OVERLAYERED ECOLOGIES

Posthumanist Perception of Place in Literature of the US South

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Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

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Abstract

The soil of the U.S. South, and its inhabitants' connection to it, has long been considered a major factor in the creation of a uniquely southern identity. The primary aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that contemporary southern authors are starting to display a new understanding of place in which our connection to the world around us becomes an inextricable relationship rather than an emotional attachment. Authors are starting to depict a posthumanist perception of place.

Although southern literature has started to receive a long-needed presence in ecocritical studies, the focus of much of the existing work centres upon the anthropogenic. The region's position as an inherently connected space is rarely addressed. With explorations in the field of New Southern Studies deconstructing interpretations of the U.S. South as a unique region, I suggest that posthumanism's questioning of exceptionalism has made it a useful tool to demonstrate the importance of viewing the region through a lens of coexistence rather than exceptionalism.

By addressing depictions of ecologies in various twenty-first century texts from the region, I argue specifically that southern authors are depicting associations of inherent connectivity and relationality that force us to rethink the tenability of place as an originator of identity. Demonstrating how various depictions of what I term overlayered ecologies evince a new way of understanding the world we occupy, I aim for an understanding of how the U.S. South positions itself through new narratives.

I argue that rather than displaying connectivity solely through historical or modern economic and cultural factors, the relationality observed in the contemporary fiction examined is an inherent part of assemblage existence. It is a connectivity that removes the human from its core. As such, the constancy that is so crucial to conceptions of place as originator of identity are undermined. This represents a turning point in the U.S. South's understanding of itself.

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This thesis follows the style of the *MLA Handbook Ninth Edition*.

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“He studied the ground beneath his spread hands. Ants moved among the grass stems like shadowy figures moving between the boles of trees and he saw with unempeachable clarity that there were other worlds than this one. Worlds layered like the sections of an onion or the pages of a book. He thought he might ease into one of them and be gone, vanish like dew in a hot morning sun.”

- William Gay, “Where Will You Go When Your Skin Cannot Contain You?”

“The Beginning of the End can feel a lot like the middle when you are living in it.”

- Karen Russell, *Swamplandia!*

Introduction

In 2017, the Whanganui River was granted environmental personhood rights. The river, on New Zealand's North Island, was given the status of a legal person. In doing so, the New Zealand government recognised the legal validity of the deep connection to nature practised by many cultures around the world. It also simultaneously questioned the validity of human exceptionalism. The government recognised an intertwining of human and other-than-human nature, an intertwining expressed by the Māori Whanganui tribe's traditional saying: "I am the river, the river is me" (Evans).

Emerging in the United States in the 1970s, environmental personhood has seen a shift in the Eurocentric view of nature as existing for the benefit of humans, to an understanding of the need to protect nature for the benefit of nature. This has seen philosophical and legal changes in several countries around the world including India, Ecuador, Bolivia, and the United States itself (Van Zeebroeck). Albert Cowdrey, in his investigation of the environmental history of the U.S. South, *This Land, This South* (1983), notes: "The ancient belief that trees, beasts, and rivers are gods has at least this to be said for it, that they tend to follow their own sweet will, for all of man's knowledge and power" (5). In doing so, he speaks to an overarching theme in this thesis, a recognition of the untenability of exceptionalism.

With explorations in the field of New Southern Studies, over the past few years, deconstructing interpretations of the U.S. South as a unique, or even distinct, region, I suggest that posthumanism's questioning of exceptionalism has made it a useful tool to interrogate such examinations of southern exceptionalism. In fact, as I shall argue throughout, rather than a southern – or even postsouthern – sense of place, contemporary literature of the U.S. South is instead beginning to display a posthumanist perception of place. This is an understanding more in-keeping with the region's

existence as part of a global network of connectivity, not only geographically, but also temporally and between human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter.

In the framing of this argument, I will address depictions of ecologies, or the relationships between coexisting elements, in the work of four contemporary authors of the U.S. South: Jesmyn Ward, Kiese Laymon, Hillary Jordan, and Ron Rash. Starting from the premise that "outdated notions of southern exceptionalism" (Vernon 5) are no longer a relevant contemporary theme, I will examine the function of ecologies in twenty-first century literature, in order to determine how the U.S. South's view of itself has changed and how we[1] as humans both connect with and are informed by such ecologies. At this point, it is necessary to clarify my use of the term ecology. I use the term throughout as an alternative to the more usual "landscape." My reason for this, is that landscape refers specifically to the land and does not include other connected features of the world we exist within. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines ecology as "the relationships between the air, land, water, animals, plants, etc., usually of a particular area, or the scientific study of this: The oil spill caused terrible damage to the fragile ecology of the coast." It is such relationships and the connectivity they express that makes ecology more suitable than landscape for this study. As art historian Jussi Parikka observes, "ecology is less a word or analytical term denoting a thing than it is a way of looking at things in their relations, conceptualising and making sense of their multiple scales" (44).

In order to analyse the function of ecologies, I will read the texts in relation to New Southern Studies and use posthumanism, in particular a new materialist

[1] Throughout this thesis I employ the terms "we," "us," and "our" in reference to the posthumanist subject as successor to the liberal humanist subject. I acknowledge that the use of these pronouns is contested and challenged by disciplines that seek to establish the effect of power differentials on all human interaction (as will be further explored in Chapter One). However, I interpret the posthumanist subject from a less granular perspective throughout in order to examine an inherent connectivity with other-than-human nature. I position us all, on this larger scale, as posthumanist subjects albeit with complexities and interactions not focused upon here.

understanding as proposed by the work of Jane Bennett, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost amongst others, to interrogate these readings. As such, this is not an attempt to uncover a meta-narrative that unsettles older narratives, but rather a way of understanding how the U.S. South positions itself through new narratives. The southern United States of New Southern Studies is attempting to walk a tightrope of remaining culturally and politically relevant, without falling into the abyss of a new kind of exceptionalism. Examining how literature of the new South chooses to represent itself is valuable in forming an understanding of how this can be achieved. Authors are not only a product of their region, but the U.S. South is also in part created by its authors, and contemporary authors' understanding of their world is different to that of their predecessors. They are depicting associations of inherent connectivity and relationality, depictions that encourage taking a wider view of the region. By approaching the literature from a posthumanist perspective, I am able to offer something new to the already diverse field of southern studies. What I aim for is a new way of viewing the region, one that attempts to take a starting point away from the history and historical trauma usually associated with the region.

Whilst human exceptionalism – the belief that humans are both separate from and superior to all other organisms in nature – needs little explanation, southern exceptionalism would certainly benefit from a brief explication. The term is too complex and varied to allow for a full investigation here, having already been the focus of book-length studies such as Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino's *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (2010). However, I will endeavour to provide a brief explanation of the term's history and, in particular, how I use it throughout this thesis. As with human exceptionalism, the term southern exceptionalism suggests that the South has historically been considered different from the rest of the United States, in many ways separate from it and, from an internal perspective, often superior to it.

Historian Laura F. Edwards suggests, "[w]hat made the South distinctive was always its comparison to somewhere else" (535). Such comparisons came both from within the region and from the outside looking in. Indeed, it has been convenient and even useful for the rest of the United States to depict the region as distinct. For instance, as Leigh Anne Duck observes, "ideas of southern 'otherness,' . . . also played a role in enabling white nonsoutherners to disavow the centrality of white supremacy in U.S. nationalism" (*The Nation's Region* 26). According to Edwards: "the South became a foil that established the superiority of positions taken by its opposite, the North" (545). When viewed from this perspective, southern exceptionalism reveals a national problem rather than a regional eccentricity. Lassiter and Crespino contend that such an approach, "has set southern history in false opposition to an idealized national standard and has encouraged oversimplification and overgeneralizations about all parts of the country" (9). Historically, southern exceptionalism has confused more than it has clarified.

Due to the comparisons I will be making with human exceptionalism, my focus in the chapters that follow will be on the U.S. South's own understanding of itself as unique. According to Richard Gray in *Writing the South* (1986), regional self-consciousness began as far back as the colonial period (xiii), with Edwards contending:

> The Revolutionary generation produced the South's first historians and the first conception of southern exceptionalism. These historians did not write about their homeland as a unique region that existed apart from the rest of the United States. Instead, they saw southern states as distinguished in a different sense: they were the most eminent states in the new republic and, as such, the best representatives of national values. (535-36)

It is this assumed eminence that underpins my own comparison with human exceptionalism. My focus throughout, will be on a regional self-consciousness that led to a conception of the U.S. South and its inhabitants as better than the rest of the nation.

This was a conception which began to cement itself into the regional psyche in the late eighteenth century, as the U.S. South became increasingly isolated both politically and culturally from the rest of the country. Gray notes "[t]he political importance of Virginia, for instance, was reduced by the fact that emigrants to America usually moved into the West or the East rather than the South, and by the fact that many Virginians themselves emigrated westwards" (23). The lack of migration to the region, compared with the more urbanised and industrialised regions of the country, fostered a rhetoric of agrarianism versus industrialism within the U.S. South, in which inhabitants of the region "tended to equate everything that was natural and noble with one, specifically rural, way of life and everything that was destructive and dogmatic as its opposite" (Gray 27). Gray suggests that there was now:

> a readiness to believe that there was such a thing as 'the Southerner', recognisably different from other Americans, and that this difference could be defined almost entirely in terms of the South's feudalism, its commitment to an antique, gentlemanly way of life. (61-62)

A perception of exceptionalism was beginning to take root.

This idea of the U.S. South as unique permeated with Civil War defeat. Edwards suggests:

> The Confederacy's defeat breathed new life into this conception of southern exceptionalism, as historians who study the cult of the Lost Cause have argued. Confederates and their descendants needed a justification for the staggering losses sustained in pursuit of a failed, discredited political cause. (546)

However, it is also true that resentment at Civil War defeat led to a determination for the region's story to be heard. According to Gray: "One form this reaction took . . . was the tendency to look back with regret at the good old days before the war and celebrate the civilisation which, it was felt, the barbarian hordes from the North had effectively

swept away" (75-76). Whether through resentment, nostalgia or more likely both, the Civil War consolidated exceptionalism in the southern psyche, rather than destroying it. By forming their own narrative of defeat, southerners were able to "define the region in terms of the one, crucial moment in its history when it tried to defend its culture and its identity by simple force of arms" (Gray 76). What emerged was both a reinvention of recent history and the recreation of the myth of eminence. As Edwards argues:

> In Lost Cause narratives, the Old South was less an actual place than it was a character in a nineteenth-century romance. Like an angelic child or a beautiful young maiden, the Old South had to die, because it was too pure to live. Its spirit still lived on, in attenuated form, marking the South as exceptional – both different and superior (546).

Such a reinvention of the past, along with a defence mechanism against the pain of defeat, was an attempt to preserve a unique southern identity.

A major part of this identity, in-keeping with the agrarian versus industrialist rhetoric of previous generations, was an attachment to the land itself. Discussing the Southern Renascence generation of writers, Gray observes: "belief in the power of environment, this feeling of attachment to landscape, remains the same and inescapable, one of the structuring principles of Southern myth" (173). Although this attachment to the ground is conspicuous in the contemporary fiction I discuss, Gray's use of the term environment is, of course, different to my own use of the term ecologies. Environment in this context, is tied closely to a sense of place and therefore to identity. It intimates stewardship of the land rather than the inherent connectivity I argue for in my own intervention. This sense of connection to the southern soil, would be central to the region's continued belief in its uniqueness that found voice in the work of the Southern Agrarians:

> According to the Agrarians, the South was not only different from but also better than the rest of the United States. The region's superiority derived from its backwardness, specifically its distance from all the dehumanizing changes associated with industrial capitalism. (Edwards 553)

A regional self-consciousness that had begun in the colonial period, found voice in the revolutionary generation, and attained mythical status by the Lost Cause narratives, was still proclaiming a unique identity by the time of the Southern Renascence.

Gray observes: "Anyone who chooses to write about the American South is almost immediately confronted with a problem. *Is* there such a thing as the South, a coherent region and an identifiable culture that can be sharply differentiated from the rest of the United States" (xi). This is a different question as to whether exceptionalism is still relevant and one that I have, of course, also had to wrestle with. There is little doubt in my mind that an idea of the South remains, both culturally and politically. However, a coherent and definable physical region is harder to justify. Lassiter and Crespino contend, "most regional characteristics cited as evidence of differences of kind are really differences of degree" (12), a view that, as will become clear, is borne out by adopting a posthumanist reflection on the U.S. South. During the Enlightenment, advancements in science became hugely influential on political thought. In a similar manner, viewing the region through a posthumanist lens allows me to ask how new understandings of materiality might help us to rethink the societal structures associated with the U.S. South. In a posthumanist perception of place, the U.S. South is, to reverse an old adage: a part, not apart.

The posthumanist perception of place is one of coexistence. The traditional binaries of human and nonhuman have been abandoned and replaced by assemblages – existence as an amalgamation rather than through individual identity – of diverse elements each with the ability to both affect and be affected. It is a perception in which

history remains in play in a more than an emotionally affective sense, creating its own assemblage with the present, and it is one of permeability in which the space we inhabit is fluid. In order to illustrate how this differs from previous interpretations of the concept, I will briefly consider place and why it is significant, before providing an outline of its traditional importance to literature of the U.S. South.

Although, as Robert Tally Jr. notes, the importance of space as a cultural concept has grown since the Second World War following from what he describes as time's dominance in modernism (3), place and our engagement with it is an ontological rather than simply a literary concern, one that affects how we view the environment we live in. The liberal humanist subject is described by N. Katherine Hayles as "a coherent, rational self, the right of that self to autonomy and freedom, and a sense of agency linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest" (85-86), and it is this post-enlightenment understanding of ourselves as human beings at the centre of our existence that has shaped our perspective on the world around us. While clearly not an unchanging or undisputed presence across three hundred years of post-Enlightenment thinking, the emergence of the individual and a commitment to the freedom of that individual to make choices and create meaning has persisted.

