilkey, *Character is Capital*, 81.

from the nearest bookseller.¹⁶ In light of this success, prominent black intellectuals such as Irvine Garland Penn and Kelly Miller joined with a host of black publishing houses to print and sell books like patterned on this model of white subscription sales—books like *The College of Life* and *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People*.¹⁷

Subscription agents sold *The College of Life: or Practical Self-Educator* (1895) door-to-door throughout rural counties ranging from Texas to Indiana. Without historical records it is difficult to know precisely who these subscribers were. Yet some material clues might shed some light. Both *The College of Life* and *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* were marketed as prized family volumes, printed on fine paper, bound in leather, and embossed in gold. Cloth-bound editions of *Progress and Achievements* sold for \$1.50 in 1913—an amount approaching \$35 in today’s market.¹⁸ It’s likely *The College of Life* sold for a similar amount. For a rural black family supported by agrarian labor, \$1.50 in 1895 represented about two days worth of work.¹⁹ These were expensive books to be sure, but they were priced similar to other competing subscription books like biographies, poetry collections, and encyclopedias.²⁰ Given the handsome binding, ample illustrations, and accompanying free “life size” picture of Booker T. Washington, *The College of Life* would have appealed to the literate, semi-literate, and illiterate alike.²¹ It’s hard to say exactly how many copies were sold, but surviving editions suggest that its sales must have

¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷ For books on the ethos of success in the United States see, Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (1954); Moses Rischin, *The American Gospel of Success*, (1965); John Calwetti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (1965); Joseph L. DeVitis, and John Martin Rich, *The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream*, (1996); Dolby, Sandra K. *Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them* (2005).

¹⁸ Price found in a review from *The Broad Axe*, May 6, 1916.

¹⁹ I derived this estimate from Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy 1865 – 1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 99.

²⁰ Radway and Kaestle, *History of the Book in America*, 65.

²¹ Howard, Chandler & Co. advertised this free picture as a way to entice potential subscription agents.

been strong; it was reprinted frequently between 1895 and 1913, from Denver in the West, New York and Philadelphia in the North, Cincinnati and Chicago in the Midwest, to Richmond, Virginia and Bessemer, Alabama in the South.²² The consumers may have been just as varied. Though *The College of Life* seems to appeal to aspiring middle-class black families looking to adopt the material trappings and social attitudes of contemporary white bourgeois society, it may have been equally marketed to low-income workers such as farmers, sharecroppers, and wage laborers who saw *The College of Life* as the important first step towards the black bourgeoisie.

After opening its ornate cover, a reader would find a panoply of practical and moral instruction. Touted as a “manual of self-improvement for the colored race,” *The College of Life*’s six hundred-pages are divided, curiously, into two parts, the “Practical Self-Educator” and “The Proper Conduct of Life.” “The Practical Self-Educator” begins with a summary of black progress over the past thirty years and then, over one hundred pages, offers forty odd short biographies on important black men and women—from Alexander Crummell to Phillis Wheatley. Interspersed throughout are short reports on successful black colleges and industrial schools, black military participation and notable servicemen, black involvement in Northern industry, primary and secondary education, the growing professional classes, and the rise of black literature. After this comes a subsection titled “The Guide to Success” aimed at cultivating important virtues specifically for black readers (I will say more on this later). Even early on, this celebration of the black accomplishments is meant to speak universally to the possibility of optimism. Pages of social statistics are

²² For the numerous publisher imprints that I found, an equal number of copies carry no publishing information either. Based on library records, I suspect these later editions to date from 1913. *The College of Life* was also repackaged as *The Southern College of Life* printed in 1902.

designed to convince readers of the “commendable showing” and “marvelous and miraculous” progress of the race.²³ All while obliquely disputing countervailing setbacks like Alabama’s Sayre Law (1893) and Virginia’s Walton Act (1894), which established white supremacy through legal disenfranchisement.²⁴

The *College of Life* is only one example of similar black self-help materials common to the late 1890s and early 1910s. Books like *Evidences of Progress Among Colored People* (1902), and *The Progress of the Race* (1897) used biography supplemented with appealing lithographs and illustrations to morally instruct black readers. Other works, such as *The White Side of a Black Subject* (1897) presented biography under the guise of historical improvement, from Crispus Attucks to the present. Similarly, encyclopedic volumes such as *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading* (1897), and *Twentieth Century Negro Literature or a Cyclopedia of Thought* (1902) combined biographical portraits, optimistic statistics on black society, and religious morals, with handsome lithographs of virtuous black laborers. By the 1910s readers could find other black self-help guides like *Life Lines of Success* (1913), and *Life’s Demands: or, According to Law* (1916).²⁵ All of these manuals fashioned their self-improvement pedagogy on representative examples of racial progress while also emphasizing the continuity of traditions, thoughts, and values amongst the race’s most successful members. In relying so uniformly on biography and personal anecdote, these books help to legitimate the burgeoning middle class as leaders and interpreters for the vast remainder of poor, impoverished, black Americans. Though there are scores of

²³ Joseph R. Gay, Henry Davenport Northrop, and Irvine Garland Penn, *The College of Life, or Practical Self-Educator* (Chicago: Chicago Publication and Lithograph Co., 1895), 30.

²⁴ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disenfranchisement in the South 1888 – 1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 16.

²⁵ *Life Lines of Success* and *Life’s Demands: or, According to Law* were both written by Sutton Griggs perhaps most famous for his earlier novel *Imperium In Imperio* (1899)—among others.

others not mentioned here, most of these books were published through a coterie of important black publishers.²⁶ The J.L. Nichols Company published and distributed several of the above-mentioned titles including *The College of Life*. Austin N. Jenkins, vice president at J.L. Nichols during the 1890s, eventually left to begin a publishing house under his name, the Austin N. Jenkins Co. which published Kelly Miller and Joseph R. Gay's black self-help guide, *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People*. During these decades the black publishing industry boomed, printing fiction, non-fiction, secular, and religious books in droves.²⁷ The diversity of titles alone demonstrates that these books must have resonated with many readers—or potential readers—during the period.

Most of *The College of Life* was plucked wholesale from a white success manual called *The Golden Manual*. This is no surprise. Reprinting was common practice at the turn of the century. No surprise also because both books were compiled by Henry Davenport Northrop—a white editor and one of the three authors responsible for *The College of Life*. Having penned over fifty books ranging from biographies of William T. Sherman and Dwight Moody, to histories of the Civil War and the Alamo, and several very popular success manuals, Northrop was well acquainted with both the publishing industry and the genre of self-improvement. Irvine Garland Penn and Joseph R. Gay offered the knowledge, and possibly the impetus, to design and market *The College of Life* to a specifically black audience. A relatively obscure figure, Joseph R. Gay worked as an author and editor with the Austin N. Jenkins publishing company on a number of similar racial improvement

²⁶ Walter A. Friedman, "The African-American Gospel of Business Success" in *Black Conservatism: Essays in Intellectual and Political History* ed. Peter Eisenstadt, (New York: Routledge, 1999): 135.

²⁷ Louis R. Harland and Raymond W. Smock, *The Booker T. Washington Papers Volume 8: 1904 – 6* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 40.

guides and pamphlets throughout the 1900s and 1910s.²⁸ The better-known Irvine Garland Penn began his professional life in 1886 as editor of the *Lynchburg Laborer*, before becoming an educator and superintendent at a number of secondary schools in Virginia.²⁹ In 1891 he published the first history of the black press called *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (1891), and in 1895 he was asked to organize the Negro Hall at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition—the same year that *The College of Life* was first published.

The second half of *The College of Life* reveals Penn and Gay's contributions to the volume. Here things get a bit strange. At the beginning of the section titled "The Proper Conduct of Life" the book's pagination starts over—on page seventeen. This second part is further divided into six books on domestic topics and proper Victorian gender conventions. Book One concerns "The Rules of Etiquette for All Occasions" and offers practical mores on being "A True Gentlemen" and "A True Lady," correct forms of salutation, proper conduct for dinner parties, weddings, and funerals as well as general guidelines for polite conversation and written correspondence. Book Two details the particular custom of Victorian courtship, marriage, and gender roles. Book Three offers advice on health while Book Four concerns business—providing universal templates for business correspondence, contracts, living wills, deeds, resolutions and petitions, as well as parliamentary rights, and forms for the "Constitutions of Lyceums." Book Five concerns Victorian domesticity with passages on the "Care and Culture of House Plants" and "The Art of Writing Poetry with Practical Instructions for Composing Verses." Finally, Book Six is a poetry miscellany from Petrarch to Wordsworth.

²⁸ Ibid., 141.

²⁹ Joanne K. Harrison and Grant Harrison, *The Life and Times of Irving Garland Penn*, (Xlibris Corp, 2000), 10.

In order to weather a callous and ambiguous world, both black and white self-help guides relied upon Protestant moral instruction stripped of its religious garb. These guides often overlooked labor tensions and gender disparity by naturalizing both of these social pressures into a neat chain of being from workingmen to industrialists, and true women to true men.³⁰ Many middle-class male readers would not have been interested in reforming capitalism's essential structural problems, nor would they care much about its attendant issues—social welfare, civil rights, women's rights and so on. Instead readers relied upon strictly Protestant ideals of self-denial and therapeutic self-management to make the world coherent.³¹ Likewise, black self-help guides intoned identical practices based equally upon white Protestant virtues. Though black self-help guides were essentially secular guides, many were published and authored by men religiously affiliated with the A.M.E. or Baptist church.³² Unsurprising as, after Reconstruction, these religious institutions took over important social welfare functions that the state had yet to take up.³³ By 1895, many middle-class black congregants had adopted white Victorian edicts of self-denial and polite comportment—the same training offered in secular language by *The College of Life*.³⁴ Thus for white or black readers, moral rectitude influenced by the bland language of Protestantism was paramount in negotiating the mounting challenges of modern society. Most importantly, while religion provided the foundation for much of black and white self-help's moral language, rhetorical authority ultimately stemmed from reason, scientific theory, and often claims towards "common sense." Self-help depends upon the belief that

³⁰ Hilkey, *Character is Capital*, 91.

³¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), xiv.

³² The famous personages listed in these self-help guides are disproportionately religious officials.

³³ William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 255.

³⁴ *The College of Life*, 255.

the self is not only mutable but essentially manmade. In this way, secular instruction and religious instruction were both reducible to the “Gospel of Wealth.”³⁵

Here one can begin to understand how black self-help guides oriented themselves to a post-Reconstruction world. Just as white self-help guides taught that personal maintenance of everyday habits could negotiate the anxieties of modern life, black self-help guides used similar language to produce the foundations for a new black citizenry. These guides were not interested in combating Jim Crow by making black readers adequate to the political promises of liberalism. Instead they were “more concerned with emulating bourgeois culture.”³⁶ The moment for electoral activism was effectively over. By 1895, approximately 90 percent of African Americans lived in poverty.³⁷ Black citizenship was still a fledgling category at best: expressly black institutions like Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and the black press had yet to fully develop and the Harlem Renaissance was still more than twenty years away.³⁸ Black self-help manuals moved readers past daily prejudice and economic hardship. This is why the aims of black self-help are so important to define. It may seem as though *The College of Life*, in its hundreds of pages on housekeeping, reflects the domestic fantasies found in black fiction of the 1890s—novels which often depicted morally virtuous women overcoming adversity to settle into domestic bliss.³⁹ Yet as Claudia Tate expertly shows, these seemingly utopian fantasies actually

³⁵ Adolph Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61.

³⁶ Friedman, “The African-American Gospel of Business Success,” 142.

³⁷ Martin Kilson, *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 53.

³⁸ See Dorothy Gay, “Crisis of Identity: The Negro Community in Raleigh, 1890 – 1900,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 50.2 (1973): 121 – 140.

³⁹ Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 19.

promoted a “liberational agenda of citizenship.”⁴⁰ The “ideal feminine citizenship” portrayed in these utopian novels was meant to intervene in contemporary politics by opening female readers to the possibility of collective action.⁴¹ Conversely, black self-help’s domestic instruction does not offer the possibility of politics, but its very opposite: a turning away from political dead ends to focus on other avenues of becoming. Hence *The College of Life*’s domestic education offers racial-improvement as self-improvement—a way to promote constructive individualization while black participatory politics were being destroyed on a yearly basis.

To see this turn one can look to *The College of Life*’s “Guide to Success.” This inset guide scripts the necessary forms of affective attunement for black readers to manage a damaged and damaging world. Spanning some one hundred pages, the “Guide to Success” features exemplary black biographies and small essays on topics like “honesty,” “self-reliance,” and “perseverance.” Here a history of inequality gets transformed into easily remembered virtues. Take for example this passage on patience:

Most of us have had troubles in all our lives, and each day has brought more evil than we wished to endure. But if we were asked to recount the sorrows of our lives, how many could we remember? How many that are six months old should we think worthy to be remembered or mentioned? To-day’s troubles look large, but a week hence they will be forgotten and buried out of sight.⁴²

Readers are encouraged to gain some perspective and let go of the past—as it so happens, at the height of lynching in the United States. To move past this kind of grief, the “Guide to Success” instructs readers to disassociate from their personal history in order to start the process of personal renovation. This language is common to the genre. *Sparkling Gems of*

⁴⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁴¹ Ibid., 128.

⁴² *The College of Life*, 127.

Race Knowledge similarly asks its readers to “guard against “ the “unnecessary recollection” of slavery.”⁴³ Advice like this flattens intimate memories of heartbreak and discharges potential activism by redefining these troubles as merely everyday obstacles. By 1895 a majority of Southern state legislatures had ratified constitutional provisions designed to keep non-whites away from the ballot box.⁴⁴ A phrase like “how many sorrows could we remember,” proposes that loss happens all the time and that this shared feeling of discouragement isn’t so bad. To reconcile readers with the racial order of white America, the monumental gets turned into the commonplace.

In fact, this language of disremembering links *The College of Life* to Booker T. Washington’s enormously successful uplift manual, *Up From Slavery* (1901). Commanding the attention of both white and black America, Washington’s book promises good “race relations” by convincing black men and women to put aside their hard feelings about slavery in exchange for a fair chance and fresh start. His catchword for these hard feelings is “bitterness”—a word that encapsulates the ongoing saga of violence and subjugation.⁴⁵ Historian Michael Rudolph West explains that “‘bitterness’ is a catch-all for, among other things, all types of political activity that directly address the conflict between black people’s interests and white people’s interests.”⁴⁶ In effect, the above advice from *The College of Life* summarizes Washington’s project in *Up From Slavery*—to “write an alternative history of slavery in line with the politics of the turn of the century.”⁴⁷ In trying to shape black readers to the market demands of white society, both authors intimate that any program to

⁴³ James T. Haley, *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading* (Nashville: J.T. Haley and Co., 1897), 13.

⁴⁴ Disenfranchisement swept through different states in waves between 1885 and 1910. See Richard H. Pildes, “Democracy, Anti-Democracy, and the Canon,” *Constitutional Commentary* vol. 17 (2000).

⁴⁵ See Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Doubleday and Co, 1901), 16, 20, 164.

⁴⁶ West, 91).

⁴⁷ Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 91.

better the race—be it social uplift or self-improvement—must amend, or eliminate, the affects circulating through black America. This historical bitterness threatened to derail reconciliation between the races by generating other acute affects like resentment and indignation, which if left unchecked might spur black men to political activism. If bitterness leads to political action, then discouragement describes subjects stuck outside of politics altogether.

Though bitterness may have been Washington's problem, discouragement belonged seemingly to everyone. As *The College of Life* demonstrates, writing against it is more difficult than it seems. By asking readers to emotionally detach from the past this language also illustrates the risks of conjuring such unaccountable feelings altogether. If, by *The College of Life's* claim, introspection reveals one's cares as trivial, what would stop it from revealing the opposite as well? What kinds of "everyday evils" might readers have endured in 1895? A father commits suicide after his forty-acre crop is destroyed by tobacco worms; a black husband is imprisoned for eloping with his white bride; an elderly woman, an infant, a girl, and an adolescent boy are whipped, dragged, and burned alive all for purportedly stealing a bible.⁴⁸ These are just a few of the tales of Jim Crow that circulated in African-American newspapers from Iowa to Florida. For recalcitrant readers—or merely informed ones—this moment of banal optimism ironically names how historical, social, and personal traumas do not simply fade into obscurity but continue to foretell those to come under Jim Crow. So when the "Guide to Success" asks for its readers to "bury today's

⁴⁸ I've culled these accounts from newspapers of the time. For the entries, see "Criminal Doings," *Broad Axe*, 19 Sept. 1895; "Brief Bits of News," *Parsons Weekly Blade*, Parsons KS, 30 Nov. 1895; "Whipped to Death," *Parsons Weekly Blade*, Parsons KS, 14 Dec. 1895.

troubles”, where else could these troubles go but to the family plot out back, next to the make-shift graves of the young and the old—deaths speeded on by the curse of history?

How can a book convince its readers in the millennial potential of the future while also carefully speaking to—or around—the ongoing cruelties of Jim Crow? Essentially, black self-help language of the period always carried with it a degree of irony—sometimes obvious and sometimes obscured. Consider how *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* (1913) proposes this kind of optimistic language. The book declares that “the light is breaking, the black clouds are disappearing, and soon, if you keep in the race, you will find the land of sunshine and happiness. Don’t give up the ship as long as there is timber to float on.”⁴⁹ As platitudes go, this one is banal. Yet, the metaphor might carry a different valence for a black audience than a white one. Instructing a reader to optimistically hold fast to the figural wreckage of black life is more than merely difficult advice. If one is buoyed only by a piece of wood, then invariably the ship is already lost. Instructing a *black* reader to support him or herself on this wreckage unintentionally alludes to a dark history of slavery that haunts every soaring promise and every mundane metaphor. A look at the stern of this proverbial galleon might prove that the ship was none other than a slave-carrying vessel, transporting its unwarranted human cargo to a new future in the Americas. The historically sensitive might find that in a metaphor for perseverance the authors have, in fact, only conjured the traumas of the past—reminding the reader that he or she is always already foundered on the rocks of race and class even before setting foot on the shores of a new

⁴⁹ Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 169.

world. Metaphors become treacherous when attempting to make sense out of the mood of discouragement.

Though published seventeen years later, *Progress and Achievements* shares a literary inheritance with *The College of Life*. Joseph R. Gay, co-author of *The College of Life*, chose Kelly Miller to collaborate with on another self-improvement book. His choice was a shrewd one. Miller was one of the most prominent black intellectuals of the time. Originally a mathematician, Miller established the department of Sociology at Howard University before becoming Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, where he overhauled the school's curriculum and brought the university to national prominence.⁵⁰ In addition, he co-edited *The Crisis* with W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote for newspapers and journals such as *The Dial*. As a public figure, Miller was known for unequivocally condemning mob violence throughout the South and challenging racial prejudice in American society. Speaking to the 1898 graduating class at Howard, he cautioned, "Race prejudice is as much a fact as the law of gravitation. . . . Do not be discouraged, then, that all the wrongs of the universe are not righted at your bidding."⁵¹ Even early in his career, Miller demonstrates that though he believed civilization would eventually catch-up to an enlightened understanding of racial harmony, race prejudice in itself was a "law" like gravitation: it could be worked against or negotiated, but never broken.

Like *The College of Life* before it, *Progress and Achievements* offers histories of illustrious African Americans and a thick miscellany of reprinted material on homemaking,

⁵⁰ August Meier, "The Racial and Educational Philosophy of Kelly Miller, 1895-1915." *The Journal of Negro Education* 29.2 (1960): 121 – 127.

⁵¹ Kelly Miller, "Address to the Graduating Class of the College Department, Howard University," Access through the Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/miller/>

etiquette, courtship, health, and finances. Similarly, a portion of the book is explicitly dedicated to racial success, and similarly it struggles to get its language right. The authors remind the reader “What you are called today, is nothing tomorrow, if you hold your position in the world’s respect.”⁵² Then, departing from platitudes, the book offers a script in the event of racial prejudice. In confronting “vulgar epithets” readers are asked to recite this succinct phrase: “According to the United States Constitution and all the laws thereunder, my color has been erased and I am an American to all intents and purposes, the same as you.”⁵³ To claim equality, the slogan argues not that color is irrelevant, but that has been “erased.” This is as much a statement of political rights as it is of ontology. Notice how the identity category of “American” is an unqualified assertion with the words “to all intents and purposes.” I am *basically* American, or I am *nearly enough* American. The anxiety that fuels these words is the same anxiety that knows just how feeble a phrase like this would be in the face of a lynch mob.

Maybe this naïve appeal to the Fourteenth Amendment makes more sense in context. A section dedicated to overcoming racial oppression argues, “Every Colored American who reads this book may feel assured that the end is in sight, and that his children will witness a great diminution in the slights put upon his race and color.”⁵⁴ A few pages later it concludes, “Bitter prejudice is becoming less aggravating. The rough edges of personal opposition are being worn down smooth, and in the course of less than another generation, the prejudices against Colored Americans will be almost a horrid dream of the

⁵² Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 36.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

past.”⁵⁵ How can it be that fifteen years after Kelly Miller insisted in his valedictory address that racial prejudice is an intractable law of nature, both he and Gay could claim that this same prejudice was “diminishing” into the “dream of the past”? Though by 1913 nearly all black men had been disenfranchised from political office, the ranks of the black urban middle-class were growing everyday. Bolstered by a growing system of segregated secondary and post-secondary education, black professionals and entrepreneurs were achieving marked economic gains.⁵⁶ Statistically, the number of black men lynched in the United States between 1900 and 1910 averaged seventy-five a year, down from the high watermark of the 1890s which averaged 111 reported cases annually—better but disturbing nonetheless.⁵⁷ And though the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was made nearly twenty years before the publication of *Progress and Achievements*, segregation was already de facto in most of the South, making the ruling merely a reflection of the sentiment of the day.⁵⁸ These facts alone cannot necessarily account for Gay and Miller’s cheeriness. For us contemporary readers it is easy to be baffled by their optimism, especially in light of the decades of continued social and political unrest that still have only produced modest gains. But possibly for the authors—members of this elite professional class themselves—it may have been hard to tell at the time what exactly the future held. The kind of fantasy supporting their rhetoric of is neither wholly naïve nor wholly cynical.

This optimism does not stop at declaring the waning of racial prejudice. The 1902 compendium *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* instructs readers that instead of being “discouraged” they should “confidently expect... to attain the full measure of manhood as a

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶ Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3, 120.

⁵⁷ See the “Tuskegee University Archives Repository” for statistics on lynching, found at tuskegee.edu

⁵⁸ Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*, 256.

race in this 'land of the free and home of the brave.'"⁵⁹ Similarly, *Progress and Achievements* insists "that the whole of the United States is the fair field for the exploitation by Colored Americans"⁶⁰ and that "unless a man is born with a silver spoon in his mouth, well provided by his ancestors with a goodly supply of this world's goods, there is no royal road to anything."⁶¹ Finally they explain, "Why do some men succeed and others fail, assuming that they all start out on the same plane equally well equipped? The reason why can not be told, it lies in the man himself, it is his character."⁶² Ah, character *not* conditions. These kinds of dismissals are peppered throughout this and similar books. The claims that most don't have a "silver spoon in their mouth," that the United States is a "fair field," hold to a fantasy about the competitive marketplace markedly out of step with reality. Inequality doesn't just exist but, by 1913, has been codified into law under the guise of "separate but equal." Regardless of industrial capitalism's economic promise or the many gains made by black men and women in medicine, business, and education, the United States was not a "fair field" in the least. Take the caveat "unless a man is born with a silver spoon in his mouth." Though the book wants readers to dismiss this remark as either irrelevant or impossible, in fact many Americans were born with silver spoons in their mouths—the silver spoons of a racial privilege that allowed white men to advance with fewer challenges through American society.

The frustration one might find in squaring lived experience with this utopian language testifies to the designs of black self-help. These are not sociology texts, and though they may make pretenses towards some statistical knowledge of the race, this data

⁵⁹ Daniel Wallace Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* (Naperville, IL: J.L. Nichols and Co, 1902), 398.

⁶⁰ Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶² *Ibid.*

does not influence their ultimate point. Again, without a reception history one can only speculate how readers may have approached these kinds of grand gestures throughout. Undoubtedly some, possibly the most destitute, saw these claims towards fairness and held on to a kind of Spartan patience—the same kind valued so highly in *The College of Life*—which said that this fairness, this success, this new world may not be visible to you here and now, but it is in fact trickling down to your home soon enough. So too those already successful black entrepreneurs and professionals may have found such phrases adequate reflections of their world. But for astute, jaded, or discouraged readers—James Weldon Johnson’s “desperate class”—these books offer little comfort against the cares of the present, finding accounts of success written on counterfeit checks.⁶³

Black success guides reveal a more important project than just the dollars and cents of domestic tips and historical anecdotes. *Self-making* masquerades as *self-help*. In sections on “racial greatness” readers learn to form positive affective relations to the future. For example, in responding to the possibility of feeling negatively about the world, Gay and Miller instruct, “One of the greatest causes for failure in life is discouragement. It seems to be an element in the life of every man to be up one day and down the next.” It is the job of the reader to meet failure “square in the eye” and “take hold of it by the throat and compel it to work to your advantage.”⁶⁴ Saturated with masculine aggression, the authors turn “failure” from a feeling into a foe. In so doing, failure transforms from a potent affect into an object that might be subdued and cudgeled. Success begins with mastery over one’s feelings, a mastery that looks a lot like determined violence. According to this logic, this

⁶³ In the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson taxonimizes black men into affective classes, in particular those men forced to “conform to the requirements of civilization” who “cherish a sullen hatred for all white men” (52).

⁶⁴ Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 190.

failure-object must be made to work even harder “to your advantage.” Ironical how the image of whipping failure rhymes with so many thousands of equivalent events that comprise the dark history of slavery in the United States. This is not just about following the rules of the game, but about learning to love the game itself.

Thus failure continually haunts the language of black success. It is not merely the case that these guides offer meager comfort for cynical readers. They go further to help us contemporary scholars understand how discouragement exists as an active mood. In the reading that I’ve presented, one can see how black self-help guides not only illustrate the historical texture of the period, but how they, in adopting the propositional language of self-help, ironically illuminate the affects of black failure—“sycophancy, distrust, hatred, resignation, and hopelessness” to let *The Souls of Black Folk* name a few.⁶⁵ Indeed, Du Bois frames his landmark work of sociology around the same affect worlds that black self-help engages. As Jonathan Flatley reflects, Du Bois is aware “that this negative affective existence is not his alone but is shared by persons who are trapped in the ‘shades of the prison house’ with him.”⁶⁶ In fact, the “experiences of depression and despair, in their local, subjective, and emotional [senses]” that Flatley draws upon in Du Bois describes how discouragement operates.⁶⁷ Self-help proves that, as a mood, it is too strong and too pervasive to be brushed aside with platitudes. Instead it hangs in the penumbra of everyday life, just as it does in the pages of these manuals.

⁶⁵ W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Conservation of the Races,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade / The Souls of Black Folk / Dusk of Dawn*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1987), 364.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

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Guides like *The College of Life* and *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* were a part of a Washingtonian model of economic improvement and racial accomodationism. As I've shown, they do not try to politically actualize their readers, nor do they directly address Jim Crow. Yet it is anachronistic to think that at this moment they might have done just that. In fact, in 1895 Du Bois and Washington fundamentally agreed. In his essay "Conservation of the Races" Du Bois argues that African Americans have "a vast work of self-reformation to do, and that a little less compliant and whining, and a little more dogged work and manly striving would do us more credit and benefit than a thousand Force or Civil Rights bills."⁶⁸ Though Du Bois' outlook would invariably change—as it often did over the next six decades—it's important to see how he reiterates Washington's program of accommodating black behavior to the demands of white society. Even his staggering achievement, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—often set in relief to Washington—was at the time less oppositional to Washington than historians might claim. As Adolph Reed explains, though the two leaders "clearly were in programmatic competition and articulated sharply different visions of blacks' place in American civic life, their conflict did not grow from deep philosophical differences about internal organization of the black population."⁶⁹ Instead, these differences were based more upon "emphasis than substance."⁷⁰ In the political climate of the late 1890s and early 1900s both men advocated the same practice—namely building a petit-bourgeois class who, by advancing in business and education, would use their class status to better campaign for political

⁶⁸ Du Bois, "Conservation of the Races," 824.

⁶⁹ Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 60.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

patronage from “New South ideologues, northern industrialists and reform intellectuals.”⁷¹ As Judith Stein describes, “Thus Du Bois, like Washington, at the time equally believed that self-reform, and not political agency, was the only way forward for black subjects especially in the South.”⁷²

In this context, black self-help guides of the late 1890s would have been the literary prong of a multifaceted cultural campaign, advocated equally from all sides, that reinvested social uplift in self-improvement. During this “nadir” period, black citizens watched as their optimism for political action quickly disintegrated into disappointment. After the failure of Reconstruction in 1877, black politics hinged upon the Populist movement. Uniting poor rural white farmers with their black counterparts under the auspices of progressive labor reform, this third party sought to challenge the consolidated power of ruling Southern plantation owners and Northern industrialists. Though Populism gave both Democrats and Republicans a run for their respective money, the nature of its precarious electorate made it easy to topple. The ruling elite in the South installed voting laws and poll taxes while also legally sanctioning violent intimidation to keep both blacks and whites away from the ballot box. Populism was destroyed by fear and political cajoling designed to silence the laboring class, both black and white. When Populism fell so too did the political dreams of black America. In its place came a steady wave of Jim Crow laws meant to make any forms of collective popular politics or, more importantly, black participatory politics effectively impossible. Judith Stein explains that any defense of voting rights in the early 1890s “had been based on the union of formal rights and a party and program that promised changes

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Stein, “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” 34.

in state policy. Events of the latter 1890s eroded that hope. It was difficult to mobilize a defeated people to preserve rights that had not helped them gain their substantive ends.”⁷³

Addressing these same “defeated people,” black self-help writers offered *optimism* as the essential panacea. Yet in so doing they struggled to render the grim circumstances of the late 1890s and 1900s into cause for hope. Optimism reacted to the regime of racial oppression legitimized through the institutions of electoral politics, secondary and higher education, and economic development. It promised to reform black attitudes towards the reproduction of everyday life. *Progress and Achievements* takes up this topic in detail. The guide cautioned its readers against unwarranted optimism, saying that “the evils said to be afflicting the people of the earth can never be cured by optimistic fancies, no more than can the racking pains and galling sores of the bedridden be healed by their concealment, or by covering them with a blanket of joy.” Such “sores” must be the wounds of Jim Crow. The passage continues: “Optimism is a comparative virtue; pessimism a relative vice.”⁷⁴ The authors complain that the “modern extreme optimists” are vain idealists who rely on “dreamy utterances” that may entice many listeners but “which mitigate no evils, redress no wrongs, soothe no pain, cure no wounds.”⁷⁵ What do they mean by this? To answer this one must understand how Gay and Miller’s objections to these “modern extreme optimists” refer to a decade’s worth of essays, pamphlets, and editorials all concerned with how to be attached to the world.

⁷³ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁴ Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 130.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

By 1913 “extreme optimism” had become its own unique and ubiquitous genre. In 1897, *The White Side of a Black Subject* insists, after describing the growing waves of mob violence in the South, that though it may not want to sound like an “optimist,” “the star of hope looms brightly on the future horizon of the colored race.”⁷⁶ Similarly, *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge* proclaims in the same year, “we have no reason to be discouraged, cast down, or hopeless about our future, because of the many unfavorable happenings.”⁷⁷ Or take for example an editorial printed seven years later in the black *Coffeyville Herald*. Titled “The Optimist. A Great Leading Power in Advancement,” the editorial argues for the power of persistent optimism. After listing several trite metaphors, the author finishes, “Optimism proves itself a general that knows no discouragement and often when defeat seemed sure he has snatched from the lion jaws of conflicting forces the palm of the victor.”⁷⁸ What a convoluted expression. Optimism is personified as a military general—a vehicle for the tenor of courage and heroism. In a subordinate metaphor the general snatches the “palm of the victor” (a symbol of victory, but not victory itself) from the lion jaws of “conflicting forces.” Parsing this figure out, one finds that “optimism” gets lost in the telling. This elaborate metaphor merely equates optimism with specific masculine virtues like courage, strength, and determination—ultimately confusing whether optimism is *like* a military general, or is simply a *quality* of a military general.

As the editorial goes on, it proves to be ideal insight into the strange rhetorical difficulty of making optimism out of aphorisms. Touching on the catchword of discouragement, the editorial boldly claims that in spite of the continued presence of

⁷⁶ Norman B. Wood, *The White Side of a Black Subject* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1897), 387.

⁷⁷ Haley, *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading*, 101.

⁷⁸ “The Optimist: A Great Leading Power in Advancement,” *The Coffeyville Herald*, March 28, 1908.

pessimists in the world, and “as enigmatical as it may appear to those who are discouraged, it is an evident fact that the young Negro is a progressive factor in this great commonwealth.” The editor goes on to say that pessimism is like a virus that sickens rational thought, finally insisting, “Let us not grow gloomy over every apparent adversity, but rather let us look at things through the lens of the optimist.” He concludes:

Optimism is the greatest leading power in the world of worthy achievements. It takes away doubt and gives us hope. It drives out all discouragement and substitutes the telling agency of faith. For every tear it proffers a smile and its thrilling voice is every heard crying, “Onward, Onward. I am he that was born to lead on to the beautiful realm of success.

The equation of self-control yielding success matches Gay and Miller’s method in *Progress and Achievements*. Here the editor doesn’t explain how to find optimism, or how to practice it, but merely gestures with lyrical language to the power of optimism in and of itself. One could argue that this strong exhortation might not be completely foreign to black readers accustomed to similar Sunday morning declarations. Tears are transfigured to smiles, and, in this ongoing metaphor, optimism—now embodied—calls for the subject to go “onward, onward” towards the everlasting promise of a “beautiful realm of success.” Images of divine providence get secularized into the abstracted regions of self-actualization. Intoning Emerson, the editor makes *success* and *succession* one in the same.⁷⁹ The mantra of “onward” calls both to the reader and the race to continue progressing in a direction that leads towards that “beautiful realm” whatever, wherever, it might be. What one discovers in these rather abstract declarations is a kind of epistemological hole. What exactly is optimism? *Optimistic* and *optimists* refer, relatively, to some *thing* or some *one* in this

⁷⁹ Emerson’s essay “Experience” consistently relates spiritual success with the trope of successiveness. The language here reminds me particularly of this line from his essay: “No man ever came to an experience which was satiating, but his good is tidings of a better. Onward and onward!” See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, (New York: Literary Classics of America, 1983), 486.

disposition. In its various forms optimism can be a noun, an adjective, or an adverb. One *has* optimism, *is* an optimist, or *feels* optimistic, or *acts* optimistically. These constructions reveal the difficulties of inculcating such an elusive affective structure through a few well-turned phrases.

By 1913 optimism had become so hackneyed that it found itself coopted into advertising campaigns. A year after the above editorial, the *Washington Bee* ran a seemingly similar essay titled “Optimism Vs. Pessimism.” Intricately distinguishing between these two boundaries, the essay asserts that optimism and pessimism have been inherent to human thought since the dawn of time. The author explains that “anything is possible to men who believe that nothing is impossible. . . . They do not heed the warning of discouragement because higher and clearer than the little noises of the little people they hear the call of success.” And then finally,

They are filled with the mightiest message given to man, they have touched with the God-spark that blazes into achievement. Recognizing the above facts the directors of the Lincoln Memorial Building Company invite you to become an optimist as they realize as well as you do, that the residents of the city of Washington are, because of race prejudice deprived of their rights to indulge their taste for the better form of theatrical entertainments.⁸⁰

What a strange turn of the pen. Just when one thinks that the author is about to land on some great truth, the rhetoric of market capitalism rears its familiar head. In what seems like another self-help moment where affective reform promises moral improvement, this editorial-cum-advertisement suddenly turns into the rhetoric of consumerism. The magnificent purpose of all of this optimism was to build an entertainment venue. The

⁸⁰ “Optimism v. Pessimism,” *The Washington Bee*, November 11, 1909.

promise of success and happiness through the rehabilitated sight of optimism is really, then, nothing more than a call to *optimize* an investment by *optimizing* ones power as a consumer. Buying-power becomes a form of agency and investing capital becomes a strange analogy for investing oneself into the promise of the future. The *Washington Bee* promises not that optimists invest in financial schemes, but that financial schemes *make* optimists out of investors.

These two anecdotes help frame *Progress and Achievements'* long treatise on optimism. Readers and writers had already been circulating an exuberant public philosophy on the proper attunement to the world. By the mid-1910s such millennial ecstasy had been categorically disproven by the shroud of Jim Crow. Gay and Miller challenge this fallacy: though an optimistic lens covers the world in an attractive hue, it simultaneously distorts the reader's vision and produces untenable expectations. Returning to their section on optimism, one finds them arguing that though the pessimist has always been "at the beginning of the work" of emancipation, the optimist sooner "realizes the profits."⁸¹ Yet pessimism is no practical philosophy either. It "plunges men down into a gulf of despair, without hope of relief, without power to defend himself and his against oppression and injustice."⁸² Attempting to guide readers between these two rocks, they carefully explain that they are not refusing optimism altogether, "the great fear of the extremes of optimism and pessimism is the danger of falling into indifference. . . . Be neither extreme, and remember that while there is life there is hope. The quality of optimism must be strained through the sieve of common sense."⁸³ Yet what really is

⁸¹ Gay and Miller, *Progress and Achievements*, 131.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

optimism when “strained through the sieve of common sense”?

In what may be the most confusing portion of their guide, Gay and Miller ultimately argue these previous manifestations of optimism have failed to portray the present realistically. The authors shift from rehearsing familiar self-improvement phrases about how confidence comes from denying both discouragement and the past. Instead, they condition their language to reflect the political failures of the present. In the span of four years the calls for optimism have sublimated to a more limited—more nuanced—philosophy. In 1913, the same year as the publication of *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People* and the 50th anniversary of Emancipation—the black newspaper *The Freeman* commemorated the event with an editorial that sought to take stock of the current atmosphere for black citizens in the United States. After discussing the continued prevalence of racial prejudice it concludes:

In view of the fact we will not stand from under the banner of good cheer and optimism if we know what is best for us. We should measure the distance we have come. There is always reason for cheer so long as the movement is forward. What has been, the darker part has been removed; it is moving. If the route is blocked at one point it will break out at a different point. In the meanwhile the world is improving because of the improvement of a given point, provided there is no backward movement. We have suffered somewhat owing to a slight backward movement along a line or so. But after all it was not a backward movement. We had not made the progress that we thought we had made. We know better at this time. There have no more inflated notions to be punctured. We are at hard pan.⁸⁴

Echoing Gay and Miller, the author admits that racial progress has not always followed a straight path. The problem hasn’t just been racial prejudice, but stems from repeatedly false claims made by previous black leaders that the race has finally overcome their most

⁸⁴ “The Fiftieth Anniversary of Freedom,” *The Freeman*. October 25, 1913.

stultifying obstacles. In this, the editorial revises a black social cartography. No longer can one judge black social progress by the miles of progress that it has logged, as the path, though far, has led dishearteningly back to the start. Instead moving—though slow, though encumbered—might just be sufficient enough. So long as no “backward movement” occurs, any direction is good. Progress, that great catchword for the past two decades, was not all that it was cracked up to be. In the present of 1913, newspaper editorialists, Gay and Miller, and host of others realize that the antidote to the syndrome of discouragement is a stern dose of realism—about optimism. At the 1895 Cotton States Convention that had, in part, welcomed Booker T. Washington onto the national stage, the question had ostensibly been, “where is the race heading?” Now, nearly twenty years later, this question becomes, “have we hit bottom?” As the article above declares: “We know better at this time. There are no more inflated notions to be punctured. We are at hard pan.”

Finding “hard pan” marks a historical change between *The College of Life* and *Progress and Achievements of The Colored People*. As the discourse surrounding optimism and discouragement evolved with Jim Crow, optimism no longer held as strong a power as it used to. In fact, by 1919 the danger now is the language of black self-help itself. Where authors had believed that their rhetoric could will optimism into existence, now one sees that its very idealized language had become a curse, conjured into existence to thwart readers from their own flourishing. In the late 1890s, Washington worried that bitterness would turn black people into intractable political subjects, but with disenfranchisement came and a decade’s worth of violence, the material basis for this bitterness disappeared behind a series of political dead ends. Optimism was meant to usher in success. Yet as one can see twenty-five years later in *Progress and Achievements*, readers are not promised

success but, ultimately, honesty. Optimism “strained through the sieve of common sense” marks a particularly self-aware rhetorical turn in which this self-help guide is attempting to ameliorate the profound ironies inherent to self-help. Insofar as these guides believe that they *can* produce new affects, what happens if these affects are, indeed, wrongly suited for the world at present? “Hard pan” then replaces an affect with a space in order describe what it means to sync one’s expectations to the social conditions of the present. Being in sync means never again being disappointed by the world’s false promises. Readers may still be discouraged, may still persist in bad moods, but at least they will not be fooled again. Ultimately black self-help changes from producing inflated notions of the world to puncturing them.

Finally, I’d like to argue that this foray into the history of black moods can help contextualize current theoretical debates, and provide some perspective on the ways that African American political affects have evolved over the course of the Twentieth Century. Optimism and pessimism, as categories, have recently emerged as newly innervated concepts in contemporary queer and race theories. Most notably, Fred Moten’s work in essays like “Black Op”⁸⁵ and Jared Sexton’s rebuttals in “The Social Life of Social Death”⁸⁶ have set the parameters for an important discussion on how black phenomenology produces its own affects—a conversation that suddenly seems to have played out one hundred years before.⁸⁷ As well, the history of the mood of optimism might remind scholars and historians about more contemporary thinking about the problems of attaching black selves to the world. That strange phrase from *Progress and Achievements* about

⁸⁵ See *PMLA* 2008)

⁸⁶ “The Social Life of Social Death” (see *InTentions* 2011)

⁸⁷ See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

promoting optimism “strained through the sieve of common sense” anticipates, in a way, how Cornel West refuses optimism for hope when he asserts that the latter passes “through the fire of despair.”⁸⁸ Whereas optimism, for West, fastens merely to superficial and material signs of progress in the world, hope forms a much deeper philosophy. Hope relates the self to a shared sense of humanity. It continually asserts that regardless of whether things are going to get better, one must continue to act passionately in favor of justice and happiness.⁸⁹ Eventually, for West, hope is a way towards realism. The dilemma he finds in separating the two terms is the same kind of rhetorical problem described in the black self-help discourse seen throughout this essay. In some ways, one can now see how in the first decades of the century, black intellectuals were still attempting to produce a positive orientation towards a precarious world. Yet optimism, ultimately, failed to maintain black men and women in the face of all kinds of hazardous, tenuous, and sometimes shattering experiences. Hope, as an emotion, has evolved out of the dissipated space once occupied by optimism. It offers a form of propositional attachment to the world that can account for how history flows into the real. By this, I mean that hope might have been the great answer to the challenge of discouragement. Optimism, as the authors of this study have demonstrated, is always a recalcitrant yet diaphanous feeling, existing only for the most successful—or the most naive. But hope, as a practice, means acknowledging discouragement, agreeing with a history of institutionalized oppression, and protesting—even if it seems vastly unreasonable—that the present is not the future.

These are the stakes of black self-help. Coursing beneath these years of political and personal violence, self-help holds itself to be the alchemy of turning discouragement into

⁸⁸ West, *Restoring Hope*, 46

⁸⁹ Ibid.

optimism. Yet, as these manuals unwittingly attest to, this other “negro problem” is not reducible to platitudes because the attendant weight of history and the crisis of the present were too great for words. I’ve demonstrated, discouragement was—to use Du Bois’s phrase—a “prison house” in which even more acute sorrows echoed throughout the walls. This is what it means to live inside of a mood. Following this, I want to suggest that optimism, too, is a mood.⁹⁰ Herein lies the difficulty of self-help language. Moods envelop subjects. They are often inherited. They descend like atmospheres and set the stage for other kinds of circulating affects.⁹¹ Most importantly, they cannot simply be changed or replaced. In the mid-1910s writers and thinkers call for a tempered optimism; they say that they know where “hard pan is,” that they will no longer be fooled by false bottoms, and that the world lays itself out for them now, fully, clear. The last editorial attests to this impossibility, articulating the newly discovered truth that discouragement cannot be exchanged wholesale for optimism. So too does the above editor, in trying to write a path out of this mess, calls for optimism tempered by pessimism. What kind of mood is this? Escaping the dissipated present means coming to terms with the realization that in leaving behind discouragement one cannot simply jump the gap to optimism. Being at “hard pan” means being no longer beholden to the idolatry of one mood or the suck of another. Instead “hard pan” means now living by receiving the ambiguous moods that flow out of the present. As my next chapter will show, living at hard pan means sometimes means building new genres of feeling, or, sometimes, relinquishing feeling altogether.

⁹⁰ Cornel West’s definition of optimism in *Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) is similar, but not quite the same, as the definition that I’m advancing. West sees “optimism” as being an affective substance that is always related to and premised upon features of the material here-in-now.

⁹¹ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007).

Chapter Three: “These Violent Affections” Dunbar, Chesnutt, and the Dangers of Capitalism

1.

In Chapter Two I discussed the waxing and waning of discouragement and optimism, expressed in self-help literature addressed to African Americans from the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, black people came to see their new fledgling society moving in retrograde. By 1905, the Populist Party and its social adjunct the Farmer’s Alliance had been roundly defeated, *Plessy v. Ferguson* legally sanctioned segregation, and Jim Crow laws were quickly hemming in most aspects of black life. Add to this a series of sweeping disfranchisement laws, and the apex of black political participation of 1872 looked like ancient history.¹ Indeed, since the defeat of radical Reconstruction in 1877, the South was rapidly changing in ways that were contradictory, if not wholly unexpected.² Northern capital flooded the decimated region, consolidating what had been an ad-hoc collection of privately held farms into industrial plantations and manufacturing hubs. Many Southern whites readily sold the family farm in order to pursue new and more lucrative manufacturing jobs—positions from which black men were regularly excluded. Consequently, black homeownership skyrocketed as land and the promise of self-sufficiency became suddenly available.³ Yet this exchange and the social progress it implied inflamed white resentment. Fringe groups like the Ku Klux Klan rapidly

¹ Kenneth Chay and Kaivan Munshi, “Black Networks after Emancipation: Evidence from Reconstruction and the Great Migration,” http://www.cream-migration.org/uploads/Chay_Munshi_October2012.pdf

² Judith Stein, “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” in *Renewing Black Intellectual History*, ed. Adolph Reed, Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren and Adolph Reed (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2010), 41.