A succinct description of place given by Ian Buchanan in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines it as: "a physical location invested with meaning" (Buchanan). And it is this investment with meaning which has seen a change in the role of place in literature. Place has developed from simply providing backdrops in which the action can occur, to performing a central role in the reflections of the characters. As the significance of the individual has emerged and grown in western philosophical thought, so their cultural importance has similarly increased through depictions of their inner thoughts and the meanings they bring to their experiences. Such meaning, provided by each individual subject, creates a meeting point between the assumed knowledge we

bring to a location, the empirical reality that greets us there, and our own connotative perception. This forms a unique experience separating "place" from "space." It is this experiential aspect in which a physical location is given a connotation by the subject perceiving it, which makes place an individual occurrence rather than simply an identifiable space. Its significance is in its signification.

Place therefore plays an important role in the creation of the liberal humanist subject. It is, in part, an emotional attachment made with the space they inhabit, the ability to make such attachments, and in turn create meanings of our own, that allows the liberal humanist subject to form as a rational, autonomous self with a sense of agency. However, it is important to note that such a conception of place, in keeping with an understanding of the liberal humanist subject puts the individual squarely in the centre of their existence. Without a subject there is no meaning, and without meaning there is merely space.

According to Eudora Welty, place is the genesis of every story. It is both the source of inspiration for every author and locus of authenticity for the reader, and such a strong attachment to a geographical location forms the basis for an understanding of the "southern sense of place" and its distinctiveness. Inextricably linked to the idea of a uniquely southern identity, the U.S. South's belief in its geographical identity as a place distinct from the rest of the country is formative in the psyche of its inhabitants. Where they come from informs who they are. However, the idea of a sense of place is not unique to the U.S. South. Often considered a social construction related to an understanding of identity, it is used to explain why certain places hold special meaning to their inhabitants in the form of communities we as individuals can identify with. It comes from a deep involvement with a place that allows the individual to feel a part of, and have a sense of understanding of, that community. Although certainly in keeping with such a description, more than simply a social construction, the southern sense of

place is rooted both in the history of the region and also its physical landscapes. Described by Barbara Allen Bogart as "an attachment to home" (152), it is an emotional attachment to where the region's inhabitants are born, subjective and individual, but invested with a weight of history and connection to the land itself that is more collective than experiential.

This suggests a subtle shift in an understanding of place. Where, in the context of Buchanan's definition, the geographical location relies on the subject to invest it with meaning, I suggest that the southern sense of place allows the location to give something back. The subject may affect the object, but the object in turn plays at least some part in the creation of the subject. Whilst a previous conception of place and understanding of the liberal humanist subject are both centrally concerned with the importance of the individual, I would argue that the focus has moved to a more connected interpretation of identity in which the notion of a unique perceiving subject has become unstable. The southern sense of place is sodden with the U.S. South's guilt about its role in slavery and resentment about the loss of the Civil War, and burdened by a belief in their own exceptionalism. Although distinct from place, as its connection to history and insistence upon a collective imaginary root it in regionalism rather than pure concept, it is still a relation between person and geography, and therefore very much connected to any definition of place. The southern sense of place is intertwined with an Agrarian ideal in which "[t]houghts, words, ideas, concepts, life itself, grew from the soil" (Owsley 69). It is a connection to the land itself.

The southern sense of place has become a trademark of southern fiction from the Southern Renascence generation of writers through to the postsouthern generation, whose parodying of previous generations failed to extricate themselves from the same sectionalism that had gone before. In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2006), Charles Reagan Wilson notes:

> In the 1974 Commission on the Future of the South, a group of prominent regional leaders suggested to the Southern Growth Policies Board that an important goal of the modern South should be 'to preserve and enhance, in meeting the issues of growth and change, the human sense of place and community that is a vital element of the unique quality of Southern life.' (254-55)

The southern sense of place relies upon a belief if not in a regional stasis, then at least in a sense of constancy that allows it to inform southern identity in a distinct way.

A postsouthern conception of place begins to question this constancy, connecting the post of postsouthern with that of posthumanism. A term coined by Lewis P. Simpson in his 1980 essay "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America," the postsouthern concept, according to Martyn Bone, is an attempt "to reassess the meaning and legitimacy of such foundational terms as 'South' and 'southern'" (*The Postsouthern Sense of Place* 43). As such, the prefix post is employed in a similar way to that of posthuman and indeed postmodern, not simply to indicate a new movement that follows from the one before, but to question the fundamental constructs of their predecessors. Postsouthern is a questioning of how the region can be viewed if we no longer accept the poetic construct of "The South" served up by the Agrarian ideal, in the same manner that the posthumanist subject questions how we should begin to view ourselves if we no longer accept the idea of the liberal humanist subject.

Bone asserts that the postsouthern is often associated with the parodic element of postmodernism, with authors of the postsouthern generation attempting to escape the almost unavoidable comparisons to their Southern Renascence predecessors. He contends that it also coincides with a move away from precapitalist agricultures towards a "sense of place(lessness) within a wider capitalist world system" (*The Postsouthern Sense of Place* 48). This production of place, with its emphasis on mechanised rather

than manual farming, also bears comparison with the post of (some definitions of) posthumanism through the reduced impact of humans at its core. As well as the suggestion of the importance of technology, a key element in Hayles's cybernetic posthuman turn, both suggest a move away from the importance of the human as subject while still placing a great emphasis on the physical environment. In questioning the legitimacy of "The South," postsouthernism is also beginning to interrogate the centrality of the human in the place that they inhabit.

Therefore, place, according to the southern studies conception as a region of constancy capable of informing its inhabitants' identities, has become untenable. By examining the region through a lens of posthumanism, in this thesis I argue that inhabitants of the U.S. South instead live in a shared space, suitable for their symbiotic coexistence. A posthumanist perception of place is one informed by what Jane Bennett terms assemblages or "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant matters of all sorts" (23). Callus et al. propose that "'we' are not autonomous and self-contained individuals of modernity who can fashion ourselves in our own image and are separate from all other living entities" (107), suggesting that our identity should no longer be considered reliant upon our own choices and behaviour, but rather be considered an integral part of the totality of our environment. Meaning is not so much invested by the subject in the physical location as it is derived by the subject from the connections that form the heterogeneous union they exist within. Place cannot be simply reduced to a geographical location, or an experiential factor in the shaping of identity, but is rather something more fundamentally, and inextricably, connected to the posthumanist subject.

The subject must now understand their role as a single node in a network of materiality that coexists and affects each part of the world around it. The connotative aspect so important to previous understandings of place is reduced – though never

entirely removed, exemplified by Lassiter and Crespino's differences of degree – and an understanding of a location invested with meaning would appear to be limiting regarding the posthumanist subject. If, crucial to an understanding of assemblages, there is no controlling centre, then the idea of an identifiable geographic location capable of identity formation becomes problematic. This raises the question of whether place can still be viewed on the same scale as it previously has been. Can "the local" be considered in isolation in a posthumanist perception of place, or do we need different conceptions of scale? The posthumanist subject, in assemblage with the world around them, may have to be considered as part of a much larger physical situation than simply their immediate surroundings, and in doing so the constancy that allowed the southern liberal humanist subject to ground their identity in their location becomes unstable. The possibility of affect is more distributed and potentially more difficult, if not impossible, to locate.

Importantly, any individual element of the assemblage, whether it be the posthumanist subject or an other-than-human element, is capable of both affecting and being itself affected. It is what Bruno Latour terms an actant: "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy" (Bennett viii). Whilst the posthumanist subject clearly does still affect the environment they live in, their direct affect once again becomes less obvious, and so too does their ability to attach or derive meaning from it. In what Bennett terms the "knotted world of vibrant matter" (13), there is still very much a relation between person and place, but it is a relationship of coexistence and connectivity rather than geographical location and emotional attachment. The posthumanist subject is thus an integral part of the place rather than an ontological architect or a phenomenological recipient of it. The posthumanist subject is no longer an individual in the same manner as before, capable of forming an emotional

attachment to a given geographical location, but more a product of their environment, and that environment has become impossible to locate solely within a unique locale.

Just as no individual subject can be seen in isolation, so no geographical location can be seen as separate from the world around it. Although place can be seen to be an actant – as with a southern sense of place conception – it must itself be considered part of an assemblage that in turn affects other assemblages. This clearly has implications for how the U.S. South must be viewed as part of a national and global whole and therefore impacts upon any latent belief in a southern sense of place. It should be understood as an integral part of its own surroundings, taking the wider view I suggest authors of the region are already deploying. The U.S. South can no longer be considered geographically, politically, and economically as an isolated pocket of land ranging from Louisiana in the south-west, to Virginia in the north-east. In fact, any continued conception of the U.S. South as a region encounters complications of geographical fluidity. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles contends "the construction of the posthuman is also deeply involved with boundary questions" (279), especially boundaries that affect an understanding of the self, an argument that resonates with a posthumanist perception of place. The very idea of a southern sense of place, and its ability to inform identity, is made problematic by interpretations of what constitutes "Southern." And any such conception of place is beset by similar boundary questions. A posthumanist perception of place must therefore remove any interpretation of place as the sole actor or even a key player in identity creation. Just as the posthumanist subject must be seen as less of a unique, isolated entity, so a posthumanist perception of place has to allow for a certain geographical fluidity alongside its erstwhile relational fluidity.

In fact, a posthumanist perception of place is one of permeability. Just as an assemblage is permeable, so is the space we inhabit. A conception of place has arguably always been a complex mix of different ideas imposed upon a given geographical space,

along with differing narratives, and in a posthumanist perception it must be recognised as being continually open to influence and even intrusion from other parts of the assemblage. Although there is arguably no "outside" of the assemblage with the posthumanist subject existing in a network of connectivity, each part of that network is itself an assemblage of smaller assemblages. Every subject, every location is connected directly to its immediate elements, and indirectly to elements within a global network. No assemblage can be therefore seen to be immune from incursion but rather must be constantly in a state of flux with forces from both outside (of the smaller assemblage) and within competing to exert their own influence, and place is no exception.

In a posthumanist perception of place, temporal landscapes are also intertwined. Our own current ecologies are permeated with ghosts and remnants of the past as well as premonitions of the future. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), Anna Tsing et al. propose "more-than-human histories" (G1) that are formative of our environment. As their conception is an attempt to illustrate the nature of our coexistence, it is inextricably linked to a posthumanist perception of place, but it is also suggestive of the inseparability of space and time. Immanence, the fact that posthumanist subjects are within ecologies both physically and temporally rather than separate from them, therefore becomes an important concept in a posthumanist perception of place.

It is in this context that I propose the phrase "overlayered ecologies" to indicate the importance of viewing ecologies as not simply laid on top of each other, but rather layered with connectivity running between the distinct but inseparable layers. This allows for an understanding of how different temporalities affect the formation of identity in the posthumanist subject, as well as their own perception of place. However, it is important to note at this point that it is not just different temporal ecologies that form such layers, but also socio-economic factors, both those rooted in the region's

history and its present. The world of the posthumanist subject is a rapidly changing one and variations in a particular assemblage due to a factor such as increased levels of mobility also result in changes to the ecology. Fluctuations in population affect how actants in a particular assemblage engage with each other. Physical changes to place have a role in shaping the perception of the posthumanist subject, and I argue that this too can be represented through overlayered ecologies. In doing so, I suggest that the posthumanist subject is affected and to some degree shaped by these overlayered ecologies, but not defined by them. They, like place itself, are permeable and fluid. Place, as Timothy Morton would suggest, "now has nothing to do with good old reliable constancy" (10). In a posthumanist perception, place continues to share ground with previous conceptions as a relation between person and physical location, but for the posthumanist subject this relationship is inextricable, and a part of their very existence more than simply an emotional attachment that helps to form them.

The Literary Landscape

The five novels taken together, allow for a reasonably diverse sample of contemporary southern fiction. They represent the work of two authors from a younger generation and two from an older, two black authors and two white, two female authors and two male, two from a traditional U.S. South and two from a wider conception, as well as three contemporary-set and two historically-set novels. As such, they allow me to examine a cross-section of southern fiction. They were, however, each also selected for their unmistakable engagement with their own unique southern ecologies.

Both Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon are representative of a new generation of southern writers. Setting their work in their native Mississippi, they draw upon a familiar rural tradition prominent in the work of their predecessors from the Southern Renascence to the postsouthern. However, theirs is not a South of seersucker suits and

honeysuckle, presenting a world more akin to the dogfighting and dirt yards of the "Rough South" than the subsistence farms of the Agrarian fantasy.

Ward is a two-time recipient of the National Book Award for Fiction. *Salvage the Bones* (2011), her second novel, as with each of her novels, is set in the fictional Mississippi Gulf Coast town of Bois Sauvage. *Salvage* tells the story of twelve days in the life of the Batistes, a poverty-stricken African American family, in the lead-up to and eventual landfall of Hurricane Katrina. Narrated by Esch, a fifteen-year-old girl, living with her father, brothers Randall, Skeetah, and Junior, and Skeetah's dog China, the novel examines socio-economic stasis alongside the physical transformation wrought by the hurricane. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Ward's third novel focuses on the family dynamics of another working-class African American family in Bois Sauvage. Largely told through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy, Jojo, the novel examines race and class relations in a traditional heartland of southern fiction, through Jojo's interactions with his grandparents, River and Philomene, his parents Leonie and Michael, and his little sister Michaela. In both novels, Ward's depiction of the natural and unnatural landscape of the U.S. South is both lyrical and tangible. It forms an inescapable part of the characters' existence. As such, it raises questions as to the degrees of distance that are possible between the posthumanist subject and the ecologies they are a part of.

Kiese Laymon's debut novel *Long Division* (2013), winner of the NAACP Image Award, is more difficult to contextualise. Once again largely set in a fictional, rural Mississippi town, the novel tells the interwoven stories of two fourteen-year-old boys named Citoyen "City" Coldson, the first set in 2013 and the second in 1985. The multi-layered, time-travelling narrative centres around the disappearance of a young girl, Baize Shephard, and throws light onto the ongoing issue of institutional racism. *Long Division* is more reminiscent of the magical realism of Haruki Murakami than the

fiction of the Southern Renascence, not least through its inclusion of a talking cat. However, once again the part-transformation and part-stasis of the region is brought into sharp focus by the ecology the characters inhabit. The past, present, and future of the fictional Melahatchie exist side-by-side, giving a telling insight into the nature of not only the posthumanist subject's existence, but also that of the U.S. South itself.