³ “While no other state could equal Virginia’s growth in rural landownership—between 1870 and 1910 black farm ownership in the state rose a remarkable 3,641 percent—rural blacks in the Upper South greatly expanded their holdings during the first generation-and-a-half of freedom.” See Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790 – 1915*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 175.

expanded as they promised to maintain, through custom and violent intimidation, a racial “order” where order had seemingly evaporated. As my first chapter argued, this wave of racial intimidation grew from the Lost Cause South, a cultural program built around a nostalgic fantasy of the prewar plantation aristocracy. As Northern military and then corporate interests infiltrated the South, many white Southerners bitterly lamented that their fates were unjust, that Reconstruction was cruel, and that the Union Army would be remembered as a corrupt and ignorant occupier viciously annihilating an idyllic paradise. For the Lost Cause, the war was still being fought. For black Americans of the period, this had always been the case.

By the early twentieth century the Lost Cause had found its most prominent literary champion in Thomas J. Dixon, whose novel *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), for example, looked longingly on the putative chivalry and honor of the old Confederacy. Simultaneously, an autonomous black publishing sphere began to emerge, borne upon subscription sales, cheap printing techniques, and wider railroad distribution throughout the U.S. Black authors spearheaded racially specific self-help tracts, broadcasted to emerging professionals. While white success manuals emerged out of anxieties surrounding industrial capitalism, black guides had to engage these same market fears along with the existential dangers of Jim Crow. In this, self-help became a literary extension of social uplift as black civic leaders—now disbarred from legislative action—sold forms of white bourgeois respectability as the only way forward. Guides like *The College of Life* (1895) promised to turn inadequate black readers into model citizens through an easy step-by-step process. Yet the rhetoric frequently struggles to turn bigotry and legalized exploitation into the grounds for optimism—an optimism through which black readers could *feel better*

about their futures. As political conditions changed in the first two decades of the twentieth century, so too did self-help's ability to track and define what exactly optimism is. Reading between the lines helps one imagine how black readers may have grown disoriented by this shallow rhetoric, shattered beyond repair by political defeat after defeat. What hides within the shadows of black self-help might be visible by African-American novelists of the era: people eschewing optimism in order to survive with what is left.

Along with self-help gurus, this period saw the emergence of a new class of black novelists writing specifically for a literate black and white bourgeoisie alike. These novels often joined racial uplift with individual self-help to offer optimism when social, political, and economic challenges only produced disappointment. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892)—one of the first black novels—tells a story about a free mixed-race woman who, after being sold into slavery, eventually reclaims her freedom and reconstructs her displaced family in the process.⁴ This and other optimistic African-American novels like Amelia Johnson's *Clarence and Corrine* (1890), and Emma Dunham Kelly-Hawkins' *Megda* (1891) told domestic stories about black families who, in following Christian values, prosperously emerge from the political and social morass of the New South.⁵ Later novels like Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1902) give utopian accounts of enterprising black protagonists who manage mixed-race ancestry and complicated family histories in order to discover their magnificent heritage in the world. Yet by the early 1900s, many black people felt that conditions were only deteriorating. As W.E.B. Du Bois explains, "From 1880 onward, in order to earn a living, the American Negro was compelled

⁴ P. Gabrielle Foreman, "'Reading Aright': White Slavery, Black Referents, and the Strategy of Histotextuality in *Iola Leroy*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1997), 327.

⁵ See Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, and Leslie W. Lewis and Ann L. Ardis, *Women's Experience of Modernity 1875 – 1945*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

to give up his political power.”⁶ In turn, black authors began to reflect this pessimism in compelling ways through literature. Books like Sutton Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter* (1901), and Charles Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* (1898) question even the very feasibility of black characters surviving in the present. In this turn to realism one can hear an unmistakable underlying refrain: how do we live with brokenness?

Two novels of the period uniquely answer this question. Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) and Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) together attempt to account for this particular moment. Dunbar illustrates the consumption side of this capitalist crisis. In his novel the prosperous middle-class black Hamiltons are exiled from their southern hometown when the family patriarch Berry is wrongly convicted of theft. His children, Joe and Kitty, and wife Fannie flee to New York City where they only find ruin and sadness. Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* reverses this migration while also elaborating upon capitalist production. The white protagonist Henry French heads south to his ancestral hometown of Clarendon after selling his successful New York financial firm. Initially expecting a nostalgic retreat, the Colonel becomes consumed with the desire to use his vast wealth to completely reform Clarendon—at first economically, then morally, and finally politically. While early in the novel the Colonel judges the town with a “certain amount of contempt for its...quixotic devotion to lost causes,” he finds by the end that his romance with Clarendon proves that he was always its native son.⁷ For all of his charity and

⁶ W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935), 693.

⁷ Charles Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream* (New York: Doubleday and Page Co, 1905), 89.

sympathy, French is forced to leave the South yet again, having only exacerbated racial tensions and lost what little family he had left.

Taken together, both novels attempt to make sense out of the historical atmosphere within which they find themselves. Both tell literary histories of the intensely doleful reactions to living in a world suddenly bereft of political, or social, function. Yet while *The Colonel's Dream* concerns the failure of real reform, *The Sport of the Gods* tells an even darker tale about how the failed bourgeois promises of identity, happiness, and home lead black people into tight corners from which they cannot escape. Though the Hamiltons have fully embraced their house servant roles adjacent to the white gentry, the family is thrown to ruin when they find at first that respectability politics can't save them from injustice and then that Northern urban life poses challenges they were never prepared for. A review from June 5th, 1902 in *The Nation* summarized the novel as tale of "unrelieved woefulness" whose moral was that "the negro has no chance against unjust suspicion in the South, nor any against ruin in New York."⁸ Since this review, scholars have been trying, with difficulty, to uncover a politics beneath Dunbar's particular brand of pessimism.

This chapter, then, is about the predations of capital. Black self-help guides sought to replace political depression with economic optimism by attaching readers to the promise of a fresh start and a fair field. While this Washingtonian strategy appealed to many, Dunbar's and Chesnut's novels separately illustrate the failed promise of mobility—be it physically migrating from South to North or moving into the bourgeoisie. In both novels black and white protagonists attempt migrations from their purported homes in search for the grounds of a new world where the meritocratic promise of free market

⁸ "More Fiction," *The Nation*, 74.1927, 449.

capitalism has yet to be corrupted. The Colonel hopes that philanthropic development can bring economic and racial equality, while the Hamiltons believe that the black metropolis might offer forms of identity disconnected from the regulated black labor they found in the South. Eventually they find that economic answers to political problems lead only to more exposure and exploitation. Both novels end without social activation or spiritual transformation; instead watching the world as it used to be fall away as the New South and the new black ghetto spring up. In this, Dunbar and Chesnutt are outlining a complex of affects and attitudes that mired both black *and white* subjects in a world after disfranchisement. These authors provide an aesthetic model for what an atmosphere of disfranchisement feels like for both races: a dead end of misery, sadness, and numbness.

It is easy to overlook the most essential insight brought forth through both books. *The Colonel's Dream* not only illustrates the struggle between debt and investment, the two competing methods vying for economic influence in the South. The real center of the novel turns upon "violent affections"—a telling phrase that describes a society where racial animosity plays out the real conflict of class warfare. When viewed from the top down one sees how these disputes over honor, virtue, heritage, and race are not merely human nature but explicitly manufactured to keep exploitation going. In Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* one finds the opposite when the story is told from the bottom up. In this strange new world of affective attachment serve to help navigate the treacherousness of urban freedom that isn't always free.

2.

By 1905 Charles Waddell Chesnutt must have known that his paltry literary career

was nearly through. Born in 1858 in Cleveland, Ohio, Chesnutt's relationship to African-American life took a conspicuous slant. The child of mixed-race parents, freedmen before the Civil War, Chesnutt had the comparative blessing, or curse, of being able to pass for white. When in 1875, at age seventeen, Chesnutt ventured south to his ancestral North Carolina, he was offered just this opportunity. Yet he refused, instead redoubling his efforts on behalf of the black community and its social challenges in the post-Reconstruction South. After ten years as a schoolteacher, Chesnutt returned to Cleveland to pursue law while nurturing a growing ambition to become a successful novelist.⁹ Splitting his time between writing and legal work, in 1899 Chesnutt published his first bound volume of short stories, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899).¹⁰ Buoyed by William Dean Howells's favorable review in the *Atlantic*, he quickly rose to prominence as one of the most famous African-American authors of the period. Yet his fame meant little towards his market success. *The Conjure Woman* barely sold 2,000 copies¹¹ while his most successful novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) cleared only 3,276 copies in its first year, 111 the next, and none in 1903.¹² Growing desperate, Chesnutt intensified his novel-writing efforts while also hedging his bets: joining the General Committee of the NAACP while also returning to his legal stenography work as a source of additional income.¹³ His growing political anxieties and his impatience with a public—black and white—who seemed uninterested in his literary merits follows his publication history. Where *The Conjure Woman* artfully portrayed slave tales as a way to legitimate black culture, *The*

⁹ Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 14.

¹⁰ Dean McWilliams, *Charles Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 17.

¹¹ Charles Chesnutt, *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Crisler et al. (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), xix.

¹² Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, ed. Joan Sherman, (Dover, 2003), v.

¹³ McWilliams, *Charles Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*, 17.

Marrow of Tradition instead focused on current events by fictionalizing the 1898 Wilmington race riots. By 1905 Chesnutt had written his most candid and acerbic novel to date, a systematic enumeration of the complicated challenges facing the post-Reconstruction South—unadorned with idealism, fantasy, or even hope. Having been dropped by Houghton Mifflin for his anemic sales, Chesnutt convinced Doubleday to take a chance on *The Colonel's Dream*.¹⁴ The question remains whether Chesnutt's frank tone in this novel emerged from the conviction that it might finally save his slumping literary career, or whether it might simply announce its end.

The book was a complete flop—though by no fault of its literary value. *The Colonel's Dream* offers a version of how black and white society responded to the triumph of capitalism at the expense of black class mobility, emotional flourishing, and social uplift. The novel centers upon Colonel Henry French, son to a Southern aristocratic family and former Confederate officer who has, in the decades since the war, amassed a small fortune from the especially profitable—and risky—sale of his New York firm French and Company Limited. Seeking a bit of convalescing, Colonel French and his son Phil head south to his boyhood home of Clarendon. When he arrives he is immediately overcome with nostalgia and sets about to use his money and his liberal outlook to revitalize the economy, and thus, the people of the town. He takes up where his family left off, buying back the French ancestral mansion and purchasing the family's faithful servant Peter at auction. He plans to turn a defunct mill into a modern industrial hub that might buoy the fortunes of white and black alike. It is on this last point—the Colonel's insistence on racial equality—where things quickly unravel. He comes to realize that any progress, racial or economic, must pass

¹⁴ Chesnutt, *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles Chesnutt*, xxiii.

through the corrupt hands of the aptly named Mr. Fetters—son of a slave trader and former plantation overseer who has come to purchase most of the farms, and farmers, in Clarendon. Fetters is a man who, as Du Bois says of this class of new men, was thirsty “for wealth and power, thrifty and avaricious.”¹⁵ What the Colonel believed to be a mere problem of economic opportunity, finally reveals an impossible puzzle, rooted in a system of legally exploited black convict labor—a system owned from laborer to legislator by Fetters. When Phil and Peter both die in a sudden accident, the Colonel’s already fraying attachments to Clarendon give way completely. He settles his contracts for a loss and retreats north having failed, completely, at his mission.

Many scholars view *The Colonel’s Dream* as elaborating the difficult economies of sympathy, philanthropy, and racial bitterness in the New South. Dean McWilliams reads Chesnut’s novel for its interest in class dynamics between Fetters and the Colonel, noting how ultimately Colonel French’s failure to reform Clarendon is “strongly determined by aristocratic class loyalty.”¹⁶ On this point, Catherine Wooley argues that the novel centers upon the difficulty, and necessity, of how “personal feelings” link to “effective social action” – but often upon channels that fail to get at the deeply rooted racist dynamics of the south.¹⁷ Closely related, Francesca Sawaya reads *The Colonel’s Dream* as an argument for how northern philanthropy fails “to deal productively with a feeling that has become institutionalized in government and law in the South: namely white *resentment* or envy.”¹⁸

These critical accounts are all correct. They focus upon what the Colonel gets right and

¹⁵ William E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), 169.

¹⁶ McWilliams, *Charles Chesnut and the Fictions of Race*, 169.

¹⁷ Christine Wooley, “The Necessary Fictions of Charles Chesnut’s *The Colonel’s Dream*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 65.2 (2012): 174.

¹⁸ Francesca Sawaya, “‘That Friendship of the Whites’: Patronage, Philanthropy, and Charles Chesnut’s *The Colonel’s Dream*,” *American Literature*, 84.4 (2012): 783.

what he fails to understand about the racial and class dynamics of the New South. Sawaya begins to uncover some of the novel's affective domain, in registering how the Colonel's sympathy, here materialized in philanthropy, is conspicuously ignorant of racial hatred. True enough, this was one of Chesnutt's most important aims. In correspondence a few years prior to the publication of *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt explained to Booker T. Washington, "the medium of fiction offers a golden opportunity to create sympathy throughout the country for our cause."¹⁹ Chesnutt may have always been dedicated to telling the story of how racial hatred thrives, but I believe that in *The Colonel's Dream* he begins to understand how the "race problem" is essentially subordinate to larger and more insidious structures. While the Colonel may be the perfect embodiment of sympathy and charity, he fails not on account of his own mistakes, but because he remains profoundly powerless against the New South's industrialized plantation economy—and powerless still to the ways in which this economy functions on feeling.

While interested in the affective regimes of the post-Reconstruction South, however, *The Colonel's Dream* does not ultimately hinge upon the Colonel's bleeding heart. When the he attempts to heal racial wounds, new ones caused by racial capitalism open in hard-to-reach spots. The town's particularly pessimistic preacher takes the Colonel aside to caution him about his naïve plan for social rejuvenation, explaining "that there is no place in this nation for the Negro, except under the sod. We will not assimilate him, we cannot deport him [...] If we but sit passive, and leave their fate to time, they will die away in discouragement and despair."²⁰ This bigoted fantasy of racial genocide ironically rests

¹⁹ "To Booker T. Washington, November 5, 1901," *To Be an Author, The Letters of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Joseph McElrath and Robert C. Leitz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). 168.

²⁰ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 164.

upon a not inaccurate understanding of the state of affairs for black people in the South—
just look to the previous chapter. The preacher continues:

To coddle them, to delude them with false hopes of an unnatural equality which not all the power of the Government has been able to maintain, is only to increase their unhappiness. To a doomed race, ignorance is euthanasia, and knowledge is but pain and sorrow. It is His will that the fittest should survive, and that those shall inherit the earth who are best prepared to utilise its forces and gather its fruits.²¹

While certainly despicable, the preacher has a firm grasp on the affective consequences of being “doomed” by Jim Crow and living inside an “unhappiness” where knowledge is nothing but “pain and sorrow”—a phrase that calls into mind that newspaper editorial from the previous chapter which argued, “many of us are discouraged and broken in spirit because knowledge gained and stored-up in physical energy are [*sic*] so often dead capital if bound up in a black skin.”²² Indeed, this is the problem indexed by black self-help guides of the period: how to promote optimism to a people overwhelmed by despair and discouragement. The knowledge to which the preacher alludes is the cynical belief that because the government cannot (or, really, *chooses* not to) enforce institutional equality for all races, equality is thus “unnatural.” He uses the racist agenda of the State as a backformation: erroneous logic that proves how racist laws are only the faithful reflection of essential racial hierarchies and not the other way around.

Yet the preacher’s fatalism is particularly noteworthy because it goes against the entrenched position of the new Southern industrial plantation elite in favor of a scientific understanding of race. Indeed, the industrial system that developed in the New South was completely dependent upon the continued survival of black people as the main foundation

²¹ Ibid., 165.

²² See Chapter Two, n. 3

of an exploitative system—along with poor white people too.²³ But for the Preacher, the great “fate” to which the Negro will succumb may be nothing more than the “survival of the fittest.” Here Chesnutt is overtly gesturing to the contemporaneous rise of Social Darwinism in structuring political policy. How exactly the Negro will return to the soil is not granted—whether it be that millions die of mere heartache or, more likely, hanging. Thus, in what amounts to a particularly insidious premonition, “Christian” bigots can escape any responsibility for the suffering and death of millions of people because these people were merely succumbing to their just fates. Yet what Chesnutt would like his readers to understand is that these are not natural forces, nor natural feelings, at all— but economic ones. In fact, market capitalism sets the stage for this despair and discouragement. While Emancipation was supposed to usher in a new world of opportunity and self-determination, instead it opened the South to the menaces of exploitation and inequality.

After Reconstruction, Northern investments flooded into the South to take advantage of cheap land and even cheaper labor.²⁴ In the lively debates between Washington and Du Bois that closed the century, white supremacy was often positioned against the growth of a fair-enterprising free market. Yet from the distance of history, this dichotomy is ironic. After Emancipation black people became free but they certainly were not equal. This simple fact is why Booker T. Washington’s plans for industrial training

²³ Stein, “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” 41.

²⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863 – 1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 29.

could simultaneously be both harmful and beneficial. By acquiescing in the mandates of the white south, Washington effectively welcomed political disfranchisement in compensation for access to a “fair,” or equal, economic field. He claims in *Up From Slavery* “no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.”²⁵ Washington believed a free market meritocracy offered a way for black labor—and thus black people—to amass what twentieth century economist Gary Becker would famously come to call “human capital.” His strategy rested upon the premise that surely if black people became industrious skilled laborers they would eventually be recognized as equal. We’ve seen this language before under the guise of black self help. But by 1905 Chesnutt, Du Bois and the Niagara Movement vehemently disagreed with Washington’s accommodationist strategy. In a letter to Washington from 1903 Chesnutt similarly dissents, explaining that while he appreciates all that the former has done for education and property “there is no good reason why we should not acquire them all the more readily because of our equality of rights. I have no confidence in that friendship of the whites which is to take the place of rights, and no expectation of justice at their hands unless it is founded on law.”²⁶ Chesnutt understood that the “fairness’ which Washington stakes his strategy upon is neither definite nor enforceable. Washington is merely *asking* for economic equality in exchange for political subordination. And if black people are asking, Du Bois and Chesnutt both understood that there was no way that an economy of “friendship” or “sympathy” could ensure a fair deal. In the South, profits do not always trump prejudice. In fact the two often went hand in hand.

²⁵ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1901), 223.

²⁶ Chesnutt, *To Be an Author*, 182.

This is an essential point in *The Colonel's Dream*, where the Colonel's great plan for economic revitalization fails not from bigotry, but because he misunderstands the system already in place. After arriving in Clarendon, the Colonel spends his money liberally in the hopes of "permeating all the channels of local enterprise."²⁷ He believes that his bolus of capital will enter into the economic bloodstream of the town and revitalize the fortunes of poor black and white alike. All he needs, he explains, are black laborers ready to "fit themselves for useful citizenship. They would meet with the difficulties that all men must, and with some peculiarly their own. But they must look up and not down, forward and not back, seeking always incentives to hope rather than excuses for failure."²⁸ On the following page the Colonel explains to this black congregation that to be "valuable members of society" they must "learn to do well some particular thing, by which you may reasonably expect to earn a comfortable living in your own home, among your neighbours, and save something for old age and the education of your children."²⁹ Here is Washington's program front-and-center. The Colonel believes that black people must "fit" themselves to the marketplace (as if centuries of agricultural labor hasn't "fitted" them already). To improve the race, black people must seek "incentives to hope" rather than "excuses for failure." The language of incentives echoes contemporary economic accounts of rational choice economic theory, a certain Benthamite strain that assumes people act rationally out of self-interest, thus always choosing hope over failure. Poverty and suffering can be overcome if Clarendon's townspeople accept the doctrine of industry and choose diligence over idleness.

²⁷ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 88-89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Yet it's impossible to choose anything when one lacks the freedom to choose in the first place. Vagrancy laws, and the system of exploited labor that they supported, haunt the Colonel's strategy. Having just settled into Clarendon, he stumbles upon his family's longtime slave-turned-servant Peter standing on the town's auction block. Described by the auctioneer as a "left over from befo' the wah,"³⁰ Peter commands little attention save from a stunned and kindhearted Colonel who immediately purchases his freedom. While purchasing Peter away from the hands of a nefarious labor gang is surely a good thing, in so doing the Colonel unwittingly falls into antebellum regimes of white paternalism and black subjugation while simultaneously believing himself to be racially progressive—a point reiterated by the fact that Peter's freedom is never once explicitly mentioned; instead the debt merely changes hands. This early scene sets up an essential aspect of the story: the double bind between industry and idleness in Clarendon. As Douglas Blackmon explains, at this time in the South a black man "could be arrested and charged with vagrancy on almost any pretense. To have no money in hand demonstrated his guilt without question and, worse, was seen as absolute proof of his worthlessness."³¹ There were others too, like "sundown laws" which restricted black farmers from selling their own crops after dark, and "lien laws" which provided exorbitantly valued advances of cash, seeds, and farming tools to black farmers in order to ensnare them in a system of perpetual debt.³² Being poor, being idle, being industrious, and even being black could lead to arrest by these vagrancy laws and a swift conviction to menial labor. As Du Bois says of the crop-lien system, this

³⁰ Ibid., 73.

³¹ Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 124.

³² Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 57.

was not a “result of shiftlessness on the part of Negroes, but is also the result of cunningly devised laws as to mortgages, liens, and misdemeanors, which can be made by conscienceless men to entrap and snare the unwary until escape is impossible, further toil a farce, and protest a crime.”³³

This system of debt servitude relied upon a seamlessly complicit criminal justice system. Black men were charged with vagrancy, and then auctioned by the municipality to a plantation overseer for hard labor. When they were freed, sometimes after months or even years of work, these ex-convicts had no job to which to return, immediately qualifying them to be arrested again at any time thus perpetuating the cycle. While designed as a way to exploit black labor, these kinds of laws were cynically couched as necessary for social uplift. The editor of the Clarendon newspaper explains to the Colonel that, “something must be done to make [the Negroes] work, or else they'll steal, and to keep them in their place, or they would run over us... These convict labour contracts are a source of considerable revenue to the State; they make up, in fact, for most of the outlay for Negro education.”³⁴ The first part is obvious, that this system of unfair incarceration serves as one of many prongs of white supremacy to inculcate fear, maintain power, and prevent black men from amassing property and capital. But the second part speaks to the ludicrous irony where the very education meant to uplift the black race is bankrolled by the convict labor that keeps the race in a position of destitute poverty. The more convicts the state produces, the more it might claim that it is supporting black social improvement while doing just the opposite. The state's financial commitment to "Negro" education is, in reality, far less than the great fortune it amasses from the plunder and sale of black labor. This is not a cycle so much as it

³³ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 170.

³⁴ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 76.

is a wheel that grinds on perpetually into the future. While white leaders like the town Preacher paid lip service to the notion that black laborers, farmers, and professionals must support themselves, in fact this same pool of impoverished labor was essential to the continuing profits of the new industrial plantation economy.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, legalized exploitation is the dark heart of the New South. It's the Colonel's struggle to recognize this fact that forms the majority of the novel's drama. Clarendon's modernization is staked upon an ambitious project: rehabilitating the town's defunct cotton mill into a prosperous manufacturing center. While the Colonel may have, tellingly, hired a New England architect for the mill, he insists for the labor and materials "to be a Clarendon enterprise, from the ground up."³⁵ His plan addresses a real concern. Archie Christmas, one of the town's black residents, bemoans that since the end of Reconstruction the opportunities for black skilled labor have dried up:

De w'ite folks says de young niggers is triflin' 'cause dey don' larn how to do nothin'. But what is dere fer 'em to do? I kin 'member when dis town was full er black an' yaller carpenters an' 'j'iners, blacksmiths, wagon makers, shoemakers, tinnerns, saddlers an' cab'net makers. Now all [...] is made at de Norf, an' dere ain' nothin' lef' fer de ole niggers ter do, let 'lone de young ones.³⁶

While Washington may hold that industrial training can uplift the race, Archie understands that the problem is not education but opportunity. With the expansion of northern industrialized capitalism comes an influx of so-to-speak *foreign* goods that render the profit margins on local labor financially unsustainable, dissolving racial and class identities with it. The Colonel believes that he can solve this problem through race-blind fairly compensated labor. Yet as soon as he hires the town's best men, troubles begin. A group of

³⁵ Ibid., 153.

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

white bricklayers walk out on the job, explaining that they “won't work under a nigger.”³⁷

Though the work continues, the mill is eventually shuttered when the Colonel and his money are run out of town at the end of the novel—by a mob of those same insulted white bricklayers who want nothing to do with the mill if it means putting “the bottom rail on top.” Their hostile reactions were commonplace, as David Roediger explains, because historically “status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions as fashioned identities as ‘not slaves,’ and as ‘not Blacks.’”³⁸ But for the black artisans of Clarendon there were few options left. Ready graduates from schools like Tuskegee were barred from the skilled labor they were trained for while also being ineligible to take positions at new manufacturing jobs. Without a completely independent black economy—or the funds of naïve Northern philanthropists—black labor was always dependent upon the fickle graces of white landlords. And, as Chesnutt describes, where black and white labor is paid equally, tension and, eventually, violence are soon to follow. The only thing left to the black people of the town is sharecropping or idleness. And ironically both carry the same consequence: indenture, debt, incarceration, and exploitation.

At the center of the web is William Feters, a “convict labour contractor” who has managed to not only buy every black man in the town, but the white ones too: “for there could not be a jury impanelled in the county which did not have on it a majority of men who were mortgaged to Feters. He even held the Judge's note for several hundred dollars.”³⁹ As

³⁷ Ibid., 191.

³⁸ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, (New York: Verso Press, 1991), 13.

³⁹ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 226.

much as the Colonel—and Northern readers—might believe that the South can be transformed through investment, Chesnutt clarifies the point. It isn't investment so much as *debt* that matters. Though he may be far wealthier than Feters, the Colonel cannot command the same fear or retribution, immediately realizing that "that the regenerative forces of education and enlightenment, in order to have any effect in his generation, must be reinforced by some positive legislative or executive action, or else the untrammelled forces of graft and greed would override them."⁴⁰ Fair legislation is essential to set the foundations for a free market system, but that is not possible when incarcerated black labor is too profitable and every key politician is in the hands of Feters. Thus the mortgage becomes Chesnutt's most important catchall: appearing twenty-three times in the novel it describes not merely the specific forms of debt by which Feters owns the land put up as collateral in exchange for a loan, but more generally the simple debts that he holds over most everyone. Chesnutt is interested in a historical problem—namely the transfer of property from Southern aristocrats to poor white men like Feters, and consolidated Northern industrial interests. Du Bois touches upon this when he explains how "on hundreds of farms, ignorant Negroes, and sometimes poor whites, were held in bondage under claims of debt, or under contracts of exclusive employment for long terms of years—contracts extorted from ignorance by craft, aided by State laws..."⁴¹ The mortgage becomes the natural logic of economic obligation—supplanting that other word from that old world: slavery. A logical reversal happens where, instead of owning someone as property, Feters now owns their property *like* he owns them.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 230

⁴¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 229.

While both the Colonel and Fetters may now be on equal social footing, their adolescent backstory points to the root of their difference. Early on when the Colonel learns that Fetters's had become Clarendon's parochial kingpin, he remarks how in school he "kicked [Fetters] once, all the way down Main Street from the schoolhouse to the bank."⁴² It seems as though the Colonel and his friends regularly made "the poor white boy...miserable."⁴³ And though the Colonel broadmindedly congratulates Fetters's newfound meritocratic success, he follows this thought by asserting that "there was something in blood, after all...fine types were a matter of breeding and were perhaps worth the trouble of preserving."⁴⁴ The speed with which the Colonel moves from liberal to conservative attitude is especially telling. Indeed this cognitive dissonance is the very source of the Colonel's profound myopia to come. He believes that his hatred of Fetters is justified upon moral grounds without acknowledging that it might equally rest on a deeply engrained sense of class prejudice.

It is this very rivalry that animates the climactic sequence of the novel. While *The Colonel's Dream* appears initially centered upon its eponymous hero, one might argue that the novel's most important figure is Bud Johnson. When Catherine, the black servant of the Colonel's paramour Laura Treadwell, asks the Colonel to help retrieve her husband Bud from the clutches of Mr. Fetters, Colonel French springs to action. This forms a doubly sentimental plot contrivance where Catherine and Bud's domestic safety stands in for the

⁴² Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 36.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

Colonel's affections for Laura Treadwell. What the Colonel does not immediately know however is that Bud is Fetter's prized drudge. When the Colonel bids a generous sum for Bud's freedom, Fetter explains that "this nigger has been fractious and contrary, and I've sworn that he shall work out his time. I have never let any nigger get the best of me - or white man either."⁴⁵ Fetter relishes his power over the aristocratic Colonel, even more so when it means exacting his extravagant cruelty on his beast-of-burden—testifying to the ways that class and race operated on similar political lines for men of the New South like Fetter. Even more determined, the Colonel takes matters into his own hands and has him broken out of jail. Then the wheels fall off. Instead of fleeing for safety, Bud Johnson returns for revenge by shooting dead another overseer and permanently disfiguring Fetter's son Barclay—a young man who by the end of the novel swore to devote his "talents and his education to [the Negro's] debasement."⁴⁶ With this the Colonel begins to question all of his rosy idealism:

It was becoming clear to him that the task he had undertaken was no light one [...] that of leavening the inert mass of Clarendon with the leaven of enlightenment. With the best of intentions, and hoping to save a life, he had connived at turning a murderer loose upon the community. It was true that the community, through unjust laws, had made him a murderer, but it was no part of the colonel's plan to foster or promote evil passions, or to help the victims of the law to make reprisals.⁴⁷

He believed that by reuniting Bud with Catherine, he would restore a sentimental world where tender domestic affection and a second chance at freedom could be the basis for moral transformation. Yet Bud, instead of being transformed into a virtuous, *enlightened*,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 291.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 246.

subject, does the very opposite, demonstrating how the Colonel's sentimentalized strategies for social progress failed to take suitable account for decades of hurt.

Bud's time under the lash had nearly killed him and with his jailbreak he decides that the only thing worth living for is revenge. Maybe he knew that he would always be in the clutches of Fetters or the thousands of other Fetters across the South. Maybe Bud knew that he would never be able to overcome his anger and bitterness from a lifetime of injury and subjugation. This set-piece recurs throughout Chesnutt's novels—like Josh Green from *The Marrow of Tradition*, who frequently, and correctly, prophesizes that he's "expec's ter die a vi'lent death in a quarrel wid a w'ite man."⁴⁸ It might be more appropriate to rename *The Colonel's Dream* simply *The Marrow of Tradition II* because for both novels the self-named *tradition* of the South is always racial violence. There are many ways to have purpose and meaning in the South, but these forms of attachment, built around wounds that keep getting ripped open, are fugitive to the Colonel. He believes that his liberalizing platform can supersede the things that Bud knows; but for Bud knowledge is "pain and sorrow" "bound up in black skin" (to borrow a phrase from the previous chapter). This demonstrates the limits of the Colonel's knowledge of black emotional worlds as much as it proves how the logic of a free market meritocracy fails to account for the weak lived truths that divide white from black.

By the conclusion of *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt has crafted a thorough account of how the chivalrous antebellum South can never rise again. Indeed, the Colonel's son Phil and his servant Peter die not as sentimental martyrs to a progressive ideal, but under perversely meaningless circumstances. When Phil follows a cat into a train yard Peter

⁴⁸ Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 110.

follows after and intervenes just in time to have them both crushed between two slow-moving cars. While their deaths motivate the Colonel to flee Clarendon, they do little to highlight the town's intractable social problems. In addition, perhaps the rise of the New South appears most clearly through the curious subplot of Ben Dudley—the son of former plantation aristocracy who, though intelligent and virtuous, is continually hamstrung by his family's abject poverty. This side story spends much of its time following Ben as he attempts to locate a buried chest filled with his family's wealth, hidden during the Civil War, whose location is only known by his uncle's spurned-lover-turned-mute-housekeeper, Viney. This prize, and the lurid family story it inherits, is Chesnutt's object lesson. He knows that readers would surely expect Ben to uncover the hidden cash and make good. Instead, Ben is left with nothing "except my horse and my clothes, and a few odds and ends which belong to me. Fetters will have the land - there's not enough to pay the mortgages against it, and I'm in debt for the funeral expenses."⁴⁹ Ben eventually follows the Colonel north to aide him in his new business ventures, proving that family, inheritance, and legacy are as fragile for white families as they are for black ones. Chesnutt makes clear that the South shall not rise again, and that these Lost Cause fictions about restoring a proud aristocratic family back to its place of prominence are always staked upon fantastical—and fictional—stories like chivalry, patriarchy, and buried treasure.⁵⁰

This is Chesnutt's most important insight. The separate dramas of Ben Dudley and Bud Johnson lead to the same conclusion: that the South cannot rise again because the resurrection has already happened and the winners have been named. The debt-peonage

⁴⁹ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 287.

⁵⁰ William Dean Howells said of *The Marrow of Tradition*, "it would be better if it were not so bitter," quoted in Wooley, "The Necessary Fictions of Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*," 173.

system was far too profitable to be turned over to a truly egalitarian market system. In fact, this is the point—that there is no such thing as the free market world that Washington and the Colonel believe in. As Du Bois explains in *Black Reconstruction*,

For there began to rise in America in 1876 a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor. Home labor in cultured lands, appeased and misled by a ballot whose power the dictatorship of vast capital strictly curtailed, was bribed by high wage and political office to unite in an exploitation of white, yellow, brown and black labor, in lesser lands and “breeds without the law.” Especially workers of the New World, folks who were American and for whom America was, became ashamed of their destiny. Sons of ditch-diggers aspired to be spawn of bastard kings and thieving aristocrats rather than of rough-handed children of dirt and toil.⁵¹

With Bud Johnson, Chesnutt demonstrates how even *if* one did literally set all black men and women free from debt-bondage, it wouldn’t mean that they would subscribe wholesale to the self-improvement rhetoric that *The College of Life* advocates. Instead, racial progress necessitates a kind of affective readjustment—for both races—from bitterness, discouragement, and anger, to something else. Yet as Du Bois knows, racial rivalries between white and black were installed by ruling capitalists to quell class-consciousness and the possibility of a labor coalition capable of real political power.⁵² It makes readers wonder whether Feters’s palpable enjoyment at besting Colonel French and mercilessly thrashing his indebted black farmhands stems from the same deformed environment that led Bud to his own fatal conclusions.

Ironically, the only thing that men like Bud and Feters share is a similar bitter affection for vengeance. When the Colonel first inquires to Bud’s freedom one of Feters’s white overseers explains, “[Bud’s] in Haines’s gang, and Haines loves him so well that Mr.

⁵¹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935), 634.

⁵² Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 13.

Fetters has to keep Bud in order to keep Haines. There's no accountin' for these vi'llent affections, but they're human natur', and they have to be 'umoured."⁵³ In what amounts to a perverse version of the sentimental love triangle, Fetters needs Bud because he needs Haines who “loves” Bud in turn. And even more tellingly, this kind of intimate dependence stems from a series of “violent affections” which seem to exceed economic logic and rest purely upon a system of racial bias that insists on its own existence. Here one might say that the two prongs of the racist state economy—incarceration and indenture—have hijacked a sentimental imaginary for their own vicious purposes. Why else would Bud effectively choose suicide over freedom than that his desire for vengeance was just another “violent affection” like the ones shared by Haines and Fetters?

While one could say that *The Colonel's Dream* shows how reform fails when human passions win—this would risk missing the point entirely. Just as the novel's slow-rolling tragedy begins with a single market event (the dicey sale of the Colonel's firm for a large profit) so too does the market characterize all facets of the ongoing action. The proper function of the plantation system in the South depended upon legal fiats and emotional ones: in law, the sanctioned theft of black labor, and in sentiment, the redirection of poor white politics away from Populism to sustained racial animosity.⁵⁴ This is to say that Haines “violent affections” were not, importantly, a function of “human nature” but were the very consequence of cultural propaganda installed by Lost Cause culture to keep the plantation elite safe from activism and overthrow. These “violent affections” are the historically contrived rivalries of the post-bellum South. Bud Johnson is further proof of this. Though one should wonder whether Bud's hatred of Haines was always a surrogate

⁵³ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 218.

⁵⁴ Stein, “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” 42.

for French and Fetter's own rivalry, Chesnutt is *not* offering a systemic solution. Indeed, the Colonel could wise up to all of his prideful resentments and it wouldn't make much of a difference. Fetter—unlike his rival—is neither irrational nor exceptional: he understands that the reorganized South will never allow market competition; it works just fine the way it is. However happy he might be to see the Colonel lose, losing and winning are important functions of the system, not ruptures to it. What deforms Clarendon then is not just the hammer of legalized exploitation but the anvil of submerged class conflict turned racial violence.

I want to return to the question I began with, namely, what kind of appeal did Chesnutt believe he was making in *The Colonel's Dream*? Just four years earlier in the *Marrow of Tradition*, he would end on a note of guarded hope: "there's time enough, but none to spare."⁵⁵ Yet if this terse but optimistic rebuke hinged upon actuating white men like *Marrow's* Cateret to face the dangers of racial oppression, by *The Colonel's Dream* the polemic seems all but unnecessary. Colonel French embodies just this kind of liberal fantasy: he claims deep Southern ancestry while possessing progressive policies; he's wealthy, enlightened, and virtuous; and he believes strongly in improving the South through entrepreneurial economic investment that would support both races. Indeed, the Colonel's unquestionable capacities are Chesnutt's very point because his dream ends just as the Colonel's does. Thus proving that liberal reform fantasies will always be thwarted by the intractable legal and cultural mechanisms purposefully entrenched by a post-war

⁵⁵ Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 329.

industrial plantation system devoted to profit. If Chesnutt believed his novel might effect political change, then it is hard to see where and how that might be. If there's no hope for a man like Colonel French than what might the average middle-class Northern reader do?

Perhaps the novel's final episode offers a lesson. After returning to business in New York City, the Colonel finds himself on a fast train to Chicago to oversee several western investments when he discovers that his Pullman porter is none other than Clarendon's black schoolmaster, Henry Taylor. Taylor had surreptitiously given up Bud Johnson to the police in order to exonerate an innocent white man unfairly pegged for the crime. He explains that after the Colonel left things didn't go very well for him:

Well, suh, the fact is that after you went away, it got out somehow that I had told on Bud Johnson....after that the coloured folks wouldn't send their children to me, and I lost my job, and wasn't able to get another job anywhere in the State. The folks said I was an enemy of my race, and, what was more important to me, I found that my race was an enemy to me. So I got out, suh, and I came No'th, hoping to find somethin' better.⁵⁶

While Taylor believed he might find "something better" up north, he realizes now that he's traded in one form of subordination for another. Waiting on rich white people in a Pullman car is a far cry from being a respected schoolmaster.⁵⁷ Taylor's language attests to his fallen fortunes. Earlier, Chesnutt noted that when conversing with the Colonel, Taylor lapsed "in his earnestness" from his usually precise "sir," to "suh."⁵⁸ Though Taylor used to sound every bit the erudite professional, now his "earnestness" has gotten the better of him. As he condescends to being a Pullman Porter, consciously or unconsciously Taylor knows that his

⁵⁶ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 292.

⁵⁷ Ironically, Chesnutt could not have foreseen that the Pullman Porters, organized by A. Philip Randolph under the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters would become the first African-American labor union and would be integral to the Post-WWII Civil Rights movement, pushing Roosevelt to draft Executive Order 8802 and the Fair Employment Act.

⁵⁸ Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 242.

education and eloquence are not only inconsequential to his new job, but are potential liabilities.

Taylor's parable neatly summarizes *The Colonel's Dream's* most important themes. After the Civil War, George Pullman, like those planter barons of the New South, saw in the freedmen a vast unemployed labor force ready to be exploited. He promoted his Pullman sleeping car not just for its luxury but also for its obsequious, black Porters. In this Northerners and members of the Southern middleclass could experience the trappings of Southern aristocracy well after the Civil War had ended.⁵⁹ By 1904, the Pullman Company was one of the most financially successful businesses in the United States, a fact not lost on the thousands of Pullman Porters who were notoriously overworked and underpaid.⁶⁰ Chesnutt understands that though Taylor possesses the desirable skills for anticipating white people's desires, his labor is still mired in an antebellum order that reinforces racial stereotypes—all for meager pay. In 1905 a Pullman Porter was merely another kind of Bud Johnson—workers caught within a retrograde system designed to keep them exploited. In fact, Porters could only earn a living wage through tips—a system so demeaning that some Porters called it “Uncle Tomming.”⁶¹ Maybe this is why Taylor's refuses the Colonel's “handsome tip” at the end of their meeting, saying that he “wa’n’t always [a Porter] and hope I won’t always be one.”⁶² The Pullman Porter expresses a particular paradox: the black man with endless mobility who remained stuck absolutely where they were.

Yet the novel's final caveat isn't found in this scene, but in the next. In the following

⁵⁹ Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 5.

⁶⁰ Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2004), 99.

⁶¹ Bates, 22.

⁶² Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 293.

paragraph Chesnutt explains that shortly after the Colonel “was able to find [Taylor] something better than menial employment, where his education would give him an opportunity for advancement.”⁶³ If the Colonel initially believed that business development was more effective than philanthropy, here Chesnutt implies that essentially philanthropy is the only option available. This ending gives the lie to the Washingtonian model of self-improvement. While Washington’s strategy depended upon white America’s consent, and often their donations, its trajectory was supposed to be clear: establishing an independent black economy through industrial education and self-improvement rhetoric. As head of the local school, Taylor represents this version of Washingtonian bootstrapping. But with its closing, his hasty flight north, and his subsequent job as a Pullman Porter, Taylor speaks not to the success of self-improvement but to its inability to adequately anticipate the structural predations of racial capitalism. That the Colonel provides Taylor with a job commensurate to his talents and education is not proof that the system works, but merely a piddling reminder that just as the convict lease program acts in capricious ways so too does progress, justice, and hope. When the two part ways, Taylor sees the Colonel’s charity as “as an extremely fortunate accident”⁶⁴ underscoring the truth that “fortunate accidents” are all one could hope for now.⁶⁵

One might see Chesnutt writing himself into the end of novel. Like Taylor, Chesnutt had been a schoolteacher in the South. Both had nursed bourgeois aspirations about how education might uplift the race, yet both eventually had to strain their optimism “through the sieve of common sense” (to borrow a line from our last chapter). In this, both discover

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 292.

⁶⁵ Compare this to the ending of *The Marrow of Tradition*, which while certainly apocalyptic cannot help but gesture to Olivia Carteret’s newfound moral growth.

what it is to live with and beyond a freedom that isn't free for African Americans in a new age of capital. Chesnutt's joint ambitions, literary fame and political activism fail but not for lack of talent. Instead of the people, it was the white publishing market that dictated whether or not he could continue writing. And in light of his increasingly moribund sales, first Houghton and then Doubleday decided that audiences simply didn't want Chesnutt. While he may have been speaking powerful truths, the profit margins for this kind of wisdom were not sustainable when compared to Thomas Dixon's Lost Cause romance *The Clansman* that, under Doubleday, sold nearly *a million* copies in 1905 alone.⁶⁶ Perhaps Chesnutt knew this all along, choosing unfettered truth over profit when he decided his dream of market fame had ended.

3.

In this final vignette, *The Colonel's Dream* ends with a trope specific to the pessimism of disfranchisement—the failed migration. Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of The Gods* (1902) tells a remarkably similar story about the impossibility of mobility when stuck in the realities of Jim Crow. While *The Colonel's Dream* centered upon a failed attempt to reform the system of racial capitalism, *The Sport of the Gods* fixes its attention on those who are at its whim. Here Dunbar demonstrates what black subjects reveal when the story is told from the bottom up. If in Chesnutt's Clarendon neither Bud nor Haines nor even the Colonel himself could imagine living in a world outside of an always-reinforcing system of “violent affections,” in *The Sport of the Gods* Dunbar describes an opposite scene with similar ends. Where the characters in *The Colonel's Dream* could not imagine new ways of

⁶⁶ Judith Jackson Fossett, *Race Consciousness: Reinterpretations for the New Century* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997), n. 5, pg 48.

feeling to the world, *The Sport of the Gods* is about the promises and failures of affective inventiveness. In Dunbar's novel, when his protagonists leave the South it is without hope, and when they return it is without nostalgia too. New cities and new lives for the "New Negro" require new affects to boot—but shaky, unstable, and deeply troubled ones.

Literary scholars see *The Sport of the Gods* as the earliest in a long tradition of black urban literature, stretching through to Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Ann Petry's *The Street*.⁶⁷ The novel tries to tell a conventional story as though it were exceptional. When Berry Hamilton is wrongfully accused and convicted of stealing from Maurice's brother, the Hamiltons flee the South in search of new lives. Fannie, Joe, and Kitty arrive in New York City's Tenderloin district where they quickly fall in with the wrong sort. Steered by vain ambitions, Kitty becomes a Broadway showgirl while Fannie finds a new husband whose drunkenness and abuse prove him to be everything that Berry is not. Joe, an impressionable young dandy looking for self-expression, establishes himself at the neighborhood watering hole, The Banner Club. Smitten by the club's seemingly swank atmosphere—and manipulated by its reprobate patrons—he quickly takes to the bottle. Now besotted by alcoholism and fueled by some deranged sense of resentment, he eventually murders his girlfriend Hattie in what serves as the story's climax. The novel swiftly concludes when Skaggs, a Banner Club regular and muckraker looking for a salacious newspaper story exonerates Berry of his crimes by venturing south and forcing Maurice Oakley into a full confession. Deeply ashamed that his profligate brother had, in fact, gambled away the money in question, Maurice flies into a fit of madness from which he never recovers. Finding his family broken and scattered, Berry reconciles with a newly

⁶⁷ See John Dudley, "Introduction: Naturalism and African American Culture," *Studies in American Naturalism* 1.1 (2012).

widowed Fannie and the two head back to the South.