By comparison, both Hillary Jordan and Ron Rash are representative of an older generation of southern writer. I also selected them as they represent a broader and heterogeneous U.S. South. Jordan was born in Texas, which has long skirted a line between southern and western, while Rash grew up in the Appalachian region of North Carolina where he so often sets his work. Their respective novels examined in the following pages, similarly draw upon the rural tradition albeit in a very different manner.

Jordan's debut novel *Mudbound* (2008), winner of the Bellweather Prize for fiction, is set on a remote cotton farm in the Mississippi Delta in the aftermath of World War II. Once again formally reminiscent of *As I Lay Dying*, the novel tells the story of two families, the white, landowning McAllans and African American tenant farmers, the Jacksons. Told through the eyes of six characters; brothers Jamie and Henry, and Henry's wife Laura, husband and wife Hap and Florence, and their son Ronsel, the novel primarily depicts the effect felt on the Delta's racial politics at a time of vast global and personal transformation. However, the ecology of Jordan's Delta looms large over the narrative, with an omnipresence that makes it inseparable from the characters and their relationships.

Serena (2008) is the fourth novel by O. Henry Prize winner Ron Rash. It tells the story of Serena Pemberton and her husband George's ruthless exploitation of the North Carolina forests during the Great Depression. The novel contrasts the external exploitation of Rash's home region's natural resources, with the unsustainable agrarian

existence of local woman Rachel Harmon, creating, in Serena Pemberton, a gothic force of nature reminiscent of Louise Erdrich's Fleur Pillager. As with Jordan's Delta, Rash's Appalachian Mountains serve as much more than a backdrop to the action. They highlight an unavoidable connection between the past and the present.

Each of the five novels, represents a continuance of the deep connection with the land that they inhabit also demonstrated by southern fiction of previous generations of southern authors. By placing these particular novels in conversation, I am able to examine how contemporary southern authors encode their experience in a region in existential as well as palpable transformation.

The Topography

In the eight chapters that follow, I explore the novels of my four primary authors, alongside the work of several southern authors past and present, in order to elucidate my assertion that fiction of the U.S. South is now demonstrating a posthumanist perception of place. In doing so, I centre each chapter around a notable feature of the ecologies depicted, either human, other-than-human, or abiotic matter, indicated in the chapters' mostly topographical titles.

In Chapter One, I take a brief but necessary tour through the state of the fields my research is built upon offering a summation of both New Southern Studies and posthumanism. I also demonstrate why I have chosen to place these seemingly disparate fields in conversation with each other. In doing so, I suggest the importance of viewing the region through a lens of coexistence. New Southern Studies is looking to rethink rather than reject what has come before. Here, I develop the concept of overlayered ecologies in which connectivity runs between distinct yet inseparable layers, both temporally and socio-economically and show how the literature demonstrates a new way of understanding the world we occupy.

For the following four chapters, I turn to the novels of Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon. This section represents an exploration of literature set in the post-millennium U.S. South. In Chapter Two, I examine the centrality of holes in Laymon's *Long Division* and Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I read each of these holes as unfamiliar examples of Michel Foucault's "heterotopia," places that can both reflect and destabilise everything that lies outside of them. These heterotopic holes provide concrete examples of the overlayering theorised in Chapter One and show how the posthumanist subject exists within relational spaces, connected both geographically and temporally. As such, they undermine the constancy that is formative in southern exceptionalism. They instead highlight the region's transformation in various ways and to various degrees of success.

In Chapter Three, I look at fissures in southern ecologies in the form of revenants. I argue that, whilst recurring participants in southern literature, revenants in both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Long Division* are the character equivalents of the heterotopic holes of Chapter Two. They are reflectors of the region's assemblage, blurring the lines between past, present, and future, and offer alternative understandings of a region in transformation. In a posthumanist interpretation, history can be seen to exist in an active assemblage with the present and the future. The region inhabited by these revenants is not a backward-glancing one, but a U.S. South trying to navigate a path to a better future.

Chapter Four brings the focus back to topographic features of the southern ecologies in the form of trees and forests. Having long played a role in the national imaginary, I argue that their use by Ward demonstrates the changing nature of southerners' deep connection to the land. They demonstrate a connection to the environment rather than dominion over it. There is less of a unique southern identity on display in Ward's novels, but rather a wider reach of connectivity for southern culture.

The forests mark a return to the relational spaces of Chapter Two. They are a shift away from exceptionalism towards coexistence.

In Chapter Five, I examine another recurring participant in southern literature, storms. By contrasting their representation in Ward and Laymon with that of their predecessors; William Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston, notable differences come to light. I note that, while depictions in Southern Renascence literature focused on the ideological underpinnings of human attempts to control nature, in contemporary fiction, the effect of storms is no longer centred on the human cost alone, but instead demonstrates more of a connection with the world around us. In doing so, they highlight the fragility of our connection to other-than-human nature. The contemporary depiction of storms constitutes a rejection of the constancy associated with the U.S. South. Here, connectivity with the land is not indicative of identity, but rather the inherent nature of coexistence.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I turn my attention to two contemporary works of historical fiction, Hillary Jordan's *Mudbound* and Ron Rash's *Serena*. In doing so, I examine whether contemporary authors depict historical ecologies in a similar way to the region's representation in the present, or instead mirror the cultural ideologies of the past. I explore whether depictions of the posthumanist subject or the liberal humanist subject are at the fore. Chapter Six turns its attention to the land itself, specifically the farmed, or worked, land of Mississippi and North Carolina. I argue that ownership of the land, central to understandings of both human and southern exceptionalism, is more important in *Mudbound* and *Serena* than it is in Ward and Laymon's novels. Consequently, I suggest that both novels portray a juxtaposition between liberal humanist and posthumanist subjects. Although there are less posthumanist sensibilities on display in these two novels, there are still characters who demonstrate posthumanist tendencies. The ecologies themselves once again highlight the fragility of coexistence

seen in Chapter Five, and the borders of these southern assemblages are demonstrably more permeable than their predecessors.

Chapter Seven continues the focus on the land itself seen in Chapter Six. This time, I turn my attention to the unworked land, the non-agricultural soil and mud of the U.S. South. Using bioregionalism as a basis, I discuss the diversity of the region's many distinct ecologies, suggesting the U.S. South as itself an assemblage of assemblages in which the idea of an identifiable southern identity is once again undermined. I also argue that both *Mudbound* and *Serena* end with sections of overt overlayering. As well as unavoidably looking back, as historical fiction must, they also both look forwards and outwards from their respective bioregions. This reading allows me to undermine a consistently regional sense of place in novels that, otherwise, inevitably retain the sensibilities of the Renascence era they depict.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, I bring the contemporary and historically set novels together, in order to demonstrate how they can be viewed in conversation with each other. I demonstrate how contemporary fiction of the U.S. South is beginning to display a new understanding of place. Taking Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) as a starting point, I analyse how similarly recurring images have changed in the novels of Ward, Laymon, and Rash. By highlighting images of the now rusting modernity that appears in each of the novels, I exemplify how assemblages of human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter employed by contemporary authors of the U.S. South are representative of a new understanding of place, for both the posthumanist subject and the region itself.

By offering a new starting point to investigations and theorising a new perspective of place for the U.S. South, I am suggesting a zooming out rather than a focusing in on the region. Although in some ways this is a process that has already started with transnationalism, I would argue that there is still a need for a further shift of

perspective and a posthumanist perspective of place offers a step towards this. Transnationalism's concentration on how connectivity, such as inward migration, affects the region, means that its focus remains decidedly inwards. This thesis will therefore investigate inherent connectivity rather than external influence. Although coexistence is historically not a word easily aligned with the U.S. South, Jay Watson suggests "dramas of ecological or interspecies coexistence may help us reconsider, reframe, or reengage with histories of racial and other forms of human coexistence on southern ground" ("Afterwor(l)d" 265). While not focusing on the specifics of the region's societal structures, by offering a posthumanist perception of place, I will demonstrate how contemporary literature of the U.S. South is portraying a reimagining of the region.

The presence of Faulkner, O'Connor, Hurston, and Wright in this thesis might appear incongruous when proposing the importance of viewing the region from a new starting point. However, positing a new understanding of place requires the explanation of previous conceptions. Similarly, suggesting the need to start thinking about the region in a new way requires a comparison with how the region was previously presented. In her examination of Ward's own "recycling" of Faulkner and the politics of such recycling, Sinéad Moynihan, quoting Linda Hutcheon, notes "[t]his engagement with the past is 'always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic return'" (552). This would seem to be a fitting explanation for the necessity to include such writers here. My advancement of a new perception of place in southern literature is part of a continuum, a critical reworking, and one that requires an insertion of the literary past into the present to fully elucidate. A questioning of exceptionalism requires a demonstration of such exceptionalism in effect. It is itself a part of what Frédérique Spill, discussing opening Faulkner out to new interpretations, calls the "perpetually ongoing text of literature" (qtd. in Lurie 6).

Chapter One - The Fields

In his novel *The River of Kings* (2017), Taylor Brown layers three iterations of the rural Georgia ecology on top of each other. The three temporally distinct narrative threads Brown employs all take place on the same stretch of the Altamaha River. In doing so, he connects the region's current inhabitants, in the form of Hunter and Lawton Loggins, with their recently deceased father Hiram, and an early European sally and attempted colonisation of the region. Brown grafts the inhabitants of the three threads through their common search for a mythical river creature, the Altamaha-ha. Hiram's childhood friend, the reclusive tattooed ex-priest Uncle King, whose own search for the Altamaha-ha bookends the novel, stalks the river from before sunrise. His is a search for redemption from the personal tragedies that have blighted his life, one which illustrates the blurred boundaries between temporal layers:

> In those hours, when the milky eye of the moon is hooded by cloud, he believes he can see into the creature's ken. He can see wrecked ships, double-masted or paddle-wheeled or bearing the steel blossoms of screws, and he can see the giant timber-bones of shattered rafts. He can see cypress dugouts foundered like coffins, home to giant catfish, and peaceful navies of sturgeon cruising through the depths. He can see men clad only in skins, gazing upward for the long-fallen sun, and men in strange billowy garb, hunting the bottoms for the golden twinkling of their god. He can see an evil man, sallow-faced, staggering drunkenly in the muck, looking for the pair of boys who sunk him. And he can see one of those boys grown old, his body bruised with ink, his hand unable to close for the tender white worm it holds. (117)

Through the eyes of his saurian quarry, Uncle King instantiates both the river's long recorded history, and how such a history must be seen in connectivity with the other-

than-human world alongside it. Brown interleaves his analogous narrative threads, foregrounding the coexisting relationships between actants who have, and continue to, occupy the same patch of southern ground. Indeed, this is an ecology that Brown is at pains to demonstrate predates all its human inhabitants. Giant cypress trees, searched for by the protagonists of the novel's contemporary thread, already dominate the sixteenth-century skyline: "brigantines trail in the flagship's wake, their towering mainsails challenging the tall trees that line the riverbanks like sentinels of this new world" (7). Connectivity runs between Brown's distinct yet inseparable layers, and it is such connectedness that I will examine and provide a context for throughout this thesis.

In "Posthuman Systems" (2018), Simone Bignall and Rosi Braidotti observe: "The diffractive reader is less animated by questions of definition ('what is a posthuman ecology?') than by questions of performative operation or orchestration and relational consequence" (6). It is an approach that entails and encourages bringing diverse fields into contact in order to illuminate each in a new way, and it is such relational consequence that I hope to draw out from two distinct, yet in key ways overlapping, practices. In this chapter I aim to provide an overview of the key arguments in the fields of New Southern Studies and posthumanism, as well as existing research into the concepts of place, spatiality, and time in order to contextualise my own methodological choices and illustrate the benefit of the cross-methodological approach I employ.

In their introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino observe that a reliance on southern regionalism confuses rather than clarifies the U.S. South's place in the present (7). Any examination of literature from the contemporary U.S. South must take into account the move in southern cultural studies towards a new understanding of the region and its place in the national imaginary, and critical analysis of the work is looking for new interpretative strategies for responding to it. That is not to say that the past is past. In order to understand its

present, and indeed its future, contemporary scholarship must continue to deal with what has gone before. Rather than seeing the past as the subject of its fiction (Guinn xviii), New Southern Studies is exploring ways to discuss the past alongside and in existence with the present. This is where my own approach of using posthumanism to interrogate New Southern Studies can be seen to add value.

This thesis will engage with a definition of posthumanism as an examination of what comes next when our understanding of ourselves as unique individuals with an agency clearly separable from that of others can no longer be seen as valid. In other words, what constitutes the posthumanist subject if the liberal humanist subject defined by N. Katherine Hayles is no longer a definitive description of ourselves. I see this lack of individuality as one of the key convergences between the two methodologies I employ here, allowing me to make comparisons between the non-exceptionalism of the posthumanist subject and the non-exceptionalism of the U.S. South. In examining our place as posthumanist subjects in a world viewed through a lens of coexistence rather than singularity, I will be able to offer a new interpretation of how the region can be understood as it looks to transform itself. It is a new interpretation that is exemplified by how writers of the region choose to depict their own transforming spaces.

Contemporary southern fiction, as well as contemporary southern criticism, is looking for alternative ways to discuss the currency of the region, ways not reliant upon shame or mythologising. My argument throughout this thesis focuses on how the literature demonstrates a new way of understanding the world we occupy. Authors, as they always have done, are depicting the world around them, and those depictions demonstrate a world in transformation. Whilst in subsequent chapters textual analysis of the core novels will be the axis of the arguments, it is important in this opening chapter to delineate the methodological approaches I employ.

1.1 New Southern Studies

When Houston Baker Jr. and Dana Nelson, in their preface to *Violence, the Body and 'The South'* (2001), highlighted a need for a New Southern Studies which "welcomes intellectual, multiparticipant, and revisionary complexity" and "wishes to construct and survey a new scholarly map of 'The South'" (243), they advocated a new approach to academic discourse about the region. This approach aims to leave behind what Martyn Bone refers to in *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005) as "a truth universally acknowledged among southern literary scholars that 'The South' and 'southern literature' have been characterized by a sense of place" (vii). It was a call to look beyond an attachment to home rooted in the identity of southerners. Although attempts to move away from mythologising the history of the region, and therefore also away from place as an originator of identity, have inevitably led to disagreements about how best to engage with the region's history, discussions about what should and does constitute a New Southern Studies has taken scholarly investigation of the U.S. South in interesting new directions.

The move within New Southern Studies has been away from conceptions of southern identity as contrast to national identity, conceptions of the southerner as the "Other." This calls into question how southern identity itself should be discussed. Michael Kreyling argues in *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998) that southernness can only truly be understood through an understanding of how the term originated and has changed over time (169), suggesting the U.S. South as an "imagined community" in the manner of Benedict Anderson. However, his methodological approach continues to present southernness as a unique if "imagined" identity, and therefore contains an inherent insistence upon a southern "sense of place." This puts Kreyling into conflict with Baker Jr. and Nelson, who propose that the north and south must be considered inseparable in any desirably functional model of American cultural studies (231). Their

call for a reintegration of the region into an understanding of the nation in totality is based upon a continued sense of contrast and the need for it to be "completely discredited as an acceptable marker of an outlaw, retrograde, socially imagined, and almost always entirely fictional United States territory" (234), or to put it another way, to be reinterpreted from its place as the Other. In "Southern Nonidentity" (2008), Leigh Anne Duck similarly urges an approach of "caution toward the 'recognition of difference' as a goal" (320), suggesting that any examination of a southern identity is itself reductive, and advocating a shift from explanations of what the U.S. South is towards an understanding of the many distinct group identities that exist in the region.

Such a move away from rooted identity, is instructive to my own research which, although not explicitly examining multiple group identities, will inevitably deal with the region's diversity when looking at the connectivity of differing elements. Melanie Benson Taylor's "Faulkner and Southern Studies" (2015) suggests that the U.S. South is in fact "a mobile phenomenon" (120), more a set of values and tastes than a region at all, which serves to negate the possibility of a place capable of shaping identity. However, although Taylor seeks to negate the constancy of the region, values and tastes are themselves unrootable without a level of exceptionalism. A southern set of values suggests a southern identity unaffected by location or external influence. In New Southern Studies, the identity of the region's inhabitants is undergoing a necessary but thorny re-evaluation.

Further to this, the genesis of the emergence of a supposedly unique southern identity is likewise being re-examined in New Southern Studies. In *Where the New World Is* (2018), Bone contends that it was largely an economic construct where the process of identity formation around a slave economy transformed into the creation of a Confederate nationalism (5). Southern identity was, in this formulation, no more than an ideological invention and a white-washed one at that. This is a southern identity based

entirely on what Baker Jr. and Nelson call "Good Old Southern White Men telling stories on the porch" (232), one that completely elides the black South. Such an invention was, according to Duck, perpetuated by the Southern Agrarians, twelve writers and poets from the U.S. South who published their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), and sought to portray the U.S. South as "a 'minority section' of the United States that shared 'a tradition . . . deeply founded in the way of life itself'" (Duck, "Southern Nonidentity" 321). It was a poetic construct formed on an idealised view of the antebellum South and the racial and gendered hierarchy such a view entailed. In its questioning of the origins of southernness as an identity, New Southern Studies once again questions the validity of discussing the region as an Other to the country as a whole. With the concept of the U.S. South itself becoming increasingly fluid, its boundaries now not only extend potentially from coast to coast, but also beyond in an understanding of a region subject to globalisation and the connectivity that brings. Such a conception of a unique southern identity based upon a historical construct has become increasingly problematic.

As southern exceptionalism can no longer be considered an apposite means for interpreting the region, New Southern Studies has tasked itself with a move away from the regional despair created by the shame of the region's history. Instead, contemporary criticism looks to disrupt the narrative of memorialisation. In *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn highlight that as recently as the 1990s "oppositional constructions of southern identity offered by white male southerners" (1), were still prominent in a region that considered its experience of defeat and reconstruction as unique within the United States. However, in *After Southern Modernism* (2000), Matthew Guinn calls for a departure from "the stock motifs of history, place, and community" (x), suggesting that "the South as it has been conceived by earlier generations of writers and critics is in many respects the product of

nostalgia and elitism" (xii). It is, of course, just such elitism that fosters Baker, Jr. and Nelson's 'socially imagined territory' and Bone's 'economic construct.' It is my contention that, although community will inevitably figure prominently in any novel focused upon one small patch of land, contemporary authors are employing Guinn's triumvirate in differing ways.

Kreyling questions whether racism "can be divided from the narrative system of southern cultural identity" (176), or indeed should be, and in doing so acknowledges the influence race relations have had upon the cultural production of the U.S. South. While some traditional themes of southern fiction remain both relevant and important, such themes can be seen to be ubiquitous rather than simply regional. It is a ubiquity that also highlights the complexity of relationships in a globalised South that can no longer be characterised by simple binaries.

Along with re-evaluating traditional themes, New Southern Studies is seeking new ways to discuss the region's past. The past itself can be argued to be the traditional subject of southern fiction, indicative of a region that has tended to define itself by looking backwards rather than forwards. However, the rejection in New Southern Studies of the idealised pastoral South coveted by the Southern Agrarians, has seen a shift in "[t]he desire to order the present by recovering the past" (Guinn 136).

In *Finding Purple America* (2013), Jon Smith compares southern studies with American Studies questioning what the object of each is, observing that southern studies refuses to look forward while American Studies refuses to look back (19). In doing so, his New Southern Studies is searching for the space where people attempt to navigate the pull of the past *and* the future. My own positing of overlayered ecologies, pushes Smith's argument further in its suggestion that contemporary fiction is depicting a present that is not only informed by, but also entwined with, the past and the future. If, as Guinn suggests, cultural decay has become the issue that needs addressing (xxvii),

then New Southern Studies is searching for new, and potentially interdisciplinary, ways of addressing it.

Indeed, as Michael Bibler observes in "Introduction: Smash the Mason-Dixon" (2016), southern studies' interest has turned to a dazzling array of Souths:

> There are Native Souths, queer Souths, black Souths, Latin Souths, global Souths, immigrant Souths, revolutionary Souths, experimental Souths, apocalyptic Souths, undead Souths, divine Souths, visceral Souths, traumatic Souths, gratuitous Souths, boring Souths, imagined Souths, remembered Souths, forgotten Souths, no Souths, celluloid Souths, graphic Souths, aural Souths, pop Souths, swamp Souths, eco-Souths, branded Souths, red Souths, blue Souths, folk Souths, rural Souths, urban Souths, sick Souths, weird Souths, punk Souths, hippy Souths, hipster Souths, hip-hop Souths, dirty Souths, western Souths, coastal Souths, island Souths, mountain Souths, and on and on. (153)

What is clear from this list is both the diversity and interdisciplinary nature of New Southern Studies.

The most pertinent of Bibler's diverse approaches to this thesis would be eco-Souths. In "Rootedness and Mobility" (2015), Michael Beilfuss suggests that "southern studies has had many struggles that parallel ecocriticism's growth . . . Both resisted more theoretical approaches and a broader inclusion of writers and forms" (380). It is a connection that Jay Watson takes a step further in "The Other Matter of the South" (2016), when noting ecocriticism's "codependent relation with pastoral ideologies that frame environmental history as decline from a lost golden era" (158). According to these formulations, ecocriticism already enjoys a deal of crossover with southern studies. Accordingly, in "The Universe Unraveled" (2019), Sarah McFarland proposes a benefit to placing ecocriticism and southern literature in conversation with each other: "Perhaps southern literatures, so full of examples of endurance and adaptation in the

face of innumerable challenges, can reposition our thinking about what ethical interactions with human and nonhuman others look like" (190).

Such interactions are coming under increased scrutiny in the U.S. South as a region and consequently also in New Southern Studies, with Lisa Hinrichsen noting in "Stuck in Place" (2019): "The US South, like the broader Global South, is an increasingly precarious ecosystem" (23). Exploring the work of nineteenth-century proto-environmentalist, John Muir, Scott Obernesser traces a long history of southern sacrifice zones back to early industrialisation:

> Developing national industries *must* have the raw materials to produce competitively within global commerce. By supplying the nation with these raw materials, the South firmly ties itself to the nation and commits its natural spaces to extraction. (75-76)

Indeed, the precarity of the region's ecosystems has focused much critical gaze on the U.S. South's continued position as a sacrifice zone, one which, according to Beilfuss, "contributed to the birth of the environmental justice movement" (379).

Once again highlighting the parallels between the two disciplines, Watson suggests that investigations of the southern landscape can be of benefit to both ecocriticism and southern studies, but asserts that such scholarship needs:

> to ensure that scrutiny of the South's physical landscapes does not ignore the histories of land use and abuse, resource extraction, and pollution that have enriched and entitle some of the region's inhabitants at the expense of other citizens, communities, and life-forms. ("The Other Matter" 157)

It is impossible not to draw a connection here between the concerns of New Southern Studies and those of previous conceptions of southern studies.

However, in "A Totally Different Form of Living" (2021), Justin Hosbey and J.T. Roane consider southern ecologies from an alternative perspective, noting that

historically, "[a]s challenging as these environments could be . . . By coexisting with these ecologies . . . instead of 'taming' them, maroon communities were able to build 'a totally different form of living'" (72). New Southern Studies is beginning to examine southern space from multiple perspectives. In doing so, examinations of such spaces are able to offer new interpretations of human connection with its surroundings. As Beilfuss observes: "the focus of southern studies has become less white, male, privileged, insular, and exceptional" (380). Eco-Souths and their focus on coexistence and environmental justice are illustrative of this.

Another area of research that demonstrates Beilfuss's shift in focus away from the received constancy of southern space, one with particular relevance to my primary texts, is southern incarceration. The rate of incarceration across the United States, and hugely disproportionate levels based on race, are well documented. New Southern Studies has turned part of its focus towards the underlying reasons behind these figures. In "Introduction: Rethinking Mass Incarceration Through the US South" (2021), Katie Owens-Murphy and Jeanine Weekes Schroer suggest "incarceration has a distinct flavor in the US South" (2). "Welcome to the Farm Squad" (2021), penned by an anonymous inmate currently incarcerated in one of the regions prisons begins:

> I stood in line, stripped naked, asked to open my mouth, lift my testicles, and bend over and cough. We were placed on bunks in rows only feet apart, stacked next to as well as on top of each other. Counted, fed, and sometimes beaten before being shipped to the next plantation. (73)

The violence inherent in the prison plantation evokes an inescapable connection to the region's past. The use of incarceration as a postbellum solution to emancipation is made clear. What is condemned by Owens-Murphy and Schroer as the "reification of systems of enslavement through prison plantations and convict leasing" (2), is more

emphatically decried by Houston Baker, Jr.'s assertion that "the law may be not only a white dog but also a ghost ship of the transatlantic slave trade" ("Incarceration" 20).

Investigations of southern incarceration have also diversified into new fields. In "The American Virus" (2021), Jennie Lightweis-Goff observes that the national response to the covid pandemic mirrors regional carceral policies. Additionally, in "And Now She Sings It" (2021), Joanna Davis-McElligatt positions the ghosts in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in resistance to contested southern space, arguing: "they place themselves at disparate – yet interrelated – moments in Black life in the US, each of them invoked as victims of antiblack violence" (120). In fact, southern studies investigations of incarceration form part of a larger interrogation of contested space that extends beyond the physical boundaries of the prison system.

In "Haunted Roadscapes in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*" (2020), Nicole Dib interrogates the American road trip narrative. She positions the road itself, and the promise of self-discovery it has been used to symbolize, as a policed space for black drivers, one with the potential for both institutional and vigilante violence: "for black travelers . . . the implied capacity for mobility and autonomy on which a road trip ought to rely cannot be taken for granted" (135). Such interrogations extend further in New Southern Studies with history also becoming a contested space, contestations that have significance for my own investigations of how overlayered ecologies incorporate historical space.

From investigations of what constitutes a southern print culture, such as Coleman Hutchison's "Book History" (2016), to interrogating "accounts of 'southern identity' as distinctively grounded in loss, abjection, and trauma" (Smith, "Trauma" 354), historical spaces have come under closer scrutiny. In "Claiming the Property of History in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*" (2017), Sarah Gilbreath-Ford observes that "Eric Foner's question 'who owns history?' has become particularly significant

with passionate public debates about the meaning of Civil War monuments" (251), questioning who does, and should, narrate history. This, in turn, has led to investigations in the field about why history seems to return so often in southern literature. While in "When Dead Men Talk" (2015), Brian Norman suggests "literary exhumations reject historical amnesia and equip us to understand injustice in the present, and perhaps work to dismantle it" (147), Gilbreath-Ford contends that haunting "suggests that history is not over and settled but available for a new telling" (251). History, as with the road, the prison, the ecology, and all Bibler's southern spaces, has become necessarily contested in New Southern Studies. As Ted Ownby asserts in "The New Southern Studies and Rethinking the Question 'Is There Still a South?'" (2015):

> The global perspective includes all of the people, all of their histories, all of their influences . . . It takes immigration seriously, takes seriously that people travel by choice and by force, that they read, watch, learn from, and have influence on things that have no borders or whose borders are points of conflict. (873-74)

Such changes to the received fictional history of the U.S. South leave New Southern Studies with a need to form a new interpretation of southern history and its role in contemporary culture.

Whilst critics of recent years have tended to focus on conceptualisations of a post-south, either as parody of the renascence South or an examination of the capitalist mythologies of the Agrarian ideal, New Southern Studies is moving away from a fixed region that is increasingly difficult to locate, to a conceptualisation of the U.S. South as an amalgamation of histories. These histories link it regionally to both the nation and a global south, particularly through the transnational turn embraced by southern studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, any lingering notions of southern exceptionalism are undercut by the region's connection to a wider world.

While texts such as Bone's *Where the New World Is* make a compelling argument by challenging received readings of southern literature and its depiction as a fixed and somewhat untouched region, Melanie Benson Taylor suggests that transnationalism redirects "the field's gaze toward a wider international world similarly wrought by colonialism and slavery" (123). Although transnationalism is important to understanding the region's connectivity, I see Taylor's as an approach that offers scope for a new interpretation of the region, one which is not inherently affected by the monolithic tropes of the past. Whilst "the local" continues to hold a determining influence over the culture of the region – this is after all New Southern Studies as distinct from American Studies – it is a local whose interactions both "deeply influence and are influenced by national and global issues" (Eric Gary Anderson et al. 3).