To understand the novel, one must first consider Dunbar's background. By 1900, at age twenty-seven, Dunbar was the other most prominent black writer in the United States, having been catapulted to fame by the acclaim of William Dean Howells—just as Charles Chesnutt would be a few years later.⁶⁸ Like Chesnutt, Dunbar's early work was praised. His initial volumes of poetry *Oak and Ivy* (1893) and *Majors and Minors* (1895) garnered positive reviews but sold poorly. But unlike Chesnutt, Dunbar's career gained traction with *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* (1896), a collection that sold a modest but healthy 12,000 copies. While a ready white audience bolstered his popularity, Dunbar began to realize these readers only coveted his innocuous dialect verses while disregarding his standard English poems. Seeking opportunity and inspiration, Dunbar moved to Manhattan's Tenderloin district in 1898. As New York City's first black ghetto, the Tenderloin was unique for its "racial tolerance and professional opportunities"—along with its rampant crime and poverty.⁶⁹ Though Dunbar opposed Washington's strategies for industrial education in the South, he was equally concerned with the precariousness of black urban life in the North, often decrying the "poisonous" influence of the city on unsuspecting migrants.⁷⁰ In response to these Southern neophytes, Dunbar redoubled his literary efforts, writing increasingly more direct political essays and novels, while working and collaborating with a talented group of like-minded black artists in the Marshall Hotel.⁷¹ It was here that Dunbar found lucrative work as a lyricist for some of the most popular minstrel shows of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 80.

⁷⁰ Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*, 67.

⁷¹ Jonathan Daigle, "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism," *African American Review* 43.4 (2009): 633

the Progressive Era.

Dunbar's work in minstrelsy provides as an especially important frame. He lent his pen to numerous works, the most popular of which being Bert Williams and George Walker's *In Dahomey* (1903)—the first musical written and performed by an entirely black cast in a major house on Broadway. He may have been better known for his "coon shows" had it not been for the later intervention of scholars made uncomfortable by such seemingly pejorative lyrics.⁷² Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes Dunbar's minstrel writings as nothing more than an author exploiting himself for greed.⁷³ Yet this condemnation misunderstands Dunbar's work. These minstrel scripts illustrate a nuanced artist deftly entertaining white spectators while simultaneously speaking to his black viewers through undercutting satire.⁷⁴ In fact, satire was Dunbar's main mode. His popular poetry also engages in this kind of signifying. As Jonathan Daigle describes, "on the one hand, he braved racist misreadings to force a new idea of black abilities onto a doubting white public. On the other, his verse expresses layers of black interiority on frequencies whites could not or would not hear."⁷⁵ This is to say at a moment of intense racial violence in the South before the Harlem Renaissance, minstrelsy offered a genre for political dissent and black solidarity when, for Dunbar, neither nostalgia nor utopia were appropriate. Perhaps the most revealing motivation comes from Dunbar's diary when In 1900, after witnessing with horror as race riots ravaged the Tenderloin, Dunbar set out to write a melodrama that

⁷²Ibid., 639.

⁷³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 174.

⁷⁴ Daigle, "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism," 634.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 637.

could offer practical training to the waves of “untrained negroes” arriving daily into the city.⁷⁶

To understand Dunbar’s critique in *The Sport of the Gods*, one could return to the self-help rhetoric discussed in my previous chapter. Berry and his family begin the story as the prototypical bourgeois African-American family navigating the continued uncertainty of post-Reconstruction life. They whole-heartedly adopt the Protestant, Victorian practices expertly detailed in *The College of Life*’s hundreds of pages of black self-improvement. In effect, Dunbar’s Hamiltons are the ideal consumers of this kind of literature—their middle-class aspirations so engrained that when the white patriarch Maurice Oakley marries he remarks, “there’s no telling when Berry will be following my example and be taking a wife unto himself.”⁷⁷ *The Sport of the Gods* demonstrates how in adopting the language of bourgeois subjectivity so synonymous with self-help discourse, the Hamiltons sew their eponymous fate. Take the advice offered in *The College of Life*: “a man who has a bank account is never ignored, whether his account is large or small. It means something substantial, and you feel more like holding up your head and looking at the sun without a smoked glass.”⁷⁸ True enough, the town’s white patriarchs cannot ignore Berry’s savings account when they investigate a theft at the Oakley home. Though earned legitimately, Berry’s savings prove his guilt to a white jury and sets in motion the family’s complete

⁷⁶ 1902 was the “nadir” of race relations, or as Charles Chesnutt says “post-bellum, pre-Harlem.” See Wooley, “The Necessary Fictions of Charles Chesnutt’s *The Colonel’s Dream*,” 359.

⁷⁷ Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods* (New York: Dodd Mead Co., 1902) 2.

⁷⁸ Joseph R. Gay, Henry Davenport Northrop, and Irvine Garland Penn, *The College of Life, or Practical Self-Educator* (Chicago: Chicago Publication and Lithograph Co., 1895), 156.

destruction. Jonathan Daigle describes *The Sport of the Gods* as a critique of “‘uplift’ strategies that rely on white recognition.”⁷⁹ Jilmarie Murphy and Bridget Tsemo independently argue that the Hamilton’s investment in Washingtonian strategies of racial compliance is what actually damns them in the end. While this might sound correct, these critics misconstrue the respectability politics of 1902. At the time both Washington *and* Du Bois advocated this same uplift strategy to an aspiring black bourgeoisie who had lost social equality and political representation.

Yet though the Hamiltons might think themselves good members of the aspirational middle class, they have not actually been following the rules. Their bank account does not testify to their resourcefulness, but only confuses their dependence on the Oakleys with self-reliance. The novel’s first pages illustrate this when the Hamlitons draw the resentment of the town’s black community. In response, the narrator casually muses, “when has not the aristocrat been the target for the plebeian’s sneers?”⁸⁰ This kind of class hierarchy among the town’s black society speaks to the ways that the Hamiltons are still invested in an antebellum racial hierarchy perilously dependent upon white favor. Yet while they may self-identify as the black *upper* class, Dunbar sarcastically shows that there was really no such thing when it is transitively applied. Within hours of the alleged theft, Berry is imprisoned and his modest savings confiscated by the town’s white oligarchy, demonstrating to readers that black property is never really their property at all when white honor is at stake. In fact the racial hierarchies of this unnamed southern town are so strong that after Berry’s imprisonment the black community quickly distances itself from

⁷⁹ Daigle, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,” 643.

⁸⁰ Dunbar, *The Sport, of the Gods*, 4.

the Hamiltons: “the strong influence of slavery was still operative, and with one accord they turned away from one of their own kind upon whom had been set the ban of the white people's displeasure.”⁸¹ Even with their disapproving critique, the black community remains organized by the same antebellum system that ensnared the Hamiltons. It might be that this entire town cannot help but confuse social status with independence—what would become the Hamilton’s first tragic mistake. Without access to a strong self-sustaining and wholly independent black community, the family finds that they have no support.

In this, *The Sport of the Gods* complicates the terms of self-reliance. Dunbar makes this obvious through Joe Hamilton. Like his father, Joe only cuts hair for white patrons. In the process, he absorbs certain expectations about the world that Dunbar deems morally reprehensible: “[from] scraping the chins of aristocrats [Joe] came to imbibe some of their ideas, and rather too early in life bid fair to be a dandy.”⁸² While Joe’s dream to become a dandy predates his exposure to city life, he becomes permanently enamored of this lifestyle as soon as he sets foot in the Tenderloin. There he finds a previously unknown world of young black men who have cultivated independent styles and attitudes: “He looked with a new feeling at the swaggering, sporty young negroes. His attitude towards them was not one of humble self-depreciation any more. Since last night he had grown, and felt that he might, that he would, be like them, and it put a sort of chuckling glee into his heart.”⁸³ Joe understands that his father’s brand of bourgeois respectability failed to protect him and his family from the whims of white America. In these “swaggering, sporty young negroes,” Joe

⁸¹ Ibid., 26.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

⁸³ Ibid., 56.

finds what he thinks to be a nascent black culture wholly independent of the judgments, and hierarchies, of the white world. What is important here is that though these “sporty young negroes” might be freed from Southern racial orders, they are not free from Joe’s particularly entrenched desires for social status above all else. Though the Tenderloin offers to Joe a form of identity divorced from Southern society, it also plays right into the class-based desires that had so distanced the Hamiltons from the black community of their Southern town. Though the substance is different the promise is still the same.

Yet Joe’s newfound aspirations are not warmly met. Fannie laments that he is heading down a dark road, as “a biggity po’ niggah is a ‘bomination befo’ de face of de Lawd.”⁸⁴ Fannie’s fears are echoed by the narrator who harshly insists that Joe’s quasi-“growth” actually stages his fall into alcoholism and murder. Though Joe may be travelling a path to self-actualization, it is not, importantly, *self-determination*. Dunbar clarifies this point for his readers:

One might find it in him to feel sorry for this small-souled, warped being, for he was so evidently the jest of Fate, if it were not that he was so blissfully, so conceitedly, unconscious of his own nastiness. Down home he had shaved the wild young bucks of the town, and while doing it drunk in eagerly their unguarded narrations of their gay exploits. So he had started out with false ideals as to what was fine and manly. He was afflicted by a sort of moral and mental astigmatism that made him see everything wrong.⁸⁵

Dunbar argues that maybe Berry’s wrongful incarceration could have spurred a more intellectually astute Joe to something else. While the “wrongness” of Joe’s vision might be clear from his tragic fall to alcoholism, the opposing “rightness” is never addressed. This makes the narrator’s language of Joe’s failed “manhood” even more troubling. It trades in

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 56.

the same tropes of masculinity simultaneously used by white supremacists of the time to justify campaigns of lynching and violence.⁸⁶ In this way, manhood was a fraught—if not dangerous—marker for young black men in the South.

This gets to the heart of the novel. In the complicated social landscape of Jim Crow, black people had few options for growth not already sanctioned by white America. What Dunbar argues is that Joe's fall to vice happens not because he desires transformation, but because he confuses the Banner Club for being *the only* institution by which can transform. Soon after attending a show at the theatre Joe becomes inspired "with a desire to go to work and earn money on his own, to be independent both of paternal help and control, and so be able to spend as he pleased."⁸⁷ Taken on its own Joe's actions demonstrate virtues, not vices. His desire to free himself from paternalism—which could be Berry as much as it could be the white world—speaks not to his innate moral flaws but to the tortuous avenues of becoming he identifies around him. Even Dunbar's description of the Banner Club as a place where "false idealism and fevered ambition come face to face with catering cupidity" makes this point clear.⁸⁸ It is not a club or dandy culture that catalyzes Joe's nascent viciousness, but the specific predatory characteristics of this particularly vile saloon that seize upon his "false idealism" and seal his fate. Daigle claims, "*Sport* defines conventional racial identity as fictions that warp those who mistake them for realities."⁸⁹ Correctly so, the novel—like Joe himself—cannot separate positive from negative examples of black identity. His tragic flaw was not that he wanted to be somebody, but was that the

⁸⁶ For more see Daniel P. Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: A Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery*, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1997).

⁸⁷ Dunbar, *The Sport, of the Gods*, 109.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁹ Daigle, "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism," 646.

somebody he chose to be was the first and only somebody he ever saw; and that his ways forward—along with forms of self-expression—are forestalled by the gravity of the Banner Club and the designs of its patrons. It is not that Joe should not have wanted to be a man; it is just that he mistook the men that he saw on the street and in the bar as being the only options available.

In this way one can see how Dunbar's ambitions in *The Sport of the Gods* are the same pedagogical ambitions found in black self-help rhetoric of the period. The Hamiltons live in a world where forms of personhood seem to come in two sizes: white ones, and broken ones. When Joe believes that he's discovered an outside to the paternalistic designs of capitalist exploitation he finds ruin instead of success. Why would Dunbar be so pessimistic when it comes to Joe's fate? Importantly, he condemns Joe *without* invoking the power of the white world by portraying a version of the Tenderloin filled only with predators and charlatans. As Reynolds J. Scott-Childress says, "the degradation of the Hamiltons occurs without any direct (or even indirect) confrontation with white supremacy," finally explaining that their dissipation comes from "a thoroughly middle-class yearning."⁹⁰ In so doing, *The Sport of the Gods* illustrates how even seemingly emancipatory forms of culture, found here in the Banner Club, also hold the potential for abuse and destruction—a crucial lesson for black men and women who have attached themselves to the affect of bourgeois self-help without understanding its limits. While fleeing the South for freedom and opportunity in the North may, at first, seem like a good bet, Dunbar wants readers to know that places like the Tenderloin are filled with more dangers than they could ever anticipate. Joe's downfall comes not because he has ambitions, or that he has

⁹⁰ Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, "Paul Laurence Dunbar, New Yorker," *New York History* 92.3 (2011): 199.

ambitions to be a *somebody*, but because his ambitions attach to the wrong object, follow specious advice, and, most importantly, disregard the few morsels of wisdom that he's been given. These come to him in the form of Sadness, a character Dunbar poses as a certain transitional figure. He will prove that surviving in the urban North means not acquiescing to latent genres of identity but making new ones altogether.

Sadness is one of the most singular characters in the black literary tradition.⁹¹ "He serves as the Banner Club's "part-time *raisonneur*,"⁹² and though he plays only a minor role, he delivers some of the novel's most significant monologues. Having fled the South after his father is lynched ("with a very good rope and by the best citizens of Texas"⁹³) Sadness has crafted a complicated affective identity more suitable for that other, real, haunt, Dunbar's Marshall Hotel. Upon meeting Joe, Sadness immediately recognizes the young man's naivety, lecturing: "you are a fool. Your case isn't half as bad as that of nine-tenths of the fellows that hang around here."⁹⁴ He goes on to elaborate his own suffering, sarcastically explaining that as "grateful" as he should be for being the victim of mob violence, he instead only feels "ungratefully sad."⁹⁵ His brand of wisdom is sphinxlike: "You see Hamilton, in this life we are all suffering from fever" Then pointing to an inebriate down the bar he explains that this man lives on money his father left to him: "He spent his two thousand learning. But, after all, it was a good investment. It was like buying an annuity, he begins to

⁹¹ Dunbar, *The Sport, of the Gods*, 63.

⁹² Myles Hurd, "Blackness and Borrowed Obscurity: Another Look at Dunbar's: *The Sport of the Gods*," *Callaloo* 11.13 (1981): 91.

⁹³ Dunbar, *The Sport, of the Gods*, 83.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

know already how to live on others as they have lived on him.”⁹⁶ This man, like Sadness—like Joe will become—will “go on his way until, broken and useless.”⁹⁷ Sadness concludes, “oh it’s a fine, rich life, my lad. I know you’ll like it.” Yet his caution merely makes Joe feel “wonderfully ‘in it’” and nothing more.⁹⁸ Perhaps for Joe feeling “in it” means choosing a kind of ignorant optimism in face of these discouraging words. Given unassailable advice to steer him away from ruin, Joe cannot make sense of Sadness’s rhetoric, instead falling to a world that he’s unwittingly, but willingly, accepted.

Yet, if he so obviously didn’t get it, why wouldn’t Sadness dumb down his language to get through to Joe? Perhaps retuning to the novel’s original impetus might help. Recall that *The Sport of the Gods* originated from the New York race riots of 1900 and Dunbar’s fear at the waves of “untrained negroes” flooding into the city. Maybe Sadness speaks so strangely because surviving as a traumatized migrant means needing a new syntax and tone. That Joe can only glean something “wonderful” from these caveats speaks not just to his alcoholic stupor but to his essential illiteracy in this regard. The only way for Joe to break from his fate would be for him to begin to delaminate himself from the genres of coolness that had so enrapt him when he saw those “sporty young negroes” on his first day in the Tenderloin. Then he would have to begin the process of building new affects that attach differently to the world. Dunbar seems to be saying that if he can’t read Sadness, what chance would Joe have navigating the myriad predations of the city—to say, of freedom?

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 84.

But Sadness's persona does not merely serve as an instructive function. It is doing much more. In fact literary scholars continue to actively interpret him through their logic of the novel. He has been labeled variously a dandy, a bohemian, a Wildean flaneur, and a homosexual.⁹⁹ Bernard Bell calls him "the first blues figure in the Afro-American novel;"¹⁰⁰ while Jonathan Daigle and James Smethurst independently see Sadness as a fictionalized incarnation of Broadway minstrel stars Bert Williams and George Walker.¹⁰¹ In some ways all of these proposed identities are equivalent. They understand that Sadness bears a disaffected, or differently affected attitude towards both the urban metropolis and his own grief.¹⁰² All of these readings presume that Sadness engages in a cultural performance that comes from beyond the stultifying confines of the novel—as a kind of nascent black modernist. While he might share much with Modernist expression of the period, calling him such misses the point. It is not just his urbanity that matters, but his trauma and heartbreak too. What he invents marks a new kind of affect drawn against the contours, or the in the aftermath of Jim Crow America.

Maybe it's simplest to rely on Dunbar, whose well-known poem, "We Wear the Mask," explains: "With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, | And mouth with myriad subtleties."¹⁰³ If Sadness is a fictionalized stand-in for Bert Williams then his strange mixture of gloom and cheer resonates. By the beginning of the twentieth century white

⁹⁹ James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 168.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 71.

¹⁰¹ Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, 167. Critics have also compared Williams and Walker to the minstrel figure of Zip Coon. For more on black dandyism at the turn of the century see Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009).

¹⁰² As Du Bois says of young urban black men in the South, "he must flatter and be pleasant, endure petty insults with a smile, shut his eyes to wrong; in too many cases he sees positive personal advantage in deception and lying," Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 204

¹⁰³ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd Mead Co., 1896), 167.

audiences expected black minstrel performers to wear blackface in order to heighten the buffoonery.¹⁰⁴ It was common practice. This strange redundancy, as Sadiya Hartmann observes, “restages the seizure and possession of the black body for the other’s use and enjoyment.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, Bert Williams’s success on stage came from his ability to gesture towards the context of his performance—appearing cheerful and morose often at the same time.¹⁰⁶ Yet as critics have explained, Williams’ jolly emotional buffoonery masked sad knowledge. His sadness indexed the pain he feels in potentially reinforcing black stereotypes for a white audience. In this light, though Dunbar, Williams, and Walker might have all believed that they were undercover agents, so to speak, deftly showcasing the complexities of real black life, they also knew that were reluctantly proving the opposite as well. This is the kind of double-bind that James Weldon Johnson describes when he explains that “the Negro in the United States has achieved or been placed in a certain artistic niche.”¹⁰⁷ Minstrel shows like *In Dahomey* proved the artistic capabilities and market success of black artists, while simultaneously reducing black cultural production to the “niche” of the stereotypical plantation ducky. While it may seem simple to equate Sadness with the minstrel type, Sadness’s sadness does not derive, like Williams’ and Walker’s, from guilt in propagating racial stereotypes. Instead, Sadness’s sadness comes from the wealth of pain he carries. His sadness stands in for a kind of generic sadness common to all the members of the Banner Club. As their wisest patron he wears the mask—not for others, but for himself.

¹⁰⁴ David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) 101.

¹⁰⁵ Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31.

¹⁰⁶ Daigle, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,” 633.

¹⁰⁷ James Weldon Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co, 1922), xli.

Joe and Sadness represent two possibilities within the same history of white prejudice and violence in the South. While Sadness faces his past, Joe blithely does not. This is one of Dunbar's most salient points. Joe sought dandyism, Hattie, and the Banner Club as the promise to be "somebody" outside the paternalism of racial capital and legal prejudice in the South.¹⁰⁸ What Dunbar wants to demonstrate here is that the dandy or the somebody is merely a heuristic for a thing that may not actually exist. This is to say that when Joe mistakenly understands Sadness's warnings as making him feel "wonderfully in it" he might not actually be wrong. Because as Dunbar will prove, being "in it" ultimately means living a wounded life characterized by despair, insecurity, addiction, and finally destruction. Sadness demonstrates what it looks like to live with this pain. Joe's path, on the other hand, proves what it looks like to die by it.

This is a story without winners. In Sadness one sees what happens when young Southern black men are unfortunately traumatized by the violence of Jim Crow but lucky enough to escape North. But when he arrives he finds not sanctuary but instead illegible people and illegible predations. Becoming Sadness is not a way to signify between registers, but a way to recollect past trauma into something pliable to allow for continued living. Perhaps what Sadness demonstrates may be the only way out—that of the disaffected artist. Like Chesnutt's final self-conscious moment in *The Colonel's Dream*, Sadness bleeds between the needs of Dunbar's melodrama and the modes of real life. One might see him as a fictional member of the Marshall Hotel, plopped down before Joe to give him the kind of counsel Dunbar would have provided. But unlike one of Dunbar's minstrel performers, Sadness does not wear the mask of false cheer, but its opposite. His sadness is

¹⁰⁸ As Kit says of Joe once he's begun his descent into alcoholism, "Joe's somebody now." See *The Sport of the Gods*, 93.

real and on the surface. What Sadness teaches is that there is no form of emancipation from this life. All one can do is become adept to the suffering of others, speak subversively while being all smiles, *play* the dandy like the coon, the darkie, and the buffoon without risking any intrinsic identity for fear that it might be pillaged, again, by Jim Crow America. This pessimism gets to the heart of the problem: what to do when one's *only* real mobility is to or from one's self.

Sadness demonstrates one version of what it looks to stay attached to life once democracy, safety, and economic prosperity are taken away.¹⁰⁹ His place in *The Sport of the Gods* underscores the stakes of the novel's conclusion—a scene that has plagued critics trying to make a political project out of Dunbar's specific brand of literary pessimism. On the final page, Fannie and Berry turn “southward, back to the only place they could call home. Surely the people could not be cruel to them now, and even if they were, they felt that after what they had endured no wound had power to give them pain.”¹¹⁰ Now haunted by the cries from the big house, Fannie and Berry huddle together, alone. As Dunbar explains, “It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own.”¹¹¹ Thus the Hamiltons return, at the end, to the scene of the crime—or one could say, the scene of someone else's crime. Why come back to the

¹⁰⁹ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁰ Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*, 176. See also Angela Weld Grimke's poem echoes, “No sight may wound / our worn-out eyes.” Angelina Weld Grimke, “Surrender,” in *The Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*, ed. Carolivia Herron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 401.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

unsympathetic hamlet from which they were so bitterly expelled? Jeanne King argues that they “re-enslave” themselves because they “fail to examine their past,” while Bridget Tsemo Harris optimistically claims that because Berry and Fannie experience “pain and growth in the North,” they return home to face “insurmountable adversity with dignity and strength.”¹¹² These readings judge how the Hamiltons should or should not have behaved to recuperate a kind of tidy spiritual calculus for Dunbar’s readers.

What these readings fail to recognize is that when black Southerners like Sadness or Berry and Fannie Hamilton are betrayed by their world, they must scavenge with what they know.¹¹³ The Hamiltons may have gleaned something else from *The College of Life* when it tells readers that “most of us have had troubles in all our lives, and each day has brought more evil than we wished to endure [...] To-day’s troubles look large, but a week hence they will be forgotten and buried out of sight.”¹¹⁴ Indirectly, Dunbar is questioning how *The College of Life’s* advice could possibly uplift the Hamiltons as they waste away on the old plantation. The couple cannot perform this kind of forgetting as, “many a night thereafter they sat together with clasped hands listening to the shrieks of the madman across the yard and thinking of what he had brought to them and to himself.”¹¹⁵ Berry and Fannie have become consummate trouble-bearers. And though they’ve achieved the superhuman ability to endure, it does not mean that their life is “a happy one.” Endurance—though admirable—only keeps one living, but not necessarily attached, enamored, or enlarged.