As previously noted, an analysis of contemporary southern literature necessitates an understanding of how the region is being re-imagined within the national – and global – whole. While Taylor observes that most critics acknowledge "the tenacity of 'The South' as an ideological construction with discernible, tenacious influence" (122), previous constructions of the U.S. South as a region categorised by exceptionalism have given way to what Smith and Cohn describe as a need to "redirect the critical gaze of southern studies outward, away from the nativist navel-gazing that has kept mainstream southern studies methodologically so far behind American studies" (13). Smith, engaging with an argument made by James Peacock in *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (2007), contends that the local and the global do not have to be binary opposites, but can instead find resonance in each other (*Finding Purple America* 33). While the necessary breaking down of binary opposites is far from a new idea across academic disciplines, it does resonate strongly within both New Southern Studies and posthumanism. Both disciplines are searching for ways to understand surroundings that are in the midst of a re-imagining. Traditional tropes of

southern fiction must, where still employed, be similarly examined in a new spirit of connectivity, one which entails a new understanding of place for the region.

1.2 Posthumanism

As with so many terms in the humanities, the term "posthumanism" has emerged and diversified with a number of sometimes competing meanings. It is often used in reference to cybernetics and speculative fiction, with the posthuman signifying transformations of the human body. However, my research, as previously noted, will instead focus on the posthumanist subject as successor to the liberal humanist subject. In other words, recognising ourselves as no longer being unique individuals with an agency clearly separable from that of others. This will inevitably include a questioning of what it means to be human in a world coming to terms with globalisation, climate-change, and pervasive capitalism.

In his discussion of an Octavia Butler novel which posits the possibility of multiple species DNA, Pramod K. Nayar notes: "posthumanism does not see the human as the center of all things: it sees the human as instantiation of connections, linkages, and crossings in a context where species are seen as coevolving, and competition is rejected in favour of cooperation" (796). While the idea of coevolving and cooperating species is difficult to accept against the background of the Anthropocene, connectivity is key. It is our lack of exceptionalism that demarcates the posthumanist subject. We are intimately connected to the world around us.

Throughout this thesis I position new materialism as a constituent part of posthumanism. I interpret posthumanism to encompass an overarching theory of human non-exceptionalism, one that includes new materialism's examinations of matter, and "the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces" (Bennett xvi). Posthumanism's erasing of an identifiably discrete human condition is informed by the kind of inherent

connectedness that new materialism seeks to demonstrate. In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost propose that new materialism represents a return to core questions over the nature of matter and the human's place in a material world (3), one which could have a bearing on how we structure our society going forward. As Coole and Frost observe, classical science was hugely influential on modern political thought and therefore new conceptions of matter could in turn have an impact on how we rethink society (13). It is important to note a distinction here between the posthuman and the posthumanist subject with my own research focusing upon the latter. Ideas of the posthuman focus on the corporeal and advancements affecting the physical human. I instead employ a definition of the posthumanist subject as the next step if we now reject the idea of the liberal humanist subject and the exceptionalism it bequeaths. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett attempts to bypass the exceptionalism of perceived human uniqueness. It is such ideas that will allow me to interrogate the exceptionalism that New Southern Studies is attempting to navigate away from in a socio-political sense.

Bennett asserts that all things have a capacity for action. An actant, "is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen" (Bennett 9). The posthumanist subject should be considered a far from unique actant in the world around it, a subject decentred and whose material body allows no privilege but is instead searching to understand its own place in an evolving world of coexistence.

Posthumanism's questioning of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century catechizes how we perceive the world around us. This, according to Callus et al., implies a need to consider the extent of our ecological responsibility (103). We can no longer view ourselves as centrally located in an understanding of our place in the world. Theorisations of the Anthropocene, which put man at the centre of our current

geological age, are problematic to a conception of the decentred posthumanist subject. However, in "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene" (2014), Bruno Latour observes that "[t]o be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but *to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy*" (5), suggesting that reducing the equation to a nature-human binary is reductive. In addition, in "Shimmer: When All You Love Is Being Trashed" (2017), Deborah Bird Rose proposes that "by foregrounding the exceptional damage that humans are causing, the Anthropocene shows us the need for radically reworked forms of attention to what marks the human species as different" (G55). Although I concede that a pure conception of a multi-actant assemblage in which our ability to affect[2] is impossible to locate is difficult to align with the Anthropocene, it is important to once again remember that not all actants have the same ability to affect. The world around us may be a multi-species and, in effect, multi-actant environment but this does not negate the posthumanist subject's (or indeed any actant's) ability to affect it in an exceptional way. Hayles concedes that "in a literal sense, we make a world for ourselves by living in it" (158), and it is an understanding of our place as one amongst many in our environment, all with the capability to affect it in some way, that posthumanism seeks to establish.

The notion of assemblage – a heterogeneous state defined by collective agency – discussed in the introduction, is an extension to the concept of coexistence, and therefore one to most understandings of posthumanism. This clearly marks a significant change from Hayles's definition of the liberal humanist subject. It indicates our existence as amalgamations rather than individuals, and therefore subject to continuous

[2] As different academic disciplines define "affect" differently, I will clarify my own use of the term in this context. Simply put, I mean an actant's influence on the world around them. I separate it from an understanding of emotion, although there is no doubt that our own (post)human influence will usually stimulate an emotional response. Instead, I use the term in a manner more in-keeping with "networked affect" (without the technological connotation that entails). Susanna Paasonen, synthesising Spinoza, Massumi, Deleuze, and Gatens, states, "As the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by one another, affect cuts across, and joins together, bodies human and non-human, organic and machine, material and conceptual" (283). I employ the term throughout in this spirit of connectivity.

evolution and re-evaluation. The posthumanist subject is continually affected by the world around it, both human and other-than-human, with Coole and Frost suggesting that the role of the human is itself being relocated within a new conception of environment that has an ability of its own to affect (10). Such an understanding of agency is taken a step further by Bennett in her interpretation of an environment made up of matter that all has a capacity to affect. As previously noted, Bennett defines assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant matters of all sorts" (23), suggesting that the posthumanist subject is inherently connected, not just to other posthumanist subjects, but to all matter in its environment. The posthumanist subject exists in a world of assemblage, of which they are but a single part, capable of affecting but also being affected by the world around them. Its coexistence is not just a matter of circumstance but vital to an understanding of its conception.

The acceptance of such an assemblage of coexistence calls in turn for a different understanding of the environment around us. In "Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene" (2017), Nils Bubandt observes "each new scientific discovery reveals more details of the complex interplay between human worlds and natural worlds, we are also increasingly faced with our inability to tell these worlds apart" (G125). He notes that the posthumanist subject has a shared existence both in and with its environment. Coole and Frost's new materialist approach suggests that new understandings of matter are "intervening in the very building blocks of life" (24) and transforming how we see the environment we live within. In other words, theirs is a conception of posthumanism as evolution, interacting with the environment to see the world in different ways.

Anna Tsing et al. take this idea a step further by proposing that our environment consists of "overlaid arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces, which we call 'landscapes'" (G1). They suggest that our view of the world around us must be seen

as one of many such views that all overlap and interfere with each other. This is a formative concept for my thesis, which expands upon the idea of imbricated human and other-than-human living space to propose overlayered ecologies which view the layers as connected temporally and socio-economically as well as through simultaneous space, factors important for an interrogation of the U.S. South as a region. There can be no true isolation from a past with which we are intrinsically linked. Each of these interpretations suggest that the posthumanist subject is increasingly entangled with other-than-human nature, and therefore any understanding of it must include an examination of the ecologies it exists within.

Such an entanglement between posthumanist and other-than-human actants, and the lack of a clearly distinguishable agency that results, indicates the impossibility of straight lines of cause and effect. Latour questions whether the posthumanist subject has in fact become the inanimate object and nature the subject in the Anthropocene (11-12), and whether humans are capable of coping with the sheer scale of the problem, suggesting an inability to identify cause and effect. Further to this, in "Posthumanist Performativity" (2003), Karen Barad proposes that agency cannot be simply related to human intention and that directly tracing cause to effect misses out the "crucial intra-actions among these forces that fly in the face of any specific set of disciplinary concerns" (810). Bennett argues that human agency is in fact part of a distributed agency in which many actants produce a potentially unforeseen result, and that agency still contains intentionality, but assemblages reduce the power of any intention to directly affect an outcome.

In "Posthumanism: A Fickle Philosophy?" (2018), Steven Umbrello observes: "Because the term has been appropriated by various fields including critical studies, philosophy, anthropology and sociology – among others – the various instantiations for which the term has been used similarly differs" (28). In fact, along with its diverse

nature within the discipline, posthumanism has become increasingly contested by other disciplines. Academics from ethnic and cultural studies, political science, and environmental studies, amongst others, have questioned the validity of theorising posthumanism as a normative project. Rejecting the binary values associated with the liberal humanist subject, such as human/animal, man/woman, and black/white has effectively decentred the posthumanist subject. It is largely this decentring that is being questioned. In "The Contested Posthumanities" (2016), Rosi Braidotti states "this generalized appeal to a new undifferentiated 'humanity' serves mainly the function of flattening out and disregarding all power differences" (31). Correspondingly, in "Against Posthumanism" (2023), Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose argue that such a flattening "shuts down crucial ethopolitical debates about the values that should shape relations between diverse ways of being human persons in our global present" (2). Such criticism of posthumanism suggests that viewing the human as one actant – albeit one amongst many – is reductive to the complexity of the posthumanist subject's true existence within their assemblage.

One aspect of this complexity problematised by a decentring of the human is that of environmental responsibility. Indeed, posthumanism's relationship with environmental concerns is contested for a number of reasons. In "What 'The Animal' Can Teach 'The Anthropocene'" (2020), Cary Wolfe queries the idea that everything can be categorised uniformly as an actant. Instead, he proposes "one might draw a bright line between so-called Flat Ontologies and . . . what one might call 'jagged ontologies,' ones that pay attention to differences and to how . . . those differences *make* a difference" (132). This recognition of difference is cardinal to much of the contention concerning posthumanism. As Ursula K. Heise observes in "Environmentalisms and Posthumanisms" (2020):

> Posthumanism implicitly or explicitly relies on a narrative about the human species, and such species thinking has often seemed suspicious to environmentally oriented academics and activists who see concepts of nature inextricably entangled with social structures that also produce inequality. (142)

Highlighting the effect of climate change upon humans, Bignall and Braidotti note "complexity means that not all humans are equally placed to respond effectively to the social and economic impacts of the inhuman earth-forces of natural disaster" (3). However, Heise's suspicions, and the social and environmental justice concerns they evince, indicate inequalities in more than simply the effect upon humans.

In "Posthumanist Cultural Studies" (2021), Florian Cord suggests that the posthuman turn and its potential evacuating of responsibility could be seen as "a sort of political quietism" (31). Similarly, Heise observes that "some political ecologists are legitimately fearful that this shift will entail a diminished focus on the power relations that characterize human societies" (143). Once again, the decentring of the human is argued to reduce the significance of existing power relations. As flattened ontologies legitimately raise questions of inequalities in both responsibility and impact, Cord proposes: "the Anthropocene should perhaps more appropriately be termed 'Capitalocene.' For it was precisely not some abstract, universal 'man' that brought about the drastic changes in geology, climate, etc. we are now observing, but '*Western' capitalism*" (29). This is a line of reasoning that will again be apparent in alternative questionings of the posthuman turn.

Investigations of the Anthropocene highlight aspects of posthumanism that are now contested in other areas of research, including one with particular significance to the U.S. South. In "Race, Technology, and Posthumanism" (2020), Holly Flint Jones and Nicholaos Jones contend: "Absent from many posthumanist approaches to the Anthropocene, however, is attention to issues of race" (185). They argue that not only

do changes to the environment affect different populations in different ways, but that it is often overlooked how "differently racialized populations of posthumans might contribute to responding to those changes" (8). The flattened ontologies noted by both Wolfe and Cord again raise questions about posthumanism's failure to engage with forms of inequality. In "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism" (2013), Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that posthumanism's "scholars effectively sidestepped the analytical challenges posed by the categories of race, colonialism, and slavery" (671). Similarly, in "Posthumanism and Design" (2017), Laura Forlano observes: "From the perspective of critical race studies, it is not productive to speak of the posthuman when so many people . . . have not historically been included in the category of the human in the first place" (28).

While the universalist category of posthuman is rightly questioned in race studies, in "Humans Involved" (2017), Tiffany Lethabo King states that western theories of the human invariably begin from a position of whiteness. Correspondingly, Jackson contends: "However subversive posthumanism's conceptual points of departure, posthumanism remained committed to a specific *order of rationality*, one rooted in the epistemological locus of the West" (671-72). The Eurocentric foundations of posthumanist thought noted by Cord and Environmental Studies is similarly contested in Critical Race Theory. In "Critique and the Black Horizon" (2023), bringing the two fields together, Farai Chipato and David Chandler argue that posthumanism "neglects the fact that other peoples' worlds were and are still being destroyed in order to produce Western modernity now considered to be under the threat of its own extinction" (2). Chipato and Chandler further argue that posthumanism fails to acknowledge modernity's colonial bedrock stating: "[T]he question of the ethical encounter of equality and co-constitution, which . . . posthumanists advocate for, can only be examined on the 'deck', enabled by a disavowal of the fragility and violence of

the ’hold’” (9). With Jones and Jones questioning the wisdom of once again sidelining the historically marginalised, they argue: “Subordinately racialized populations . . . have much to teach about surviving times of despair, when conditions for sustainable living are out of reach and forces abound that threaten to overwhelm efforts to change course” (186). From both an environmental and race studies perspective, posthumanism’s positioning of a normative subject entangled with other-than-human actants is contested as reductive for a number of reasons.

If the post of posthumanism calls for an understanding of a world beginning to move away from humanism and the liberal humanist subject, it also calls for an appreciation of coexistence in an ecology of heterogeneous assemblage where, according to Coole and Frost, we can no longer be understood to be dissociated entities, but instead exist in a network of relations which “outrun the comprehension or intentions of individual actors” (30).