¹¹² Jeanne King, “Memory and Repression in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*,” in *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality*, ed. Harrell, Willie J. Jr. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010), 177.

Bridget Harris Tsemo, “The Politics of Self-Identity in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*,” *The Southern Literary Journal*, 41.2 (2009): 24.

¹¹³ I borrow the term from Lauren Berlant who uses it both in *Cruel Optimism*, and in her monograph *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn NY: Punctum Books, 2012), 13.

¹¹⁴ *The College of Life*, 127

¹¹⁵ Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*, 176.

Even though their old happy world is gone, Berry and Fannie return in the vain attempt to find something. When democracy fails capitalism moves in, and when capitalism fails, the Hamiltons unravel from any kind of production: economic, domestic, or even affective.¹¹⁶

Perhaps their lack of nostalgia is telling. In her work on Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*, Jennifer Fleissner considers the prevalence of the nostalgia *cachexia Africana* in nineteenth-century America.¹¹⁷ Reports of this racialized homesickness often included depression, dirt eating, and death. As a medical phenomenon, this nostalgia was used as evidence that the black sensorium was maladjusted to reason, intelligence, and the modern world.¹¹⁸ Yet, tellingly, Berry and Fannie return home "without complaint," specifically numb to their wounds. Dunbar, in portraying the Hamiltons as stoic, is also reversing these racial stereotypes. Black people's presumed inferiority—now codified into sociological truth—explained to many white, Southern politicians why they were such seemingly inept actors in competitive capitalism.¹¹⁹ Yet at end of novel it is Maurice Oakley who decompensates into madness by virtue of his unrestrained affects—not the Hamiltons. Though of pure protestant blood, Maurice Oakley descends into a fit of hysteria from which he never recovers all because of his *brother's* crime. His aristocratic sensitivity is too overdeveloped, Dunbar suggests, to endure even a fraction of the suffering that the Hamiltons must endure.

¹¹⁶ As Clifford Geertz says of Yakihamas, "what sort of whatness, are they now to have? What sort of place in the world does an 'ex-primitive' have?" See Clifford Geertz, *Life Among the Anthros, and Other Essays* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 130.

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Fleissner, "Earth-Eating, Addition, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt's Diasporic Regionalism" *Studies in Romanticism*, 49.2 (2010): 324.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹¹⁹ James B. McKee, *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 28.

In Maurice's insanity one might see that, just as in the end of *The Colonel's Dream*, both white and black people are collateral damage to the predations of capitalism when they cannot disentangle themselves from the promise of status and belonging offered through antiquated racial hierarchies. Indeed, the "infinitely stronger" "Will" which punctuates the novel's final line may not be a divine Fate, but instead the titular *sport* of the white world under consumer capital. Berry is freed only because of the caprice of the journalist Skaggs, a man who reduces Berry to the occasion for some tidy profit. So too are Berry and Fannie given a home to return to at Leslie Oakley's discretion. While the Oakleys might as well be the Hamilton's gods—for the Hamiltons seem to live helplessly at their behest—the Oakley's "gods" are, in turn, the vestiges of a tattered Southern tradition. As is in *The Colonel's Dream*, the antebellum tradition of "honor" and heredity were precious commodities to the Southern aristocracy. But now that men like Chesnutt's Fetters have come to take over the means of economic and now cultural production all that is left in the Lost Cause South is an "honor" rapidly dwindling in value.

The Sport of the Gods contends that black and white lives are neither determined by racial natures nor merely by their environment. Dunbar demonstrates that the scientific justifications for racial prejudice—the "will" of the novel's final sentence—are not merely that of the white world, but also a history of capture, enslavement, and destruction all listed under the banner of capitalism. That same year, Du Bois argued that the real challenge will be "how best to keep these millions from brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and co-operation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future."¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 107.

Both the Hamiltons *and* the Oakleys live now brooding over their wounds. And, in a masterstroke of irony, it is their very pain that has led Leslie Oakley to welcome the Hamiltons back to their scene of suffering. Thus Dunbar builds a perverted allegory of Du Bois's optimistic rhetoric, suggesting that cooperation might only happen not when both white and black families win, but when they lose.

After politics no longer offered hope, some black people grasped at self-help fantasies promising that the United States was now a bourgeois meritocracy. *The Sport of the Gods* and *The Colonel's Dream* oppose this façade, accounting from different perspectives for how it feels to be failed, over and over again. While Emancipation initially seemed splendid, by 1890 black citizens knew it to be a pyrrhic victory exposing even greater dangers than slavery at the hands of legalized economic exploitation. In this, Colonel French, Bud Johnson, Henry Taylor and Berry, Fannie, and Joe Hamilton all find their ardent attempts to flee for or from their pain to safety and prosperity lead always back to the very start. While the Great Migration was still twenty years away from the publication date of these two novels, they help tell a story about the affective inventions necessary when trapped in racist Southern towns or big Northern cities. Both describe a reality outside of politics and development where the old rules no longer apply and the new rules might not either. Historians often argue that the violence of Jim Crow pushed nearly four million black people out of the Cotton Belt to the manufacturing centers of the urban north. What *The Colonel's Dream* and *The Sport of the Gods* illustrates is that new

forms of industrial capitalism are taking away economic avenues to black flourishing, as sharecropping and exploitation become the only forms of labor in the New South.

Without reason to support any kind of optimistic attachment to the world by patriarchal whites or economically free blacks, Dunbar and Chesnutt leave their readers with narratives of mental illness and depression. A new mill, a new suit of clothes, a new haircut, a new schoolhouse—all of these objects promised the condition for the possibility of flourishing in a world of endless capitalist production. When these objects cannot deliver their promises, men like Bud Johnson and Berry Hamilton realize that the only thing they have left in this world is a body partially pillaged by white America and an affective sensorium now adapted, maybe too well, to the pains of living in the present.

Ultimately this is a white story too—about how the southern aristocracy in Mr. and Mrs. Oakley become shattered and deformed in their attachment to honor and their insistence on a retrograde version of paternalistic whiteness staked upon black bodies. Even the Colonel's paternalism, though well intentioned, cannot get past an intractable system of Southern economic exploitation, demonstrating that Northern Liberal paternalism is as equally fraught as the Southern variety. As I will show in my next chapter, the Oakleys represent an entire genre of Southern identity staked upon a retrograde version of Lost Cause sentimental culture that, according to one writer, will disappear by virtue not of politics, but evolution.

Chapter Four: An Old South Turned New: The Generic as Genetic in Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia*

1.

Ellen Glasgow was supposed to be a household name. The Virginian novelist rose to fame in the first decades of the twentieth century through her distinct brand of psychological realism and strong female protagonists. Set her apart from her contemporary Southern sentimentalists, by the middle of the century Glasgow had become arguably the most famous Southern author in the United States.¹ Yet the winds of literary immorality often change overnight.² Beginning in the 1950s William Faulkner came to supplant Glasgow's regional monopoly in the American canon—a change reflected in anthologies of the period and likely brought on by emerging New Critical tastes.³ Since then Glasgow's books have been relegated to the margins of literary criticism. And though she penned over twenty novels (and won the Pulitzer in 1942), Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925) remains her most critically acclaimed and influential novel. As a "New Woman," the novel's heroine, Dorinda Oakley represents Glasgow's personally held commitment to women's suffrage and independence. Dorinda—daughter to a struggling and stubborn Virginia tobacco farmer—falls for the town's most fitting and most milquetoast suitor Jason Greylock. When he unexpectedly breaks off their engagement to shack up with a wealthy and supercilious

¹ Her novel *In This Our Life* (1941) won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1942 and by 1949 she had tied Sarah Orne Jewett on UNESCO's list of influential American novelists, a distinction further testified to by her frequent representation in the most prominent literary anthologies of the decade. See Joseph Csicsila, *Canons By Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literature Anthologies*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 202.

² Even H.L. Mencken's famous polemic "Sahara of the Bozart" bemoaned the state of Southern literature while completely overlooking the fact that Glasgow had already eight novels to her name—many enjoying immense popular success.

³ Joseph Csicsila, *Canons By Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literature Anthologies* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 202.

former lover, Dorinda is emotionally devastated. Over time she learns to eschew romance and rationally remake her domestic sphere in the image of a life of independence. After turning her late father's infertile acres into a thriving dairy farm, Dorinda marries the town's most deserving and morally upright man—with affection but without love—and lives the rest of her days nurturing a new sense of existential enlightenment. As the third novel in Glasgow's "woman's trilogy," *Barren Ground* testifies to its author's enduring interest in liberated and empowered women who accept modernity to remake the Old South. This interest consistently carries through nearly all of her collected works.

It is for these very reasons that *Barren Ground's* predecessor, *Virginia* (1913)—the first part in this trilogy—continues to intrigue readers and scholars. One need only compare the plot lines to see just how incongruous *Virginia* is. As a young woman, Virginia Pendleton perfectly embodies her parents' two strains of goodly Victorian Protestantism, categorically adopting "the doctrine that a natural curiosity about the universe is the beginning of infidelity."⁴ Well before any nuptials, Virginia fears adultery, not in her romantic relationships, but in her narrowly held vision of a pure, chaste, and chivalric world.⁵ As the most wholesome young woman in the small town of Dinwiddie, Virginia, she finds herself naturally attracted to Oliver Treadwell, tortured playwright and prodigal nephew to the local tobacco mogul and railroad president, Cyrus Treadwell. However, her attraction comes not from youthful infatuation but from "an importunate desire for the coming of the lover to whom she had been taught to look as to the fulfillment of her

⁴ Ellen Glasgow, *Virginia* (New York: Doubleday and Page Co, 1913): 22.

⁵ For more on adultery in American literature see Margaret Thickstun, *Fictions of the Feminine* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

womanhood.”⁶ Just as her father had “married by accident the one woman who was made for him,” Virginia believes, paradoxically, that she too is meant for Oliver simply because he will be the man she marries.⁷ Alternately, Oliver views Virginia as both “lovely, loving,” and “unselfish” and the “the perfect flower of sex specialization... designed by Providence only for the delight and the sanctification of man.”⁸

It turns out that this infatuation with sentimental romance is the only thing the two newlyweds share. After the honeymoon, they realize that their inner lives are nearly inscrutable to one another. Though Virginia follows her mother’s example as a tireless domestic servant, Oliver cares little about her tedious housework, yearning instead for her to become his artistic and intellectual confidant. He comes to recognize, however, that “as a wife, Virginia was perfect; as a mental companion, she barely existed at all.”⁹ Over the years Virginia bears three children to whom she is completely and utterly devoted while Oliver expresses only the mildest interest. Yet by adulthood, her children Lucy, Henry, and Jenny have all outgrown the South and their sentimental mother as well. So too has Oliver. By the time he finally hits it big on Broadway, Oliver and Virginia lead completely separate existences. When she joins him for the premiere of his much-anticipated new production, Virginia suddenly discovers a truth that she had kept from herself for over a year (on page 475 for that matter): Oliver has been cheating on her with the starlet Margaret Oldcastle. Emotionally shattered, Virginia lacks the ability to seriously confront Oldcastle or Oliver, instead succumbing to a sense of polite Southern feminine virtue that “cost her a thing far

⁶ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

dearer than life - her happiness.”¹⁰ With only the courage to endure, Virginia retreats to Dinwiddie to await her errant children, heartbroken and alone.

Virginia Pendleton lacks, in all matters, Dorinda Oakley’s competency, ambition, and nerve. Where *Barren Ground* is a realist *bildungsroman* about the awakening and then growth of Dorinda into consciousness, *Virginia* is a novel of manners turned agonizing tragedy featuring a conspicuously anemic heroine. What would account for this? Why would Glasgow devote an entire novel to such an uncharacteristically weak protagonist—especially in her series about woman’s liberation? The novel’s most pivotal scene offers a clue. When Virginia barges into Margaret Oldcastle’s New York apartment in order to confront the starlet about her affair with Oliver, any reader versed in sentimental themes would expect fireworks. Instead, Virginia, the patron daughter of Southern womanhood, realizes that Margaret Oldcastle

stood... for the free woman; and her freedom, like that of man, had been built upon the strewn bodies of the weaker. The law of sacrifice, which is the basic law of life, ruled here as it ruled in mother-love and in the industrial warfare of men. Her triumph was less the triumph of the individual than of the type. The justice not of society, but of nature, was on her side, for she was one with evolution and with the resistless principle of change....Vaguely, without knowing that she realized these things, Virginia felt that the struggle was useless.¹¹

Though Margaret Oldcastle plays the home wrecker, Glasgow pardons her actions as merely the “triumph” of “nature” over the “weak.” But wouldn’t sentimental readers expect Virginia to get her revenge against this adulterous reprobate—or at least to find the courage to express her own self-worth? And why would Glasgow pose Oldcastle’s victory

¹⁰ Ibid., 487.

¹¹ Ibid., 486.

not in the language of morality, but that of science and evolution, where innate biological imperatives—what Glasgow calls “the law of sacrifice”—pull the strings?

Answering these questions means uncovering a drama hidden within the seemingly conventional confines of *Virginia*. As I will show, Glasgow’s point was never to prove how strong Virginia Pendleton is nor even that she’s *capable* of being strong. This sensational moment of spousal infidelity becomes practically irrelevant. Instead, Virginia is merely a vestige of the Old South—a stereotyped stand-in for the faded Southern sentimental culture so eagerly championed through popular Lost Cause fiction of the period. As a twentieth-century New Women, Margaret Oldcastle along with Oliver’s “energetic and capable” sister Susan Treadwell “typify” the larger forces of industrialization that swept across the South.¹² This generational tension between Old and New, is, as I wrote in the previous chapter, a story about how Northern investors and select Southern planter aristocrats installed a conglomerated industrial system that replicated slave capitalism through nefarious and legal forms of racial exploitation. These new economic alliances looked a lot like the old ones, where aspiring white farmers who may have gained some economic mobility during Reconstruction found their small farms unfairly burdened by taxes that the largest industrialists happily avoided.¹³ While most whites that were poor before the war remained poor after, a few Southerners became self-made men (illustrated by Oliver’s uncle Cyrus Treadwell or Mr. Fetters of Chesnutt’s *The Colonel’s Dream*). Finally, new versions of prejudice based upon advances in sociology and biology became crucial to this sleight of hand as it justified both racial violence and class warfare.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Stein, “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

While many scholars see *Virginia* as merely a maturation point in Glasgow's literary career, few note the novel's most powerful historical arguments. Pamela Matthews understands the novel as "tragic rather than ironic" in how Virginia "internalize[s] standards of male-defined womanhood."¹⁵ Linda Wagner agrees with Ellen Glasgow's own summation that the book portrays a "tragedy of a single dream of identity;"¹⁶ while others such as Dorothy Scura see in one of the novel's minor characters, Susan Treadwell, an important blueprint for the liberated New Woman. Many too see *Virginia* as a prime example of Glasgow's staunch interest in evolutionary theory, prompting Martha Patterson to conclude that in the novel "the rhetoric of Darwinism legitimates the New Woman's ascent."¹⁷ Though all of this critical commentary dutifully notes Glasgow's interest in evolutionism and her growing pathos for Virginia Pendleton as the soon-to-be-extinct vestige of a Southern Victorian type, these scholars have also missed the big picture, so to speak.

In this chapter I demonstrate how *Virginia* stages two parallel stories: the triumph of the New Woman over the Old, and the triumph of the New South over the remains of the Confederacy. If my first chapter was about what comes before the rise of Lost Cause mythology in the South, this chapter is about what comes after. While *Virginia* rarely strays from Virginia Pendleton's intimate existence, in the periphery are set-pieces that should be common to both Glasgow's contemporary audience and readers of this dissertation alike: the Confederacy's defeat, the exploitation of the South under Northern investment after

¹⁵ Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 82.

¹⁶ Glasgow, *Virginia*, xxi, quoted in Linda Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 47.

¹⁷ Martha Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 142.

Reconstruction, and the rise of capitalist massification posed through the language of Darwinian thought. In this, Glasgow tells a story of socioeconomic historical change located not on the scale of the State but that of the individual. This argument only becomes clear when one sees how Virginia Pendleton, as the prototypical antebellum Southern woman, embodies the distorted and aggrandized nostalgia of Lost Cause sentimental culture. Glasgow, as a suffragist and strongly independent woman, chafed under the bigoted and sexist ideologies of the retrograde South. In telling of Virginia Pendleton's demise, Glasgow offers to her readers a timely premonition about the eventual rise of the New South and, in this, the New Woman too—what biographer Susan Goodman would call “subordinating the broadly historical to the intensely personal.”¹⁸ To do so, *Virginia* knowingly moves between generic forms, modifying nineteenth-century sentimentalism with Spencerian evolutionary theory and the language of literary naturalism in order to redefine Lost Cause genres as themselves retrograde and ill-suited for the inevitable triumph of Modernity and the world it offered—one of reason, science, strong wills, and strong women.

As Glasgow imagines Virginia the fall guy to a story of scientific progress, she also concedes that her heroine is the victim of a Southern domestic tradition that has been unraveling since Appomattox. Indeed, while she may have initially intended to write a comedy of manners by patronizing Virginia as some kind of sentimental dope, Glasgow eventually finds that perhaps the lifelike pathos with which Virginia is endow becomes too convincing even for its author to resist. Living as both a selfless housewife and her husband's “forsaken ideal,” Virginia Pendleton exemplifies what happens when the domestic sphere no longer holds the promise of recognizable identity except in endless

¹⁸ Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 126.

suffering and endurance. In a seemingly mild-mannered book that features a decidedly unambitious and unexceptional heroine, one finds a remarkable attempt to give voice and possibly value to the dispossessed. In this, Virginia Pendleton becomes yet another figure in this dissertation's litany of examples: stuck in the now archaic attachments of a sentimental world without the ability to reinvent herself in the model of the New Woman. As a woman wounded at the hands of her husband and children, Virginia offers a final anecdote about defeat, sadness, and being at hard pan. And while Glasgow might be proclaiming the triumph of realism over sentimentalism, she too cannot help but sympathize with Virginia at the end of the novel, ultimately demonstrating an economy of feeling that seems to lead nowhere.

Born in 1873, Ellen Glasgow was raised between two strains of Virginia gentry—one old and one new. While her mother Anne Gholson was descended from an old Tidewater aristocratic family, Glasgow's father, Francis Thomas Glasgow, was every bit new money.¹⁹ A stern industrialist, Francis Glasgow built his fortune during the Civil War as owner of the Tredegar Iron Works, a key munitions manufacturer for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. After the war Tredegar became one of the "largest industrial enterprises in the Upper South."²⁰ The success of Tredegar was based in no small part upon Francis Glasgow's particularly severe brand of Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism that he had inherited from his working class upland past. This combination of industrial tyrant and Presbyterian

¹⁹ Goodman, *A Biography*, 11.

²⁰ Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 93.

dogmatist resulted in a patriarch known both for his domineering heartlessness and complete absence from the family altogether. As a result, Ellen and her ten siblings found themselves near strangers to their father, raised instead entirely by their mother, a woman whose maternal burden was so great that she frequently suffered from episodes of “nervous exhaustion” until her sudden death from typhoid fever when Ellen was only twenty years old.²¹

After *Virginia's* release, Glasgow explained how Virginia Pendleton was patterned closely after her mother. Susan Goodman suggests that her mother's untimely death, her brother's sudden suicide in 1909, and her sister's long fatal fight with cancer in 1911 pushed Glasgow away from historical romance to allegory and autobiography in *Virginia*.²² Similarly, James C. Cobb draws immediate comparisons between Glasgow's parents and several of the book's characters. Cyrus Treadwell, the cold and rational “foe of the old feudal order and the beneficent source of the new industrialism,”—and Virginia's uncle-in-law— bears an uncanny resemblance to Francis Glasgow.²³ Emma Dominguez-Rué notes that *Virginia* is largely a fictionalized investigation into the constraining domestic environment of Anne Gholson's world.²⁴ In the novel, Glasgow describes Virginia's mother as “characteristic” of most women of her generation: “she would have endured martyrdom in support of the consecrated doctrine of her inferiority to man.”²⁵ It is the inheritance of this “consecrated doctrine” that Glasgow takes to task—a process which Pamela Mathews

²¹ Goodman, *A Biography*, 94

²² *Ibid.*, 115

²³ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132

²⁴ Glasgow, *A Certain Measure*, 90

²⁵ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 150

describes as that of a woman pushing herself “to the periphery of her own existence.”²⁶ This is why Linda Wagner calls Virginia not a heroine, but “a creature of sacrifice.”²⁷ In fact, Glasgow would later say as much, admitting that though she intended *Virginia* to be a pastiche of the “Southern lady and Victorian tradition,” her vitriol quickly turned to compassion: “I discovered, as I went on, that my irony grew fainter while it yielded at last to sympathetic compassion. By the time I approached the end, the simple goodness of Virginia’s nature had turned a comedy of manners into a tragedy of human fate.”²⁸ That Glasgow eventually sympathized with her protagonist is only one half of the story. The other has everything to do with her avowed turn from comedy to tragedy. Indeed, the drama of this book centers upon these very generic transitions.

Glasgow’s first novels read like unhappy compromises between a literary marketplace itching for sentimental fables of Southern bravery and Glasgow’s nascent interests in realism. Novels like *The Battle-Ground* (1902) and *The Deliverance* (1904) tell stories of the continued drag of the Old South on the emerging class of formerly impoverished white farmers now ready to embrace the era’s social, intellectual, and industrial progress.²⁹ Both were hugely successful: *The Battle-Ground* sold nearly 21,000 copies in its first two weeks of publication, and *The Deliverance* became the second-best selling book of 1904.³⁰ Along with *The Ancient Law* (1908), *Romance of a Plain Man* (1909), and *The Miller of Old Church* (1911), the books form the basis of what Glasgow would later

²⁶ Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman’s Traditions*, 12.

²⁷ Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 66.

²⁸ Glasgow, *A Certain Measure*, 79.

²⁹ Cobb, *Away Down South*, 131.

³⁰ Edward L. Ayers, *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South 1877 – 1906*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 217.

call her “social history of Virginia.”³¹ Here one might see Glasgow already beginning to bend established generic conventions by manipulating the framework of historical romance to describe the post-war class struggles of the Southern gentry. While dressed in the Lost Cause vestments of faded honor and strong masculine protagonists, these books acted as proving grounds for an ambitious psychological narration that would quickly mark her as one of the most potent realist authors in the United States.³² Here scholars often point to *Virginia* as Glasgow’s first committed stab at a literary style set apart from the conventions of historical romance—what William Dean Howells derided at the time as “pernicious fiction.”³³ While the realism of her late career—like *Life and Gabriella* (1916), *The Builders* (1919), and *Barren Ground* (1925) among others—features fearless female protagonists with the willpower and ingenuity to adapt to modern times, *Virginia* bears the traces of this generic working-out: a book that is just as much about the waning of its protagonist as it is about the waning of genres.

To understand what precisely is changing in *Virginia*, one first must understand how Southern literary sentimentalism had changed in the New South. My first chapter discussed how former Confederates cobbled together rough affective attachments during the decade after Appomattox and before the rise of Lost Cause ideology. As I discussed, the Lost Cause only began to find its voice in 1877 following the repeal of the Reconstruction Acts and in this it was never a monolithic cultural program. Instead, Lost Cause traditions emerged independently through civic institutions, academia, political legislation, public monument,

³¹ Glasgow, *A Certain Measure*, 3.