It is posthumanism’s reflections on “what comes next?” and how that is influenced by inherent connectivity, that help to shape my own investigations on the U.S. South. The zooming out rather than focusing in, I advocate in the introduction, is rooted in, and grows from, a posthumanist understanding of assemblages. Posthumanism’s positioning of its subject as a far from unique actant whose agency is distributed, resonates strongly with a U.S. South in need of a new understanding of its own place.

1.3 Place, Spatiality, and Time

Although New Southern Studies and posthumanism are the two key fields that this thesis is situated within, place, spatiality, and time are the foci of each of the chapters. As each has its own associated body of research, I will briefly introduce some of the key arguments. This section will necessarily present a degree of crossover with the two

main methodologies due to the importance of the concepts discussed to each. My research focuses on a new interpretation of place apparent in southern literature, and time and spatiality are important elements of both this interpretation and the novels discussed. As such, how both New Southern Studies and posthumanism influence understandings of each is significant.

So, why is place such an important concept in literature and why is literature in turn important to the concept? In "Place in Fiction" (1956), Eudora Welty observes "the novel from the start has been bound up in the local, the 'real,' the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience" (41). Literature has always been seen to play a role in the recognition of place and even the creation of place. Welty argues that location provides validity to a text, it makes it believable (43). However, in his more recent scholarly intervention *Spatiality* (2012), Robert Tally, Jr. argues that the connection is more fundamental, and that "literature provides a way of mapping the spaces encountered or imagined" (2). Literature is formative in our creation of our own living space, and according to Tally, literary cartography provides means for readers to interpret their own social space (6). Thadious Davis suggests that this is particularly true of a South whose people have "participated in mythmaking out of the landscape, its occupants, and their sociocultural and geopolitical networks" (15). In other words, the social space of the U.S. South has in part been constructed from the myths of the past, a fact that New Southern Studies is attempting to move away from and redefine. Such a re-conception is something Tally suggests is entirely possible when he observes that if the human condition is one of disorientation, then literary studies can offer "new means of making sense of the ways we make sense of the world" (43).

It is important to note at this point, that Davis points out in her analysis of Shay Youngblood's 1997 novel: "*Soul Kiss*, like the later work of Alice Walker, moves 'southern' writing into a larger twenty-first-century, transnational, cross-cultural, and

diasporic space in which people have global connections" (151). Southern literature can be considered global before the contemporary authors I address in my own research. I do not mean to suggest that southern literature has itself recently emerged from a state of isolation, but instead to highlight the value in analysing how connections and networks are portrayed within the texts, as this thesis does, connectivity that goes beyond existing analyses of the transnational kind.

As discussed in the introduction, place has long played a central role in investigations of southern literature. However, critics have laid different emphases on the importance of place to identity. Thadious Davis, who is concerned with how the social structures of the South were used in the construction of identity, argues in *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (2011), that place "is a powerful signifier of identity that cannot be overestimated, particularly in terms of the South with its specific history and sociology" (15). Her argument is almost exclusively concerned with examining space and identity from a racial perspective. In *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism* (2008), Attie de Lange et al. agree that place is linked to identity however, they also note that it can complicate as well as contribute to its creation, something they describe as the "double element of belonging to a place while simultaneously feeling alienated both from it and from the people who live in it" (xii). This I would suggest is important to a New Southern Studies conception of the region, one that can no longer link identity creation unproblematically to the region without taking into account its heterogeneous nature or its connectivity with a wider world.

In "Changing Spaces: Salman Rushdie's Mapping of Postcolonial Territories" (2008), Frederik Tygstrup contends that spatial reality is made by actants in relational networks, and that place "takes shape, neither as a human construct nor as a natural ground, but as an ecology" (201). Such a conception connects Tygstrup back to both

Jane Bennet's assemblages and Anna Tsing et al.'s imbricated human and non-human living spaces. Understandings of place, while important to the self-definition of both individuals and groups, have themselves undergone a change, one I link with the new materialist turn, through observations of the connectivity and networks of multiple actants necessary for its creation.

Such connectivity requires a rethinking of how time and space are linked. Tally notes that several factors after the Second World War shifted critical thinking away from the conceptions of time that had dominated modernism and towards a more spatial understanding of the world. An idea of time "progressively moving from barbarism to civilization" (Tally 13), became difficult to maintain after the horrors of the war. This coupled with a re-evaluation of the ideals of enlightenment thinking and the rise in mass movement of populations called for a reassessment of conceptions of time and space. With New Southern Studies looking to rethink ideas such as sense of place and the past in the present, temporal and spatial connectivity are observable in the overlayered ecologies I foreground in this thesis.

In *Ghost Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination* (2012), Maria del Pilar Blanco argues that an understanding of simultaneity is important as it encourages a sense of other actants in other landscapes, a simultaneity that is spatial as well as temporal (26). This finds resonance in Michel Foucault's statement in "Of Other Spaces" (1967) that "[w]e are in the epoch of simultaneity" (22). For Foucault, "our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22). This suggests a network of connectivity that exists not just between actants in contemporaneous assemblages, but also across time, and overlayering provides a way of visualising such connections.

According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, in "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference" (1992), connectivity is key:

> [I]f one begins with the premise that spaces have *always* been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference *through* connection. (8)

Thinking about space as naturally interconnected is an idea that I see as central to New Southern Studies re-imagining of the region. In "Houses, Cellars and Caves in Selected Novels from Latin America and South Africa" (2008), Marita Wenzel suggests that landscapes are cultural palimpsests that are inevitably altered over time yet retain traces of the past, but Gupta and Ferguson argue that the reality is more radical than this. They contend "[p]hysical location and physical territory . . . need to be replaced by multiple grids that enable us to see that connection and contiguity" (20), and overlayered ecologies provide such multiplicity, as well as a lens on connectivity through the simultaneity of time and space.

In keeping with this notion of simultaneity, Tsing et al. contend:

> Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits. This refusal of the past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue fouling our own nests. How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly . . . Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life. (G2)

Their insistence that we need to be careful of refusing the past in how we view our place on the planet, resonates with the U.S. South's own contentious relationship with its history. Although attempting to move away from the past as subject, academics are looking to rethink rather than reject what has gone before. In both methodologies there needs to be a balance struck with how we acknowledge the past. In his geographical

investigation of the Anthropocene, David Matless asserts "the marking out of the Anthropocene raises questions of inheritance, of the intended or unintended bequests of previous generations in particular parts of the world" (372). Although his is really a rumination on the environmental changes observable through the erosion of coastal landscapes, Matless's suggestion that "[l]andscape has often been a medium for meditations on legacy, whether cultural legacies of heritage or familial and institutional legacies of property" (372), finds nourishment in the fertile ground of southern fictional ecologies. The land, and its inhabitants' connection to it, has long played a central role in literature of the U.S. South and it continues to do so in the ecologies examined throughout this thesis. How the "past, present and future meet through questions of inheritance" (Matless 364), is as pertinent to an investigation of the U.S. South as it is to debates around the Anthropocene.

In her investigation into American literary landscapes, Blanco suggests that haunting "can indicate how American authors write spaces that are in the process of being transformed" (16). This is an idea that I see as informative for my own research, as both New Southern Studies and posthumanism are attempting to navigate spaces in the process of transformation. In fact, according to Tygstrup, "[t]he historicity of space unfolds as transformations of what has been handed down – that is, as an interplay between decaying and emerging forms" (203). In other words, space is always in the process of transformation and literary landscapes can be used to demonstrate such transformations. Matless proposes that "[p]olitics, morality and imagination refract through landscape" (365), an idea that Blanco similarly makes in her suggestion that the landscape depicted in a text opens up questions about the socio-political factors affecting its inhabitants (10). This, in turn, connects back to Thadious Davis's previously mentioned examination of space from a racial perspective.

One such factor directly informed by a new materialist understanding of space is that of fixity of place and its importance to nationhood. Gupta and Ferguson state that discontinuity forms the basis of our understanding of the distinctiveness of societies and culture and that each nation is seen as a discontinuous space, rooted in its proper place, with a unique culture (6), but noting that such a conception becomes problematic when considering borderlands, migration, and diasporic transference of culture. Davis notes that boundaries serve to "define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded" (44) and are therefore social as well as spatial. As traditional geographic boundaries are now seen as fluid in New Southern Studies, and posthumanism and assemblage existence effectively refuses boundaries between different actants (whether human or other-than-human), in both methodologies any remaining boundaries are largely social, a construction conceptually in need of breaking down.

Assemblages allow for an imagining of what Blanco calls: "Limitless nations, landscapes without confines: Such are the dreams defined and refined by the continuous reimagination of community space" (149). I dislike the term limitless nations and the expansionist connotation it conjures however, this sort of a reimagining of space and social construction are central to both methodologies I employ. Davis notes, "with those differentials in space come differences in power and the ability to impact" (192), and this allows me to create an important link back to new materialism. Not every actant in an assemblage has the same ability to affect, a factor that, with its socio-economic and racial implications, is as important to New Southern Studies as it is to posthumanist theory.

In *Southscapes*, Davis also theorises a concept of "imbricated strata" of "places in which . . . separate sets of people, from distinct but ancillary histories, function individually and collectively" (214), an idea that feeds into my own positing of overlayered ecologies. Both theories deal with a connectivity between space and time,

however, imbricated strata are based upon chains of events that connect characters through time rather than assemblage existences within it. For Davis, "[t]he links form connective tissue carrying ideas both forward and backward along a time-space continuum" (214) and is therefore more a positing of the past informing the present, than existing alongside it. It is a defined set of connections rather than the paucity of cause and effect apparent in the new materialist understanding of space I employ.

In the following chapters I turn to the novels of Jesmyn Ward, Kiese Laymon, Hillary Jordan, and Ron Rash, a diverse cross-section of the region's contemporary authors. The U.S. South of the novels that I investigate is one that exhibits a new understanding of place, one informed by the twin methodologies I employ. As I demonstrate, the U.S. South depicted is one of assemblage existence, both within its fluid boundaries and in its connections further afield.

Chapter Two - Holes

The U.S. South and discussions of transformation have never been natural bedfellows. Rather, it has been seen as a region where time stands still in a rapidly modernising world, with Matthew Guinn noting "[s]outherners such as the Nashville Agrarians used the past in a more didactic fashion, turning to southern history as something close to a panacea for contemporary problems, an antidote to modern disorder" (xviii). Even recent trends in New Southern Studies, from transnationalism to examinations of the undead, have sought new ways of viewing the region by examining its past. They discuss transformation via a better understanding of the past in the present. Although transformation really is the key word for these opening chapters on the novels of Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon, here it is a transformation that looks to the future as well as the past. In doing so, I contend that the novels demonstrate the acceptance of a need for further change. Taylor Hagood argues, "southern ground conceived as an actant also provides the kinds of liberating energies that can imagine new Souths" (259), a suggestion that southern ecologies have more of a role to play than simply providing a backdrop and hint of local colour to the action. The ecologies that exist within these novels no longer comply with an understanding of linear progress, a fact that helps to shape contemporary narratives of the region. In the following four chapters I examine how contemporary authors of the region attempt to portray the U.S. South, and in so doing the posthumanist subject, from within a transformation that is continuously in process.

This analysis of Ward and Laymon's fictional narratives relies heavily upon a new materialist understanding of assemblages in which nothing can be isolated completely from the world around it. As Thomas Nail asserts:

> [A]n assemblage is a multiplicity, neither a part nor a whole. If the elements of an assemblage are defined only by their external relations, then it is possible that they can be added, subtracted and recombined with one another *ad infinitum* without ever creating or destroying an organic unity. (186)

With each novel demonstrating a strong connection to the ground it inhabits and the history of that ground, the novels allow for an investigation into how that connection shapes the existence of the region's inhabitants. In this chapter I will demonstrate that theirs is a new representation of place. It is a representation which relies upon an understanding of connectivity between the past, present, and future, one effect of which is to undermine regional exceptionalism.

In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing et al. state that the "future is a characteristic feature of commitments to modernity" (G7), one that has required us to push forwards while looking straight ahead. However, Southern Renascence Modernism has always been slightly at odds with such conceptions of modernity on account of its propensity to look to the past for answers. While the academic south of New Southern Studies is searching for new ways to discuss the region, ones more focused on the future, it is still navigating a present that feels the pull of history as much as that which lies ahead. Tsing et al. contend: "The ghosts of multispecies landscapes disturb our conventional sense of time, where we measure and manage one thing leading to another" (G9). In keeping with such understandings of time as not simply linear, contemporary fiction of the U.S. South demonstrates a region not simply looking straight ahead, but existing in the past, present, and future simultaneously.

As with their predecessors, both Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon layer fictional space over a representation of real place – the state of Mississippi – a layering that here serves to interrogate the region's view of itself both geographically and existentially and portray the region from within its transformation. Notable topographical features of

each of these layered southern ecologies are holes in the Mississippi ground: an excavated pit, a subterranean passageway in the woods, and a disembodied burrowing through the dirt. Through their use of holes, which I propose reading as unfamiliar examples of Michel Foucault's "heterotopia," both authors layer different temporal and socio-economic interpretations of their Mississippi ecologies on top of each other. In doing so, they place their characters in multi-layered ecologies rather than simply multi-species landscapes. By analysing Ward and Laymon's work as illustrative of a posthumanist perception of place, I will demonstrate a U.S. South that is no longer solely backward-looking, but rather navigating the pull of the past and the future.

The concept of overlayered space offers, in keeping with the social constructionist frameworks proposed by the likes of political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) and theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad (2007), a new way to examine our own assemblage existence in the space we occupy. One important way in which overlayered ecologies function is through Foucault's conception of heterotopia, theorised in "Of Other Spaces." Simply put, heterotopic space constitutes a specific place within a landscape that can be seen to both reflect and destabilise everything that lies outside of it, along with, as Foucault explains, "certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites" (24). As such, heterotopias are able to both represent and reflect all of the real sites found within our environment meaning that we exist within a set of relations and relational spaces. Employment of such sites of heterotopia, both through specific areas within the fictional space, and the juxtaposition between the fictional and the 'real,' allows the changing aspects of the region to be depicted, as well as foregrounding an ongoing need for further change. In doing so, heterotopias themselves depict an assemblage of sorts, a site in relation with all other sites that reflects their unique properties while highlighting their inherent

connectedness. Holes in Ward and Laymon's fiction are not simply topographical features, they are reflectors of the region's assemblage with both its past and its future.