³² On the publication of *Barren Ground*, Glasgow’s publisher proclaimed that realism had finally “crossed the Potomac.” Glasgow enjoyed favorable reception in most acclaimed literary outlets, and was on the short-list for the Pulitzer in 1925. See Goodman, 168.

³³ See William Dean Howells, “Pernicious Fiction,” *Harper’s Magazine*, vol. 74, no. 443, (April 1887).

and of course literature.³⁴ At first a strain of historical revisionism trumpeted by a host of former Confederates-turned-politicians, by the end of the nineteenth century the Lost Cause had become a familiar—and national—cultural agenda.³⁵ In forty years, massive population migrations, technological change, and the rise of industrial capitalism made the Civil War and the antebellum period appear a distant memory. As David Blight explains, readers sought to “escape into a pre-Civil War, exotic South that, all but ‘lost,’ was now the object of enormous nostalgia.”³⁶ This nostalgia, as Gaines Foster says, offered to Southerners of the period an answer to the question “why [had] they lost the war that marked the end of the Old South?”³⁷

By the time of Ellen Glasgow’s first novel, *The Descendant* (1897), southern fiction was dominated by Lost Cause sentimental romances intended to promote sectional reconciliation.³⁸ As I touched upon in the last chapter, Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas F. Dixon Jr. were two of the period’s most prominent Southern novelists, whose fiction remade certain decades-old political fantasies about the antebellum South into sentimental fables replete with white heroism, masculine chivalry and subservient, foolish, and lighthearted slaves.³⁹ Sometimes called the “plantation tradition,” this genre formed a common lie propagated throughout American culture. Dixon’s influential novels like *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) posed the loss of the Confederacy against the repeal of Reconstruction, legitimizing white supremacy under the Ku Klux Klan as a

³⁴ David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & The American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 100.

³⁵ Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of The New South 1864 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

³⁶ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 211.

³⁷ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 7.

³⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 211.

³⁹ Singal, *The War Within*, 83.

necessary vigilante force protecting white freedom from the immoral imperialism of Northern conquest and the unchecked barbarism and racial adulteration of African-Americans.⁴⁰ Indeed Dixon's novels strictly defined racial purity as the Anglo-Saxon race—or as Dixon defines, the descendants of highland Scots.⁴¹ These novels were committed to describing Southern culture and identity as anti-modern, explicitly provincial, and historically uncorrupted. As Walter Benn Michaels argues, along with Dixon, Page cunningly leveraged the rise of U.S. imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines in the 1890s to revise the Confederate South as yet another one of these victimized regions, as evidenced in *Red Rocks* (1898).⁴² By focusing upon the honor of the southern family, these romances “provide[d] social unity during the crucial period of transition.”⁴³

In order to convince national readers that the South suffered unjustly and the heroism of the Ku Klux Klan was necessary, these late-nineteenth-century Lost Cause romances appropriated the language and politics of earlier sentimental literature. This kind of repurposing was particularly ironic. While end-of-the-century romances like *The Clansman* used Confederate history “as the backdrop for...imperial fantasies,” the Southern plantation romance in the United States can trace its literary heritage back to antebellum *abolitionist* rhetoric found in sentimental fiction.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most essential example of this (or eccentric depending on the critic⁴⁵) is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

⁴⁰ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 111.

⁴¹ Michael Gilmore, *The War on Words: Slavery, Race, and Free Speech in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 274.

⁴² Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 17.

⁴³ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 7.

⁴⁴ *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, 131.

⁴⁵ Mary McCartin Wearn says that sentimentalism depicted female protagonists using their mother-power to inveigh upon the affections of their husbands. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* differs in that it depicts women as agents and

Selling over 300,000 copies within its first three months, Stowe's novel mounted "an abolitionist protest through the feminized form of sentimental fiction."⁴⁶ While certainly not all sentimental novels made such powerful political overtures, many of the pre-war period told similar stories about the influence of a heroine's virtues on her husband's actions or their triumph over the charms of immoral suitors.⁴⁷ Scholars like Philip Fisher and Lori Merish agree that literary sentimentalism in the mid-nineteenth century regularly thematized suffering and dehumanized forms in order to elevate characters like madmen, women, slaves, and children to the emotional scrutiny of readers.⁴⁸ In this the sentimental novel promised social change by way of coordinated affects—telling readers how private feelings, when felt in unison, might provoke political ends. This kind of "passive empathy," as Lauren Berlant has argued, relies on a universal sense of similar pain and trauma in order to engage readers in a path towards transformation that works parallel to, but often distinct from, actual political change.⁴⁹ Circulating pain is critical to any sentimental project and often accounts for the sentimental tradition's continued interest in slavery so that even the most sympathetic accounts of bondage also promise white readers the experience of suffering and the pleasure of white mastery in a ways legible also to white chauvinists like Dixon and Page.⁵⁰ Indeed, as Ken Warren has argued, sentimentalism stripped of its

not merely ancillary figures. See Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 18 .

⁴⁶ Emory Elliott, Cathy N. Davidson, *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, Columbia University Press, 1991, 222.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 219.

⁴⁸ Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 153.

⁴⁹ See Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70 (1998): 636.

⁵⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

liberalizing politics became the Lost Cause's most potent tool, now ironically "undermining the political and social gains made by black Americans during the post-Civil War period."⁵¹

In Lost Cause sentimental romances, beleaguered ex-Confederate aristocrats and chaste women assume the role of dehumanized victims in much the same way that earlier sentimental novels portrayed slaves and invalids. Women, as idols, were essential for Lost Cause mythology. After the war, Confederate widows and spouses founded memorial societies that promoted and maintained a culture of mourning and a version of chaste female devotion that would be inherited by the plantation school in the 1890s.⁵² As fictionalized emblems, characters like Sallie Worth from Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* exist as "threatened commodities"—either the prize in an "imagined sexual male contest" between hero and villain, or as, in the case of *The Clansman's* Elsie Stoneman the helpless victim to black sexual violence.⁵³ In all cases, these Lost Cause romances were frequently authored by men, fixated on masculine chivalry, and featured women whose only purpose was to serve as a mirror to the novel's heroes and villains. Characters like Sallie Worth offered little except further proof of the racial and historical purity of the Southern white race. Indeed, on the final page of *The Leopard's Spots*, Sallie Worth proclaims to the novel's hero Charles Gaston, that she "desire[s] no career save that of a wife—your wife."⁵⁴

This last point is key. Virginia Pendleton is not merely an embodiment of Glasgow's mother, but equally the most perfect example of Lost Cause sentimental femininity plucked, one could say, right from the pages of Dixon and Page. For example, after the birth of her

⁵¹ Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 92.

⁵² Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 273.

⁵³ Mason Stokes, "White Heterosexuality: A Romance of the Straight Man's Burden," *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality* ed. Chrys Ingraham (New York: Routledge, 2005), 140.

⁵⁴ Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865 - 1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co, 1902), 465.

third child, Virginia contemplates whether her “reddened and knotted hands” exist “in that chain of pathetic hands that had worked in the exacting service of love.”⁵⁵ Several chapters later Glasgow reiterates this idea. After nursing her son Henry through an agonizing bout of diphtheria, Virginia learns from the town doctor that her own mother, too, had nursed her through diphtheria as a child, prompting her to realize that “she was not the only one who had suffered this anguish—other women, many women, had been through it before she was born. It was a part of that immemorial pang of motherhood of which the old doctor had spoken.”⁵⁶ At the end of the novel, Glasgow explains that Virginia’s inmost personality has been “filtering down through generations” until it “had become so inseparable from the sources of character, it had passed at last through the intellect into the blood.”⁵⁷ In this last quote Glasgow is keenly aware of the language of sentimental woman’s culture. To return to Berlant again, this culture “flourishes by circulating as an already felt need, a sense of emotional continuity among women who identify with the expectations that, as women, they will manage personal life and lubricate emotional worlds.”⁵⁸ Continuity speaks both to how sentimental personality circulates in an intimate public sphere, as much as it equally alludes to Dixon and Pages’ staunch defense of Southern character as born through Anglo-Saxon bloodlines.

Beginning in the first half the nineteenth century, Victorian standards of conduct and Protestant morality joined in a domestic worldview termed the Cult of True Womanhood. This cultural ideology held that by submitting completely to selfless physical and emotional labor, wives and mothers provided the very moral fabric upon which all of

⁵⁵ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 305.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 488.

⁵⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

society rests.⁵⁹ Literary historians like Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins have famously described how sentimental “women’s culture”, so particularly entrenched in the South, turned women into economic instruments: requiring housewives to perform daily household drudgeries perfectly and without waste while also requiring them to handle the burdens of their family’s emotional surpluses, completely and without aid.⁶⁰ This explains both the expectations that readers would surely have when approaching the protagonist (even if Glasgow meant to initially lampoon her) as well as the expectations that Virginia’s fictional husband Oliver would place upon her too. Upon this last point Glasgow was particularly pessimistic, explaining, “so long as the serpent continues to crawl on the ground, the primary influence of woman will remain indirect.”⁶¹ By this Glasgow means that the continued power of men in all facets of life—both public and private—would continue to thwart women’s development. Perhaps Charlotte Perkins Gilman said it best in 1898: “Women have been left behind, outside, below, having no social relation whatever, merely the sex-relation by which they lived.”⁶²

Indeed, this dependence forms the central dynamic between Virginia and Oliver. The novel sets out to demonstrate how their relationship was never equal, but a hierarchy fueled by implicit subjection. This is no more obvious than in how Oliver holds the power to affirm or deny Virginia’s identity, and values, as a wife and mother. From the couple’s initial courtship, Oliver hold’s her up as “more than a woman; she was the embodiment of a

⁵⁹ Glenna Matthews, *“Just a Housewife:” The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 94.

⁶⁰ Lauren Berlant, “The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment,” *American Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 431. See also Anne Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) and Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (1986).

⁶¹ Glasgow, *The Woman Within: An Autobiography*, ed. Pamela R. Matthews (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 87.

⁶² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, (1898). qtd in Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 140.

forsaken ideal...and even man, who had created her out of his own desire, has grown a trifle weary of the dream-images he had made.”⁶³ This is a sentimental ideal, deeply rooted in the social conventions of the nineteenth century that prized true feeling and selfless affection over anything else. Ironically, the very maternal qualities to which Oliver is so attracted are also the attributes that he grows to despise: “the quality which had first charmed him was, perhaps, the first of which he had grown weary. He still loved Virginia, but he had ceased to talk to her.”⁶⁴ Glasgow shows the fickle cruelty of initially praising Virginia’s motherly goodness to only grow “weary” of this essential trait. The very things that *make* Virginia become the same things that Oliver grows to resent. Perhaps most painfully, Oliver resents Virginia’s fading beauty, a hurt so deep that she internalizes this herself: “Now she understood, now she knew, something had gone out of her also, and that something was youth.”⁶⁵ In this semi-autobiographical account of Glasgow’s own imagined history, the novel registers the impossibility of being both everything and nothing: of “keeping” one’s youth through the drudgery of domestic chores, or, more succinctly, of living outside of a “fiction” while also embodying another’s “forsaken ideal.” When he does consider Virginia’s interiority, he only concludes that her “universe was a fiction except the part of it that concerned him or her children.”⁶⁶ The seemingly insurmountable gap that separates Virginia from Oliver proves not merely to be one of poor communication. While Oliver holds all of Virginia’s cards, Virginia could not have had it any other way. Her personality was always already fixed to masculine desires. The cruelty comes when Oliver picks

⁶³ Glasgow, *A Certain Measure*, 82.

⁶⁴ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 308.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 307.

Virginia, knowing full well who she was, in order to abruptly leave her behind in his ascent out of the Old South.

This double standard becomes obvious when Oliver concludes that his “plays were as vital a matter in his life as the children were in Virginia’s.”⁶⁷ As a generic vestige of Lost Cause sentimentality, Virginia is confined within a narrow horizon of expectations. Oliver, on the other hand, possesses both the social freedom and innate ability to do, and, importantly, to *change* what he likes. While pushed by his uncle Cyrus to accept a respectable position at the local bank, Oliver insists that he wants to write dramas—a desire as confounding to his New South “commercialist” uncle as it is to Virginia’s traditional Old South family. Accordingly, Oliver both dismisses the suggestion to write an “inoffensive” history of Virginia ⁶⁸ while he also, at one point, forces his mother to burn her entire collection of E.D.E.N Southworth novels.⁶⁹ If anything, Glasgow sees Oliver as a nascent modernist: reflected in his overwhelming passion to write the new great American drama that might “uplift the masses” through realist portrayal, as well as his conspicuous interest in John Stuart Mill, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Charles Darwin’s *Origins of the Species*.⁷⁰ Unbound to Lost Cause sentimentality, Oliver complains that the American public doesn’t “want life on the stage; they want a kind of theatrical wedding cake.”⁷¹ His defining masterpiece, “The Beaten Road” features “the new woman who has grown so old in the last twenty years – with the woman whose past is a cross upon which she crucifies

⁶⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 19. E.D.E.N Southworth was, possibly, the most prolific and well-known sentimentalist of the nineteenth century with nearly sixty novels to her credit.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18, 135.

⁷¹ Ibid., 105.

both herself and the public.”⁷² The irony is unavoidable. Oliver’s profound narcissism prevents him from seeing that his purported heroine is Virginia herself. And while he might be a “genius” at writing about the crosses that women bear, he is also under the “impression that women acted, thought, and felt, not as individuals, but as a sex.”⁷³ This will be particularly important in the coming discussion. As heavy handed as she is, Glasgow wants readers to know that beneath Oliver’s affection for Virginia exists an abstracted principle that regards his wife not as an individual (or even his partner) but as a kind of species to be examined.

My last analogy is no exaggeration. Earlier in the novel Oliver boasts about his artistic prowess to his cousin, explaining that as “a Treadwell...I could commercialize the stage, I haven’t a doubt, as successfully as your father has commercialized the railroad. It’s in the blood - the instinct.”⁷⁴ Oliver’s insistence on his “commercial” abilities are not a sentimental account of personhood, but a genetic one. Unlike Virginia, who exists as a stereotype of nineteenth-century sentimental culture, Oliver has the innate “instincts” to commercialize whatever object he sees fit. More than just indicating Oliver’s confidence, “commercialize” also invokes the vocabulary of industrialization on a public scale. It speaks not just to his family’s innate abilities, but also to the ways in which these abilities seem to be commensurate to certain social developments happening outside of Dinwiddie, Virginia. Just as Oliver is reading Darwin’s *Origins of the Species*, Ellen Glasgow was too. In this light her insistence that Virginia shares the same “knotted” hands as her mother, and that the “immemorial pangs of motherhood” have passed “into the blood” might look both

⁷² Ibid., 128.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 106.

sentimental and, possibly, scientific. One might pick up the not-so-faint traces of natural science filtering into Glasgow's thought. So while Virginia's inmost thoughts and desires are commensurate with other women, they have also specifically "filtered down through generations" and entered "into her blood," a phrase that provokes one to wonder, in light of the anecdote that began this chapter, what exactly *Virginia* is attempting to accomplish here.

Scholars and biographers note that Glasgow eagerly studied the evolutionary theories of the era.⁷⁵ She was not alone in the matter either. Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) was not only groundbreaking in the natural sciences, but had a profound impact on all facets of modern social life.⁷⁶ In the 1890s philosophers such as Thomas Malthus, Frances Galton, and especially Herbert Spencer, adapted Darwinian principles of natural selection to prove that society could be reduced to the basic evolutionary mechanisms usefully paraphrased "survival of the fittest" or Social Darwinism.⁷⁷ These advances led to the revival of the work of eighteenth-century naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck whose theories proposed that the behaviors, mental characteristics, or even physiological changes that a person developed *during* their lifespan would be passed directly to their offspring.⁷⁸ With the publication of *Origin of the Species*, Lamarck's work was suddenly relevant. By the end of the century Lamarck was back in fashion as it tidily anticipated Spencer's contemporary ideas.

⁷⁵ Goodman, *A Biography*, 37.

⁷⁶ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 130.

⁷⁷ See Valerie A. Haines, "Is Spencer's Theory an Evolutionary Theory?" *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 93, no. 5, (1988): 1200 – 1223.

⁷⁸ John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Mizzoula: The University of Montana Ashgate Press, 2007), 23.

Taken together, these evolutionary social theories presented an accelerated and optimistic outlook on the scientific perfection of human life and society.⁷⁹ Evolution in particular, and scientific practice in general, revolutionized all corners of western thought. As Eric Foner explains, Darwin's *Origins of the Species*, published "on the eve of the Civil War...became caught up in the gathering storm over slavery and the place of blacks in American life."⁸⁰ Eugenics and polygenism grew in medicine and anthropology to formalize racial difference in scientific thought. In religion, Spencerian positivism led to a "secular religion of progress, a social scientific version of the optimistic, liberal Protestantism which pervaded the educated bourgeoisie."⁸¹ Under the banner of the New Thought movement, works like Henry Ward Beecher's *Evolution and Christianity* (1884) revised strict Calvinistic doctrine to instead insist upon the divinity of the human organism and the ability for human will to shape the body and the mind. It's worth recalling how self-help manuals of the period often married morality with material success.⁸² In literature, the genre of naturalism borrowed Spencer's ideas of biological determinism and certain aspects of Lamarckism to demonstrate how characters, when placed within the novel's literary ecosystem, often succumb to their basest instincts. Though these theories supported a scientific misogyny, they did the opposite as well.⁸³

This background helps put the novel's pivotal confrontation between Margaret Oldcastle and Virginia Pendleton into sharper focus. Remember how when Virginia storms

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Eric Foner, "Evolutionary Wars: How Darwin's Masterwork Shook Up America," New York Times, Jan 20, 2017.

⁸¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 22.

⁸² Ibid., 23.

⁸³ Emma Domínguez-Rué, *Of Lovely Tyrants and Invisible Women: The Female Invalid as Metaphor in the Fiction of Ellen Glasgow* (Berlin, Germany: Logos Verlag, 2011), 67.

in to confront Oldcastle on her adultery with Oliver, Glasgow explains that she realizes that she's already lost and that Oldcastle's triumph as the "free woman...was less the triumph of the individual than of the type. The justice not of society, but of nature, was on her side, for she was one with evolution and with the resistless principle of change....Vaguely, without knowing that she realized these things, Virginia felt that the struggle was useless."⁸⁴ For Oldcastle "the justice not of society, but of nature, was on her side, for she was one with evolution and...the resistless principle of change."⁸⁵ Unlike Virginia, Oldcastle has the distinct advantage of holding a winning hand, so to speak, in the new world of "industrial warfare." By neatly combining tanks and trade in one, Glasgow gestures to a modern New South characterized by scientific efficiency and competition. Notably, Oldcastle is a different "type" of person—just as Oliver's Treadwell blood makes him distinct in kind and in ability from Virginia. While sentimental conventions might have called for Oldcastle to be pilloried for sleeping with another woman's husband, in *Virginia* her behavior carries no moral component whatsoever, instead testifying to her biological fitness. Indeed, Social Darwinism trickled down to the woman's suffrage movement too, prompting Lester Ward, in his famous *Pure Sociology* (1903), to argue that women held more importance to genetic reproduction than men because the "only sure road to the evolution of man" was the "elevation of women."⁸⁶

While what Glasgow is trying to achieve in *Virginia* might be innovative, her use of evolutionary language was not. Here she is pulling directly from literary naturalism. Glasgow read extensively in naturalist fiction of the period—fiction that directly inherited

⁸⁴ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 486.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Lester Ward, *Our Better Halves*, 275, quoted in Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 131.

this Spencerian thought.⁸⁷ Indeed, scholars and literary anthologies have often applied the term “naturalist” to her—and *Virginia*—over the past fifty years.⁸⁸ While questions about Glasgow’s generic classifications or even the very parameters of naturalism itself are irrelevant here, I touch upon the genre because it offers a useful point for comparison. Originating in the 1870s Europe, naturalism by 1905 had reached its zenith in the U.S. where authors like Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Paul Laurence Dunbar in *Sport of the Gods* (see chapter three) were overturning Victorian sentimentalism (think of Oliver’s burning of those Southworth novels) in pursuit of a social scientific literature. Yet while the genre might have been called naturalism it did not reject artifice. As Keith Newlin explains, naturalism is “a version of realism...that grafts realistic detail onto a necessitarian ideology.... Like melodrama, and unlike realism, naturalism conspicuously employs such emotive effects to promote the acceptance of a thesis.”⁸⁹

In fact, this fiction’s defining characteristic is how it exaggerates realism. For example, in Dreiser’s prototypical *Sister Carrie* (1900), the young and beautiful Carrie Meeber emigrates from the Midwestern hinterlands to Chicago in search of fame and fortune. There she learns to be a kept woman before becoming unwittingly entangled with a saloon manager turned thief who absconds with her to New York City. While he dramatically falls to poverty and suicide, Carrie rises to Broadway fame and success because she possesses instinctive ability to navigate the conflicting desires of a masculine world. As Dreiser describes, “In Carrie...instinct and reason, desire and understanding,

⁸⁷ Goodman, *A Biography*, 88.

⁸⁸ See Nancy Walker, “Women Writers and Literary Naturalism: The Case of Ellen Glasgow,” *American Literary Realism 1870 – 1910*, vol. 18 no. ½ (1985), and Donna Campbell, “‘Where are the ladies?’ Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists,” *Studies in American Naturalism* vol. 1, no ½ (2006), to name a few.

⁸⁹ Keith Newlin, “Introduction: The Naturalistic Imagination and the Aesthetics of Excess,” *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

were at war for the mastery. She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew.”⁹⁰ Like Virginia Pendleton, Carrie struggles to control her internal impulses that waver between “instinct” and “reason.” It just so happens that when she does give herself over to desire, it’s a good thing. As Walter Benn Michaels notes, by following her cravings Carrie becomes a hollowed-out vessel for an accretive desire for money, making her a model capitalist subject while simultaneously “[subverting] the ideology of the autonomous self.”⁹¹ In this, Carrie is naturally fluent in the new world of commercial capitalism by simply being her instinctive and desiring self—a self that, ironically, lacks much in the way of originality or autonomy.

While Dreiser’s novel was a commercial dud, it was well received by the American literati and by 1913 would have surely been familiar to Glasgow.⁹² Where *Sister Carrie* is a story about who flourishes under capitalism, *Virginia* examines its opposite effects—here invoking naturalist themes without succumbing to the same sense of melodrama. It is not Virginia Pendleton that Carrie should be compared to but Margaret Oldcastle—that other Broadway starlet. Where Carrie’s lack of autonomous self was her ticket to fame, it is Oldcastle’s “glowing intellectuality,” power, and biography of “hard work, self-denial, and discipline” that leads to her success.⁹³ Glasgow wants to stress that Oldcastle’s fame rests not upon lustful male desires for a “voluptuous temptress” but, rather, completely in spite of this. It is Oldcastle’s very independence that sets her apart. In this, *Virginia* works to

⁹⁰ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1900), 83.

⁹¹ Michaels, “Sister Carrie’s Popular Economy,” *Critical Inquiry*, 7.2 (1980): 388.

⁹² Donald Pizer, “Introduction,” *New Essays on Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 11.

⁹³ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 442.

disprove Dreiser's earlier lament by staging a version of the female artist that is neither beholden to male affection nor lacking in intellect.