Such a conception of the U.S. South allows us to interrogate another enduring notion of an erstwhile southern studies, that of it being a region of constancy. By layering fictional space over real space, and in turn creating relational sites that perform a totality as well as the individuality of a distinct locale, such sites are able to depict a transformation in process, one that is away from the glare of the real. Whereas representations of space as reality are usually only able to show stasis, a landscape captured in a moment in time, heterotopic spaces also depict the transformation itself and therefore serve to undermine the constancy that is formative within southern exceptionalism. Similarly, the lack of constancy created by overlayered space has significance for the posthumanist subject. Without an identifiable geographical site in which to embed the characters, there is no locatable place to generate a sense of. Their inherent connectivity rather than their entrenchment begins to define them. It is the function of their totality, their connectedness to all around them that allows heterotopic spaces to resonate with a new understanding of our posthumanist place in the world. Analyses of fictional space and heterotopic space thus converge in the difference of "hetero," a difference born from transformation.

In this thesis, I argue that placing different iterations of the southern ecologies depicted on top of each other has become a feature of contemporary fiction of the region. It is this overlayering, and how it functions temporally, that distinguishes the contemporary use of fictive space from that of its predecessors. The ground of Ward and Laymon represents a region less in thrall to its past. We are, as Foucault suggests, "in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (22). This spatio-temporal turn is foundational in how authors of the

contemporary U.S. South represent the region and how we can now begin to re-situate it.

Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* features the fictional space of Melahatchie layered over a depiction of the 'real' Mississippian landscape. Kathryn McKee notes: "Although the particularity of Laymon's world roots itself in Mississippi, his trajectory is always toward the broader stage of the nation" ("New Southern Studies" 218). One specific feature of this fictional landscape allows it to function as a heterotopia, and therefore as a reflector on both southern and wider society. The hole in the Night Time/Magic Woods, the novel's central topographic feature, connects various conceptions of Melahatchie, as well as their residents, and links them together in "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements" (Bennett 23). Melahatchie is also layered upon previous epochs of itself throughout the novel. A true/false test that protagonist Citoyen "City" Coldson is made to take as a punishment, contains the statement: "There are undergrounds to the past and future for every human being on earth" (16). It is a literal conception of this statement that acts as a heterotopia in the novel. Descriptions of the hole itself are limited, with a "rusty handle that was covered in pine needles and leaves" (59), leading to a place where "darkness swallowed everything you were supposed to see" (60). However, it is not its material properties that are of importance. Rather, the hole's overlayering capacity allows it to function in-keeping with Foucault's conception as both a small section of, and the totality of, the world at the same time (26). Despite appearing incongruous to its immediate surroundings, a rusty metal handle amid the more natural surroundings of the woods, that reveals an opening with no discernible purpose, the hole manages to be not only in relation with all other sites, but in fact to *create* the relation between these sites. Its own apparent opacity does not negate its ability to shed light on its situational perspective. Rather, the fact that its overriding

characteristic is of a dark unknown reflects the otherness of the connections outside of our space compared to our own.

Consequently, the region depicted is one of connectivity but also one of questioning. When City's friend, and object of his affections, Shalaya Crump asks "what happens if we change our future by changing the past? It's impossible to not change the future if you change the past, right?" (134), she highlights the fact that there is no clear line of cause and effect in this overlayered fictional space, itself a marker of a posthumanist perception of place. Actions in one space have unforeseen consequences in another. Although the title of the novel refers to a mathematical process that requires you to show your working out and therefore explain how to get from there to here, it cannot extrapolate further and show how to then get from here to a new there (or what 'there' may be). Furthering the mathematical analogy, Shalaya laments "[t]hey just tell you that you gotta master the small steps if you wanna get to the big answer . . . But I wish we could really pause at each step in long division and talk about it" (56). *Long Division*'s U.S. South is one that acknowledges its existence within a connected world yet is unsure about its place or how to proceed in order to ensure its future. The heterotopic space in the novel is a small piece of seemingly insignificant land, capable of connecting Mississippi with the totality of the world, and it is a connection that calls attention to the far-reaching affect of the decisions we make in the present and those we made in the past.

When space stops being theorised as a temporally constricted framework through which to view the posthumanist subject, its connectivity and ability to affect becomes, if not clearer, then at least more understandably muddied. The posthumanist subject is not just connected geographically (although increasingly so), but also temporally. As Karen Barad observes, "[e]ach moment is thickly threaded through with all other moments, each a holographic condensation of specific diffraction patterns

created by a plethora of virtual wanderings, alternative histories of what is/might yet be/have been" ("No Small Matter" G113). The posthumanist subject's affect occurs across time. In effect, no geographic location can be viewed in isolation, either physically or temporally, and the contemporary use of fictional space is representative of this.

Accordingly, *Long Division*'s employment of heterotopic space relies upon the use of overlayered temporality to create its own uncertainty of affect. The various conceptions of Melahatchie employ fictional space set in the 'real' (or, more accurately, recognisable) moments of time 1964, 1985, and its present day of 2013. Each of these temporal layers represents a distinct yet interconnected period in the family history/future of City Coldson, the protagonist of the novel within a novel, also titled *Long Division*, creating at times alternative versions of the characters who then exist in parallel with each other. Such a technique allows the novel to draw the socio-economic transformation (or possibly lack thereof) through interconnected generations of the family, as the reader is presented with the impact of both personal decisions and environmental emergencies on past, current, future, and parallel characters. The resulting depiction is of both a region and its posthumanist subjects in their transformation.

In fact, everyone in *Long Division* is connected to each other through exposure as much as through association. The City Coldson of 1985's ability to meet and talk to a grandfather he never knew allows him to gain an understanding of both where he comes from and the historical trauma inflicted upon his family, an understanding of which he is previously seemingly incapable. This is mirrored by his daughter Baize's revelation in 2013 about her parents who died in Hurricane Katrina, eight years before City meets her: "City Coldson is…was my father's name…my mother's name…was…Shalaya Crump-Coldson" (229). The relational opacity of heterotopic space is at times

bewildering in its heterochronic conception in what I suggest is a representation of both the U.S. South's need to look forward and its inability at times to do so fully. City and Shalaya's daughter Baize "could only be born if Shalaya Crump and I had her in 1999, but the longer we were in 1964, the more Shalaya Crump and I knew that Baize would have to eventually disappear" (243). Shalaya's eventual insistence on remaining in the past, towards the end of the novel, despite the realisation of the inevitable effect this will have on everyone's future, is telling. It is representative of the harm the U.S. South continues to inflict upon itself, a harm caused by its "native navel-gazing" (Duck, "Southern Nonidentity" 322), and preoccupation with the past. In *Long Division*, change is possible, but it must be "that special change, the kind that lasts, hurts" (Laymon 246).

The characters' ability to move between these temporal layers occurs in the heterotopic space of the hole found in the woods. It is rooted in the materiality of the Mississippi ground, with "dusty steps that led straight down to red clay" (60), the same red clay that prominently features in most of the southern texts discussed in this thesis. As such, the characters literally emerge from the landscape into their next space. Their existence in each layer of the environment is contingent upon the land itself. And their ability to effect change, or even preserve such existence, is reliant upon the Melahatchie ground. They do not just exist upon it, they coexist with it. The characters as posthumanist subjects are a part of the ground they live on.

This is important to an understanding of both posthumanist and new southern identity. In her exploration of houses, and their association with both history and individual identity, Marita Wenzel observes that 'hidden' rooms, such as cellars and cavernous rooms below ground, in such novels can be related to hidden or suppressed histories:

> [T]he cellar room was often used to store old or useless objects and books or remnants of furniture not intended for the public gaze or consumption. In a figurative sense, these divisions or subterranean rooms would then be associated with the past and perceived as repositories of individual histories that harbour memories of particular societies and cultures. (148)

Although the hole in the Night Time Woods bears some comparison due to its subterranean nature and (literal) connection to history, in *Long Division*, histories are not so much suppressed as dismissed, at least by the novel's younger generation. In 2013, City's Grandma, replying to her grandson's statement that he is tired of hearing about white folks, declares: "I ain't forgetting nothing they did to us. Nothing! I spent my whole life forgetting. Shit" (98-99). In contrast, her grandson's response to injustices of the past is lacking both comprehension and any desire to understand. In reply to a direct call to his cultural cognisance from his teacher, Principal Reeves, who tells him a story about a fifteen-year-old high school activist in the 1960s jailed for ordering a hamburger from a white restaurant, City asks: "Just a regular hamburger? Not even a fish sandwich or a grilled cheese?" (16). This is a world City is unable and seemingly unwilling to relate to, happy instead to leave it in the past. In fact, his 1985 counterpart verbalises the conundrum directly in his summation of 1964 Melahatchie: "I hate this ol' backwards-ass place. Don't you feel like this is someone else's story?" (224). For both iterations of City Coldson, history is something to be dismissed.

Nevertheless, *Long Division* does offer some hope for a continuation of generational enlightenment. City initially disagrees with his grandma's assertion that "[y]our foolishness impacts not only black folks today, but black folks yet to be born" (16). However, we discover at the end of the novel that he has answered 'True' to the punishment test question: "Past, present, and future exist within you and you change them by changing the way you live your life" (257). The hole in the Melahatchie ground

does not suppress history, it opens it up and connects it directly with the future, and in doing so both reflects and destabilises everything outside of it.

In *Long Division* the descriptions of the physical landscape are sparsely drawn, and the fictionality of the setting is thus amplified by the noticeably barren evocation of the environment. This is the U.S. South, a South of red dirt and sticker bushes, but it is a South drawn with narrative distance from both empirical reality and the Agrarian fantasies of the past. Any details are impoverished. The rural tradition is reduced: "Four more feet and you were out the back door, under a clothesline, where there was a scary work shed I was never allowed to go in and a chinaberry tree" (83). Similarly, the urban modernity is depicted by brief references to the I-55 and "the green room in the Coliseum was crazy . . . Grown white folks were looking at us like we were giving out $400 shopping sprees at the new Super Target by Northpark Mall" (30). In a Q&A that forms part of the novel's paratext, Laymon states "the woods in *Long Division* are the same woods I played in as a child" (274), but there is little evocation on offer in the novel to signal any sentiment. *Long Division* is many things, but it is not a romantic or nostalgic painting of the region. This is *a* southern landscape, but it is not *the* southern landscape. At least not one that the reader can unearth and hold on to.

Yet, when a tangible depiction *is* given, its effect is striking even if the picture drawn is not. The woods, the centrepiece of this fictional overlayered ecology, are captured in a series of concise references, none of which convey much information and are therefore of limited descriptive value on their own, but which accumulate to portray a region in transformation. In 1985, "inside the woods, the purple gray of the road cut through the green just enough that it was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen" (59), but in 1964, "even before you really completely saw Old Ryle Road, you could tell that it wasn't a road. It was all dirt and rocks and it was a lot thinner than the road in 1985" (141). By 2013, you "could see bigger slithers of dark road from where we were in the

woods, like the woods had gone on a diet. The road didn't seem like a road anymore, either. It looked like a tar-black slab of bacon that was way fatter than it was before we went in" (61). Here, an accumulative image is beginning to form. As the space progresses through the narrative's fabula (although the order in which events take place is open to contestation), it transforms from an overgrown rural space with a dirt track, to a cutting with an increasingly widening road, that by 2013 has become the more cosmopolitan sounding Ryle Boulevard. There is a clear shift from the rural towards the urban. Even in the decidedly rural fictional setting of Melahatchie, modernity is taking hold. Such a transformation is also that of the U.S. South, a region no longer solely grounded in tradition, but one that is accepting of modernity's inevitable encroachment.

Along with the physical characteristics of the overlayered ecologies in the novel, their ambient air quality similarly differs, offering another example of the possibility for change. When travelling back in time through the hole, City observes: "When we pushed open the door to 1964, the air was thin" (136). Yet, in 2013, "[i]t felt hotter when we stepped out of the hole" (61) and "[t]he air in the woods was heavier than it had been" (61). Not only does this raise an obvious suggestion of global warming having an increasingly negative effect on the earth's atmosphere, but also City's physical reaction to his new surroundings. His claim that "I think I got asthma" (61), suggests a physical change to the human body brought about by these atmospheric changes. Indeed, Baize, when travelling from 2013 to 1964, also initially struggles physically, telling City: "I just gotta get right with the air here" (221). Notably, however, when 1985 City again travels to 2013 at the end of the novel, he is at first unable to locate himself because "the air was as thin as it had been in 1964 and the forest was only a little less lime green than it had been in 2013" (255). The changes so evident in previous descriptions of the distinct temporal ecologies are markedly reduced. The conflation of past, present, and future has resulted not only in changes to

familial circumstances, but also to the essence of the space the characters exist in, and there is a suggestion here that environmental change is possible. This reconciling of the past and the future is brought about by the overlayering of ecologies in the heterotopic space of the hole, and with it the novel offers the possibility of transformation within the region for the better. If a change in the very fabric of the region is feasible, then the transformation of the region's convictions must be similarly possible. Moreover, by not anchoring it in tangible space this transformation becomes more apparent.

The existence of a book entitled *Long Division* within the narrative, and its lack of a named author, would appear to question in a postmodern manner where real life ends and narrative fiction begins. The landscape depictions, particularly the paucity of the colours involved, also draw attention to the fictional world of Melahatchie. The woods change from: "Everything is so green here" (192), to: "green like the Hulk's chest instead of green like a lime" (61). They leave the reader with no tangible sense of the landscape that they are observing. In *Long Division*, the posthumanist subject's shared space is not rooted in a conspicuously identifiable reality. Just as the posthumanist subject's existence cannot be identifiably tethered to a specific location, so too the materiality of the novel's U.S. South cannot be framed in any clearly distinguishable way. This is not a landscape of kudzu or cotton but an anywhere, or rather an everywhere. The region depicted in *Long Division* cannot be read in isolation, and neither can the lessons it suggests. This is a U.S. South in assemblage with the world around it.