In fact the "instinctual" "desiring" character here is Virginia. And, insofar as Virginia Pendleton—like Carrie Meeber—might be a vessel for male fantasies, these fantasies lead explicitly to her downfall, not her ascendance. This is particularly important because it helps to elaborate Glasgow's most basic claim in the novel: that the coming world will be inherited by the strong and not the weak. Though Dreiser would claim that an absence of personality is key to surviving in the marketplace of commercial capitalism, Glasgow would have it as the opposite that in lacking a strong and independent sense of self one actually lacks the essential bedrock for personal growth and thus profitable self-expression.

Unlike in the world of *Sister Carrie*, in Glasgow's novel Virginia's baser-self is *also* her moral self, built for the labor of nineteenth century mothering that is no longer required in the market economy of the twentieth century. As Glasgow explains in the novel's preface: if Virginia "approaches perfection...it is a law of our nature, as of all nature, that change only endures, and the perfect mold must be broken."⁹⁴ Virginia has been perfected for a different world, and her perfections prohibit her from engaging in the kinds of behaviors now suitable for modernity. The things that Virginia craves are not things at all but the contract of sentimentality premised upon clearly defined domestic duties and reciprocated affections. In the language of naturalism, *Virginia* concerns a character succumbing to her base cravings and desires; yet unlike naturalism, not everyone's lives are determined—just *Virginia's*.

⁹⁴ Ibid., xvii.

Perhaps this helps explain several seemingly unusual incidents from the novel. Soon after their marriage, Oliver begins regularly foxhunting with his free-spirited friend Abbie Goode. A jealous Virginia insists on recklessly joining in even though she lacks the requisite equestrian experience. Glasgow describes her as submitting to “the primeval woman in her blood,” explaining that she “was at the same time herself and not herself.... as helpless as a fallen leaf.”⁹⁵ A few chapters later, after Virginia has uncharacteristically indulged herself in a few yards of expensive fabric, Glasgow explains: “the natural Virginia had triumphed for an instant over the Virginia whom the ages had bred;” and later describing her as “the Virginia who desired and the Virginia who had learned from the ages to stifle her desire.”⁹⁶ These anecdotes should seem confusing. If, like Carrie Meeber, Virginia is also at the whim of her appetites then what can one make out of two sets of instincts that are seemingly at odds? The answer to this lies in Lamarck and Spencer’s corresponding visions of human behavior. While there are two Virginias at odds—the domestic servant and the headstrong and craving one—these two versions speak to her subconscious as both a “natural” woman and a woman “who the ages bred.” By saying that she is both, Glasgow is revising sentimental traditions through the language of evolutionary theory by borrowing from Lamarck’s theory of generationally inherited traits. Virginia has not merely learned the genre of good motherhood, but she’s received it through her blood where the sentimental behaviors continue to fight against other, baser, “creaturely” impulses. Abbie Goode, like Margaret Oldcastle and the novel’s Laura Treadwell, stands as another example of an unrestrained New Woman pushing her sex forward to the future. Because the Virginia of the foxhunt ultimately loses to the Virginia of the foyer, Glasgow might be suggesting that

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

had the primeval woman triumphed over the sentimental one, Virginia might have developed a stronger more dynamic personality fit to fight for Oliver's affections.

These conflicting drives stage a story of historical transition where the generic has become genetic. This is most clearly seen during an episode from the middle of the novel where Virginia cannot finish the prompt: "I should be perfectly satisfied if only—." Instead she feels, as Glasgow describes, a formless "lack" that "belonged less to circumstances than it did to the essential structure of life."⁹⁷ This lack exists because Virginia's desires are not meant to be satiated. In fact they are wholly inseparable from her tedious domestic obligations. The structures of sentimental domesticity already presuppose that her only feelings will be goodly, motherly, and graceful. As Philip D. Atterbery argues, Virginia's mind has been "incapacitated by cultural conditioning."⁹⁸ In fact, what I've been demonstrating is that Virginia has not been merely "culturally conditioned" but genetically or *generically* conditioned. Thus the novel's most basic function is not just to describe how Virginia's maternal identity as an artifact of nineteenth century sentimental cultural norms, but, moreover, to argue that sentimentality is an intrinsic trait carried through Virginia's aristocratic ancestry. As Berlant explains, sentimental culture was premised upon a "social obligation based on the citizen's capacity for suffering and trauma."⁹⁹ This is echoed later in the novel when Virginia remarks that her suffering "is so old that it has been here forever, and I seem to have been suffering it all my life—since the day I was born, and before the day I was born."¹⁰⁰ Virginia will never be perfectly satisfied because while her personality

⁹⁷ Ibid., 399.

⁹⁸ Philip D. Atterbery, "The Framing of Glasgow's *Virginia*, in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, Dorothy M. Scura ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 124.

⁹⁹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 494.

might be tied to external habits like domestic chores and spousal affection, her in-bred motivations have been built upon a base of suffering.

As a sentimental heroine, suffering is what Virginia does. As the genre has been bred into her, it has become both nurture *and* nature. It is her *basic* mode of ordinary life. To be happy, Virginia would have to *not be* Virginia. Instead of feeling herself constructed through her maternal labor, Virginia finds that it “had consumed in its ecstatic flame even her ordinary capacities for enjoyment.”¹⁰¹ This is reinforced when Glasgow describes how Virginia and her mother, were merely “creatures trained to feel rather than to think, whose very goodness was the result not of reason, but of emotion.”¹⁰² Glasgow’s language points to a particularly acute taxonomy. She reduces Virginia and her mother from “women” to “creatures” in the natural order of evolutionary progress. In so doing Glasgow places pressure on an especially important tenet. One should remember that the sentimental novel takes political realities (such as slavery) and turns them into affective problems where good feelings are supposed to solve things. Feeling, then, is a trait central to survival in a sentimental ecosystem. This is why Virginia and her mother can only feel and not reason—they seem deficient now because their sentimental habitat, so to speak, the domain of the Old South has receded from history. Now, ill-adapted to the new genres of the present, their feelings have gone from being assets to evolutionary liabilities.

New times calls for new people, and new people call for new genres. Glasgow stresses the impossible generational gap between Virginia and her three children who have been born into a world that’s illegible to their mother. Her children refuse the circulation of sentimental affects that had so connected Virginia, and her “knotted hands” to the suffering

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 310.

¹⁰² Ibid., 313.

of *her* mother. Jenny, the youngest, has learned to “consistently [magnify] in her mind the space which she would ultimately occupy in the universe,” while her older sister Lucy “was the most selfish and least considerate of the three children,” known for her “dashing, rather cynical, worldliness.”¹⁰³ And though Harry, Virginia’s favorite, does not “intentionally neglect” his mother, he chooses just the same to move his family thousands of miles away.¹⁰⁴ As Susan Goodman notes, “the feminine ideal, Virginia gives way to the new woman, represented...by her own daughters, Lucy, a pre-flapper, and Jennifer, a young Jane Addams and possibly a lesbian.”¹⁰⁵ Singal agrees, explaining, “Lucy embodies the complete reversal of all the major personality attributes that the nineteenth century most admired. She has no conception whatever of family, honor, or duty.”¹⁰⁶ With the extinction of sentimentality comes, unsurprisingly, unsentimental children who do not share the same affect world as their mother. Instead her children seem to have inherited Oliver’s tendencies toward selfishness and self-reliance. Cruelly—ironically—Virginia is the only one in the family without an expressible, canny, modern identity.

The novel’s thesis matches its author’s political convictions. By 1913, Glasgow had already distinguished herself as a crusader against the “Southern lady and Victorian tradition.” In 1909 she, along with fellow southern novelist Mary Johnston, founded the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia—a local effort in a national suffrage movement over two million women strong.¹⁰⁷ Though born in the nineteenth century, Glasgow felt herself meant for the twentieth. The last thirty years in the U.S. had seen enormous changes in

¹⁰³ Ibid., 415.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 444.

¹⁰⁵ Susan Goodman, *Civil Wars: American Novelists and Manners, 1880 – 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 111.

¹⁰⁶ Singal, *The War Within*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Woman at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (Basic Books 2011), 40.

gender conventions and the domestic sphere itself. Through the “dual impact of economic upheaval and evolutionary theory,” the Victorian home gave way to “the domain of technocrats and advertisers” who sought to capitalize on advancements in consumer capitalism by turning women—and their labor—into occasions for technological efficiency and innovation.¹⁰⁸ This, along with the relative rise in household income and the electrification of the private home meant that women, now emboldened by scientific theories of the period and freed from grueling hours of domestic labor, sought new roles and identities in modern society—as consumers, readers, and, importantly, some of the most popular novelists of the period. In this Glasgow saw the novel as the most essential place for protest. In *Virginia* it would seem as though Glasgow sees much of herself in Oldcastle, as the capable middle-aged starlet whose fame rests upon her talents and her gumption alone.

Now one can really understand why Virginia, when facing Margaret Oldcastle, can only muster the courage to lick her wounds and slink back to her home. At this moment Glasgow conflates the language of naturalism with the language of sentimentalism, describing how when Virginia left Oldcastle’s New York apartment she smiled “the grave smile with which her mother had walked through a ruined country, and taking up her muff, which she had laid on the table, passed out into the hall.”¹⁰⁹ This pun is the very point. Virginia’s “grave smile” testifies both to her maternal ancestry as it does to the continued shadow effects of the Civil War. While earlier Glasgow may have neatly diagnosed Virginia as genetically (or one might say “racially”) unfit to progress, it takes only the span of a paragraph before the traumatic history of the nineteenth-century *State of Virginia* asserts

¹⁰⁸ Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 487.

its own claims. Finally the two Virginias intersect. While *Virginia* might be the first in Glasgow's "women's trilogy" one could argue that is also the last her in social history of the State of Virginia. Here historical drama is personified; her demise testifies to the rise of the New South and New Woman. All three strands of this argument come into focus. Virginia's virtues are inherited, through her blood, as the final type in a long lineage of Southern sentimental women. In this, sentimentality is tied inextricably with the Lost Cause South, promising that the retrograde historical romances of Dixon and Page will be overturned in a natural process that changes people as much as it changes culture. As an archaic stand-in for a historical genre that no longer has purchase in the world, under Glasgow's logic Virginia's decline proves that historical ideologies need only a bit of patience for the perfecting work of Darwinian selection to override retrograde people and thus retrograde culture.

However jubilant this new world might eventually be, *Virginia* is still stuck in the South. At the end of the book, Virginia loses not merely a marriage but the very objects of attachment upon which she based her self worth and purpose. As Lori Merish explains, under a sentimental imagination "satisfaction and ethical value lie in the voluntary, unregulated, deeply felt exchanges of interpersonal life. As a particular code of identification, sentimental sympathy can seem to neutralize the relations of political inequality it upholds..."¹¹⁰ As I've discussed, the American sentimental novel often employed socially jeopardized characters to serve purportedly political ends— Dixon and

¹¹⁰ Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

Page's Lost Cause novels are doing just this when they appropriated these generic forms to posit an idealized (and factually inaccurate) South as the victims instead of predators. Virginia's defeat stages not just the demise of a nineteenth century women's culture of feeling but also, in it, the foundations of the Old South now often invoked in retrograde Southern fictions. Where earlier in the nineteenth century *Virginia* might have connected disfranchised Southern women through legible anecdotes of suffering and pain, at the beginning of the twentieth century Glasgow intends to dispel these conventions all together. At the end of the novel this transition lingers. Having cast Virginia as the woman "whose past is a cross upon which she crucifies both herself and the public," Glasgow's novel and Oliver's "The Beaten Road" now appear quite similar. Though Virginia's martyrdom might be essential for this real novel and imaginary play, neither one seems to quite know how to address this same martyred "public" for which Virginia might mean quite a bit.

While *Virginia* might critique the sentimental novel, it cannot help but also, ironically, engage sentimental reader's expectations. It remains an unanswered question, at the end of the book, how exactly readers *should* feel about Virginia. This ambivalence plays out in the novel's contemporary reviews. A review in the *Charlotte Observer* from March 16th 1913 praises the novel as "one of the deepest and most sympathetic studies of the case of modern woman to be found." This is echoed by the *Duluth News Tribune* whose April 24th review casts the novel as "simple realism which compels the reader to admit...[the] self-sacrificing woman." It is hardly surprising that reviewers would not have understood Glasgow's progressive vision. Not only did sentimentalism continue to pull at the heartstrings of the publishing market, but Glasgow's books might voice Virginia's pathetic

appeals a bit too well. Why would one expect readers to think otherwise? So too, Glasgow, who may have set out to write a comedy, ends her novel overwhelmed with a feeling of pathos for her character. Her ambivalence becomes the novel's ambivalence as well. One could imagine a much more devastating parody of overbred Southern gentility that would make Virginia's demise feel appropriate if not justified. But Glasgow cannot help but end the novel falling for Virginia's hereditary suffering, realizing that while her heroine may be an emblem of all that detritus to be removed from society, she was always also a stand-in for Glasgow's mother.

As noted, Glasgow's autobiographical turn in *Virginia* may stem from family tragedy. This was the first of Glasgow's novels to be written without the close input of her sister Cary who died from cancer in 1911; and it was published immediately before the death of her other sister, Emily in 1913.¹¹¹ During this harrowing period, Ellen turned to close friend and fellow novelist and suffragist Mary Johnston who was one of many like-minded women in Glasgow's lively cohort of writers.¹¹² The turmoil surrounding Glasgow's literary confidants might have driven her to reconsider for whom her novels were meant and to what ends they should accomplish. Though *Virginia* might celebrate the demise of Lost Cause womanhood, it cannot do so without depicting a protagonist whose suffering was "not new. It has been coming on for years."¹¹³ However ancient, Virginia's pain feels no less painful when felt by her. In this her suffering is *not* universal, nor meant to be circulated to an intimate public of women readers. After all, *Virginia* is a stereotype. Instead the novel offers consolation through scientific prognostication—pointing to a future where

¹¹¹ Goodman, *A Biography*, 126.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹³ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 494.

the women in power will be capable, formidable, and self-sufficient. While clear enough, the moral here also raises an important question. Could there be a difference between the heroine and the protagonist in *Virginia*: might Margaret Oldcastle be the *real* hero while the marginalized Virginia Pendleton stands merely as an archaic vestige to be pitied but not to be emulated? Perhaps for Glasgow's cohort of suffragists the ending is easier to swallow. But for others, like sentimental readers still infatuated with Virginia regardless of her status as historical set-piece, her suffering remains an important outcome of the novel.

By 1913 the novel—especially in the hands of woman writers in the United States—served many different cultural purposes as both high literature and commercial entertainment. Ian Watt has famously argued that the rise of the novel was itself a byproduct of rise of the domestic sphere.¹¹⁴ Educated and literate housewives, formally excluded from employment and labor, turned to novels and novel-writing to while away their hours. And, as Nancy Armstrong holds, by the middle of the nineteenth century authors, booksellers, and publishers had begun to tap into an ever-widening market for popular fiction, a market driven by the tastes and desires of middle class white women.¹¹⁵ After the Civil War in the United States novels—especially the sentimental novel—became increasingly the province of women writers. By the time of *Virginia*'s publication, Mary Johnston, Willa Cather, E.D.E.N Southworth and others of this cohort were no longer content to simply pander to popular tastes; they wanted recognition as real artists.¹¹⁶ By turning away from sentimental romance to tell a story of the present, Glasgow dedicated

¹¹⁴ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 300.

¹¹⁵ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

¹¹⁶ *Columbia History of the American Novel*, 270.

herself to a political message aimed at the countless thousands of Southern women passionately rising up to assert their citizenship and rights in the United States. As Armstrong argues about the British novel, “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman.”¹¹⁷ Though Glasgow wanted to stage the literary conditions for the triumph of realism and modernity over Lost Cause mythologies, her vision would prove just as tragic as her protagonist’s. Glasgow was, for the first half of the twentieth century, the voice of the South, but her prestige was eventually supplanted. Deposed, this time, not only by William Faulkner, but also by resilient and recalcitrant Lost Cause fantasies famously immortalized in Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936). This is a particularly ironic twist. So long as Scarlett O’Hara endures as a figure for the lost benighted antebellum order so too will Virginia Pendleton, proving how certain archaic remainders continue to endure in spite of progressive, or, to borrow from Colonel French, “enlightened” culture.

2.

Virginia is not the New Woman agitating for social change but a woman for whom social change marks a particularly powerful annihilation. One might recall how, in *The Colonel’s Dream*, Colonel Henry French speaks with a particularly pessimistic white preacher who presages that the black race, now defunct, has only to wait a few generations until it is completely destroyed by the impartial and universal logic of a Christian theology turned Social Darwinism. As the Preacher says, “It is His will that the fittest should survive, and that those shall inherit the earth who are best prepared to utilise its forces and gather

¹¹⁷ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 8.

its fruits.”¹¹⁸ This rhetoric of fitness, survival, work, and production should be familiar by now. It is particularly telling that the language of Social Darwinism, which in Chesnutt’s throat sounds the prejudice of white supremacy, looks so oddly similar when applied to Virginia. Ironically, the very culture that produced and supported such racist accounts would also become the genesis for Glasgow’s refusal from said culture. Here Virginia looks an awful lot like the Hamiltons who were still attached to old racial economies of becoming and belonging. Across the divides of race, class, and slaveholding status one finds that Virginia, Bud Johnson, Henry Taylor, and Berry and Fannie Hamilton all have become bedfellows. All are archaic specimens of antebellum and post-bellum orders and all face the cold fate of evolutionary perfectionism. While Glasgow’s investment in scientific progress served as an optimistic portent to the woman’s movement, the logics upon which it traffics are the very same used by eugenics, and here, certain pockets of white supremacists too. Inside all three novels one finds a similar refrain saying that if society waits long enough certain vestigial, unattractive, and uncompetitive elements will be simply shorn off.

While Virginia might be slated for demolition, she does possess one final trait that not even Oliver or Margaret Oldcastle can boast: endurance. Indeed, as much as Glasgow was enthralled by evolutionary theory and the rising women’s movement, she was also fixed specifically to this idea of endurance—at first as a component of progress and then, somewhat surprisingly, as a marker of archaic attachment. In her very first novel, *The Descendant* (1897), Glasgow sees endurance as an essential positive attribute for the intellectual and social maturation of her “self-made” protagonist, Michael Akershem whose self-possessed “endurance” “fit him to struggle, and in the struggle to survive” from the

¹¹⁸ Chesnutt, *The Colonel’s Dream*, 165.

confines of the Old South.¹¹⁹ By *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909) Glasgow begun to understand endurance as an intimate function of the Southern woman's sphere, describing the intelligent and charming Sally Mickleborough as a woman whose "very endurance—her power of sustained sympathy, of sacrifice—had its birth in some strangely idealized quality of passion—as though even suffering or duty was enkindled by this warm, clear flame that burned always within her."¹²⁰ Her description suits Virginia Pendleton just as well. Yet by *Virginia*, Glasgow's philosophy no longer sees endurance as an essential evolutionary adaptation, but as a sort of vestigial trait concerned only with bare life: "with that strange passivity of the nerves which nature mercifully sends to those who have learned submission to suffering, to those whose strength is the strength, not of resistance, but of endurance, she felt that as long as she sat there, relaxed and motionless, she had in a way withdrawn herself from the struggle to live."¹²¹ Virginia can only submit to enduring life without the power to struggle or resist her circumstance. By *Barren Ground* this transformation from man-made ability to natural fact is complete. Glasgow describes Dorinda Oakley's "mood of endurance" as an analogue of the unbroken monotonous broomsedge outside her door—a landscape that by novel's end feeds Dorinda with the endurance she had previously lost.¹²²

This little intellectual history offers an important lesson. Glasgow finds endurance to be a natural vestigial instinct common as much to intellectually dissipated southern women as it is to grass and insects. While Dorinda, in *Barren Ground*, spends much of the book

¹¹⁹ Nancy Walker, "Woman Writers and Literary Naturalism: The Case of Ellen Glasgow," *American Literary Realism*, vol. 18, no. ½ (1985), 136. See also Glasgow, *The Descendent*, 9.

¹²⁰ Glasgow, *Romance of a Plain Man*, 372.

¹²¹ Glasgow, *Virginia*, 492.

¹²² Glasgow, *Barren Ground*, 591.

furiously interrogating her purpose and personality, Virginia does little self-reflecting. Instead, Virginia has one indispensable talent handed down to her through the same genteel blood that had so unfit her for the present. Enduring does not necessarily lead to resisting the unfair circumstances of her world, but it might at least keep her attached. It is the impetus of living churning below the surface of her affections, giving her the drive to remain however purposeless she may be. For Glasgow, endurance is the solution to live as opposed to the solution to die. It means, in some ways, to disagree with Chesnut's Preacher's estimation that the world will soon leave an entire race behind. If the precept behind scientific racism was that suicide and self-annihilation might be the only form of escape for certain figures in certain situations, enduring in the world is also a way to combat the effects of racial prejudice if the prejudice in question is couched not as white supremacy but the rational processes of scientific progress.

Finally, this should make one wonder whether or not the natural presuppositions of Glasgow's project have always been, perhaps, mistaken from the very beginning. Consider the fact that, as natural selection works, Virginia has successfully borne offspring. And while her children might all have inherited Oliver's modern abilities to lead independent, dynamic, undomesticated lives, Virginia's genetic material still endures within them, perhaps to be expressed in future generations. But, most importantly, Glasgow's evolutionary presuppositions are mistaken because what else is endurance other than "survival *without* fitness." One could say that Virginia's endurance, like the Hamiltons, and Taylor, and Bud Johnson also proves the lie: that while the effects of modern capitalism might be remaking people, the forces of selection are not comprehensive enough to destroy everyone, and everything, from the past.

To endure, for Glasgow, means to demonstrate what it looks like to fight but not to win, to live but not to progress. I have shown over and over again, hanging onto a world that requires either an impossible transformation or complete annihilation can be unrewarding, to say the least. But endurance, in this guise, is the fight against the logic of a natural determinism that promises, through evolution, to expunge that which is no longer fit for this world. The history of the U.S. after the Civil War is the history of many worlds as they are continually upended and revised, leaving the unsuited, so to speak, in its wake. Indeed, the precept of so much of this racial, social, and evolutionary theory was that these Darwinian principles of natural selection were stronger than human will. Yet *Virginia* shows that though the weak might not triumph, nor overcome, they can continue to linger. In so doing, all one is left with is the chance for the conditions of the possibility of some other kind of world to emerge. The weak, the left behind, and the stuck can endure in a way that returns a kind of specificity to human existence. There is a sort of strange exception that adheres in these particularly American anecdotes about how the abject return, or at least, remain unaccountable.

This dissertation has tried to place its finger on the moment, or the feeling, when ideologies end, belief systems fail, and the promises of a racialized American capitalism prove that hard work means little in the face of structural predations. The United States at the turn of the twentieth century had seen such wholesale political and social upheaval that not just one but many classes of people in the South—men and women, black and white, were thrown out of the world without recourse for return or reinstatement. When the promises of national fantasy fail, former confederates are left scrambled outside of time. When the promises of electoral politics fail, discouragement seeps in and optimism cannot

do much better. When the promises of capitalism fail, families like the Hamiltons and men like Taylor can only accept their reduction without the recompense of moral superiority, divine election, or social gain. In the case of Dunbar's *Sadness*, to transform into something else does not guarantee that one can forget who one was before. The stakes of this dissertation have not only been to use small historical anecdotes to shine a light on the losers, so to speak, of history. I have sought to demonstrate that it has been the province of the literary, moreover the novel, to capture the stories of the dispossessed in ways few other cultural objects could.

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