This use of fictional space has another interesting consequence in *Long Division*. The lack of a tangible U.S. South for the reader to hold on to, already mentioned, is also reflected in the characters' sensibilities. The fictional setting serves to negate the connotative aspect of place – its ability to engender identification for both the individual and community – important to an understanding of the liberal humanist subject and

previous conceptions of the U.S. South alike, not only for the reader but also for the novel's characters. Laymon's is not a depiction of a southern sense of place, despite the setting, but a more ungrounded and unfertilised connection to place. Rather, it is a depiction of a posthumanist perception of place. No-one in the text has an emotional attachment to their own space. When Baize writes rhymes about herself, she observes: "Now Melahatchie ain't exactly what We thought it was. Blues for days, dark mayonnaise and kinda country" (74). This is not a nostalgic attachment to a neo-Agrarian ideal but rather a commentary on the region's slow progress towards modernity. Instead, the characters share a more globalised connection to their environment. They are inextricably connected to the space they occupy, and the problems they face are more than simply regional. The institutional racism that the novel depicts is not a southern problem but a national one as demonstrated by the 2013 version of City and his treatment at the "National Can You Use That Word In A Sentence" competition. The characters' attachments are made with people rather than place, a consequence of the unmoored heterotopic space they occupy.

The overlayered space of the hole not only brings together characters from different temporal spaces to demonstrate their assemblage existence, but also disrupts the black-white binary traditionally associated with the region, as exemplified by Patricia Yaeger's insistence in *Dirt and Desire* (2000), "that southern literature, at its best, is not about community but about moments of crisis and acts of contestation, about the intersection of black and white cultures as they influence one another and collide" (38). Although influential to any understanding of southern studies, Yaeger's reliance here upon binary oppositions for her collisions is itself reductive to a region of multiple cultural influences, and various forms of inequality. The introduction of Evan Altshuler to *Long Division*, a Jewish character who insists that he "[a]in't white. From a little bit of everywhere, though" (125), further destabilises any sense of constancy associated

with the region. Not only must the region be understood in cultural terms as more than simply a black-white binary, but also the historical trauma associated with the region has to be recognised in broader terms.

Neither City nor Shalaya is able to understand the complexities of the region's history, with Shalaya herself seeing only in terms of black and white, telling Evan: "We ain't white like you. You can be Jewish and white or you can just be Jewish or you can just be white. Either way, you said it yourself. You gotta not act right to get killed. What do we have to do?" (139). However, as Evan observes, "[f]irst of all, you got some colored Jews out there too. Y'all know what these white folks do to Jews, no matter our color, if they find us out over Highway 49 after dark? . . . They slaughter us" (138). Historical trauma in the novel cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy, just as it should not be for the region. In addition to this, *Long Division* hints at widening influences and inequalities that continue to expand alongside the region itself. 2013 City recalls, "[d]uring one of our Mexican Awareness weeks, Principal Reeves taught us that Arizona was becoming the Mississippi of the Southwest" (35). This recollection underscores a U.S. South that not only has to be seen as wider than its traditional pocket of southeastern states, and in this case wider than the United States itself, but one which also contains a diversity of cultures, each with their own stories of inequality and collision. The U.S. South of *Long Division* is a newly understood assemblage South, one which is having to accept new truths about itself and its place in the world.

Jesmyn Ward sets her novels in her own fictional patch of Mississippi soil. Widely considered to be based on Ward's home town of DeLisle, Bois Sauvage is a small, rural Gulf Coast town that provides the background for the interconnected lives portrayed in each of her three novels to date: *Where the Line Bleeds*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Drawing on the French cultural influence of the region, the name translates most commonly as "wild wood," although variations from

unspoiled/untamed to ferocious/savage are equally plausible. This provides the possibility of a number of metaphorical connections to be made concerning the untouched or possibly untamed nature of the region, along with obvious allusions to the title of Ward's second novel. The name connects the town with the physical landscape it occupies, as well as highlighting the importance of the woods themselves within the novels and the marginality they evince. But Ward's fictional space, more so than Laymon's, is layered over a recognisable reality. This reality is both temporal, with the backdrop of Hurricane Katrina which shapes *Salvage the Bones*, and geographical via the Mississippi State Penitentiary, known as Parchman Farm, whose presence equally shapes *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Ward's work, like Laymon's, employs a parcel of space that is able to both represent and reflect a greater totality than is apparently its own. However, although *Sing, Unburied, Sing* features the fictional space of Bois Sauvage layered over the real Mississippian landscape, it is Ward's depiction of the nearby Parchman Farm that functions as a heterotopic hole in the novel. The overlayered ecology evoked provides reflection on the U.S. South as a region, whilst bringing it into relation with the totality of the world. In contrast to *Long Division*, it is the real space, not the fictional space that serves as a heterotopia. Yet, as with Laymon's novel, it is its central landscape feature, the one which connects the majority of the central characters and also functions as a hole, that is able to demonstrate assemblages of both the region and its posthumanist residents.

Parchman, as a prison, in fact directly represents what Foucault terms a heterotopia of deviation, one in which "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). However, it is not its functional spatial properties which make it significant. Rather, in contrast to *Long Division*'s hole, Parchman's depiction is noteworthy due to the description of its material properties.

From its first appearance in River's recollection as "the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls" (21), it is the site's materiality that creates its spatial properties and starts to form a picture. When River explains, "I understood that when I was on that line in them fields I had to not think about it . . . It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields. I had to, or being in jail for them five years woulda made me drop in that dirt and die" (22-23), Parchman becomes a metaphorical hole from which he can only mentally escape. It is the dirt of the Mississippi landscape that he must mentally distance himself from.

As with Laymon's novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s employment of heterotopic space is reliant upon a spatio-temporal understanding, one in which different temporal conceptions of the same physical space connect, in order to expose not just the reality of each space shown, but also a wider understanding of the space that is externally in assemblage with it. Foucault suggests that heterotopias function fully at breaks with traditional time, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s depiction of overlayered ecologies occur within such breaks. Richie, the character originally stuck within the heterotopia, and therefore most intrinsically connected to it observes: "I didn't understand time either, when I was young. How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky . . . how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once?" (186). Previously depicted as a working farm with overseers, in reference to the cotton plantations of the antebellum South, Parchman is initially a backward-looking space. Richie burrows into the dirt and moves between the layers, emerging "in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball and smoke" (186). In a similar manner to Taylor Brown's *The River of Kings*, the prison/plantation is here layered over a past before "The South." It is a past that precedes both slavery and New World settlers, one which, as with

Brown, suggests a subtle critique of American exceptionalism as much as southern exceptionalism. Jeffrey Belnap argues, "Anglo-Americans blinded themselves to the multiethnic complexities of their own nation by conceptualizing the natural landscape as an essentially empty space waiting to be taken up with history" (203). However, *Sing*'s overlayering of indigenous ecologies depicts a land not only occupied but happily so, a "rich earth" enjoyed by its inhabitants. In sketching a place of abundance and freedom enjoyed by its native inhabitants, the novel raises the spectre of another site of national historical trauma, one crucial to an understanding of the nation as a whole.

Although the temporal layers of Parchman are not as chronologically definable as Melahatchie's, with no specific dates given, they are instead representative of epochs in the region's history. Kelly McKisson suggests: "*Sing, Unburied, Sing* emphasizes the characters' abilities to remap and reimagine their geological and geographical space. The remapping is enabled by emphasizing the subsident depths as a layered space of haunting histories" (484). The transformation of the U.S. South is depicted through changes to its inhabitants, and their use of the land. This is a representation of a region in transformation, portraying a movement from rich, carefree soil to captive toil. The U.S. South depicted is one suggestive of a need for further change, but in contrast to *Long Division*, the region's need to look forward is realised through Richie and through its overlayered ecologies. Richie is not only able to see the layers of the past, but also those of the future, in which:

> Across the face of the water, there is land. It is green and hilly, dense with trees, riven by rivers. The rivers flow backward: they begin in the sea and end inland. The air is gold: the gold of sunrise and sunset, perpetually peach. There are homes set atop mountain ranges, in valleys, on beaches. They are vivid blue and dark red, cloudy pink and deepest purple. They are yurts and adobe dwelling and teepees and longhouses and villas. Some of the homes are clustered together in

> small villages: graceful gatherings of round, steady huts with domed roofs. And there are cities, cities that harbor plazas and canals and buildings bearing minarets and hip and gable roofs and crouching beasts and massive skyscrapers that look as if they should collapse, so weirdly they flower into the sky. Yet they do not. (241)

The heterotopic space of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* presents a vision of the future layered over its depictions of the past, and it is one where the U.S. South is no longer seen as a distinct region separate from the nation and world around it, but instead as a place in assemblage, one where different cultures thrive alongside each other. This is a space where "*we* don't walk no straight lines. It's all happening at once. All of it. *We* are all here at once" (236; my emphasis). It is a space that demonstrates both a less exceptionalist view of the region and, through its suggestions of coexistence, diminishing individual identity, and temporal indistinction, a posthumanist perception of place.

Richie, the character through whom the reader experiences the overlayered ecologies of Parchman Farm, even more so than his counterparts in *Long Division*, is a part of the materiality of the Mississippi ground. He literally moves through his hole from layer to layer and "burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time" (187). Richie may not be able to effect change through his various transchronic realisations, in the manner of his *Long Division* counterparts, but he does similarly coexist within the landscape, and can see its future. He is in assemblage with the ecology that surrounds him, and such an assemblage demonstrates the heterochronic nature of the posthumanist subject's existence, their arrival "at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 26). It demonstrates the posthumanist subject's temporal coexistence. The impossibility of cause and effect that is so apparent in Laymon's novel, is not the main focus of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Instead, the transformation of the region is brought into focus, along with the need for further change, and it is a change that the novel presents as possible. Through its employment of Parchman Farm as a heterotopic hole, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reflects not only the historical trauma of the region but also the wider national trauma of the treatment of the ecology's original occupiers. Yet, through its overlayered ecologies, the novel offers a glimmer of hope for a brighter future of assemblage existence.

As with Ward's later novel, *Salvage the Bones* portrays a space of rural marginality. The Pit, the topographic centre of the novel, and home to the Batiste family, is once again a hole in the Mississippi ground, one which exists within the margins. It is not only outside the centre of Bois Sauvage, a fact drawn by the woods surrounding the property that the characters are at times forced to cross through (a motif that I will explore further in Chapter Four), but also on the outside of the community: "we were picked up at 6:30 A.M. and for the next hour we rode up and out of the black Bois that we knew and into the white Bois we didn't that spread out and upcountry" (70). Both novels depict the rural U.S. South, and in so doing appear to follow the southern literary tradition. However, again this U.S. South is no neo-Agrarian ideal, but rather a rural existence distanced from urban prosperity, and Ward once again uses both a literal and metaphorical hole to highlight this marginality. The Batistes' is a posthumanist existence within a wider assemblage and yet marginalised from it.

The physical landscape of Bois Sauvage is far more prominent and connected to its residents than that of Melahatchie. In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward accentuates the man-made materials found in the Pit such as the "backseats of junk cars, the old RV Daddy bought for cheap from some man at a gas station" (10), whilst in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, it is the other-than-human matter of River's homestead with its "dry red dirt, and the wind makes the trees wave" (1-2). Her characters are connected to the fictional Mississippi ecologies that accommodate them. Theirs is an undeniably southern

landscape, and it is one that sits in stasis far more than *Long Division*'s. The Pit's landscape contains markers of modernity: "the tools, the oil drums, the broken lawnmowers and bike frames and pots for plants" (196). Yet, often there is a lack of progression associated with this modernity: "refrigerators rusted so that they look like deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika, pieces of engines, a washing machine so old it has an arm that swished the clothes around" (89). There is a rootedness to life here, more so than in *Sing*, but this is not the southern sense of place. There is an undoubted attachment to the ecologies the Batistes exist in, but it occurs through an inability to move forward rather than through any sentimental connection to the land.

It is, instead, a stasis rooted in poverty. The Pit, in contrast to Parchman Farm, depicts what Foucault terms a crisis heterotopia. It is a space "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault 24). The Batistes represent a section of society left behind, one that reflects upon a failure of national societal structure as much as regional. Facing a refrigerator containing only "six eggs . . . A few cups of cold rice. Three pieces of bologna. An empty cardboard box from the gas station that holds chicken bones sucked dry" (189-90), their situation is clearly worse than just a need to re-purpose what they can. The family "catch boils on the Pit as easily as we catch stray dogs, and I know enough about them to understand that they are bacterial infections" (111). Although, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, the novel's reach does not extend to an examination of the societal failings post-Katrina, the palpable poverty of the Pit and its inhabitants are indicative of the pre-existing failings that the storm would later expose. Descriptions of an ecology where "clay has turned to dust for want of rain" (186), are suggestive of the Pit as a Dust Bowl, a literalised version of a historical south-western United States where ill-conceived farming practices damaged not only the ecology but also the economy of a large section of the nation. As such, the materiality of the novel's

heterotopic hole is a reflection of not just the region, but of the nation as a whole. It is a reflector of both the past, in the form of the Great Depression, and a post-Katrina future where similar societal failings will be tragically exposed. There is neither a regional Agrarian ideal, nor a national development and growth on display here.

As such, connectivity with their assemblage environment is essential in order to survive. The Batistes' societal marginality means that they must salvage and reuse just to get by. Along with the skeletons of cars stripped to the bones, the Pit contains a garden plot: "fenced off with wooden slats from an old baby crib Daddy had found at the side of the road" (110). Daddy is described "knocking down what is left of the chicken coop" (108), in order to re-purpose the wood. Even in the house "Randall has nailed up a blanket over the window" (155), re-using whatever can be found in lieu of what the family cannot afford. When Skeetah jokes, following Daddy's accident, "[w]e should look for the fingers. That's free protein" (187), his dark humour resonates with the family's reliance on salvaging anything they can and carries an unfortunate and disturbing ring of truth. This novel's hole is a "trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling" (94). Although not as explicitly overlayered as the other novels, expressing more of a socio-economic than temporal connectivity, this is a bleeding landscape within a "savage" wood layered over the Mississippi soil, one which describes: "the water, swirling and gathering on all sides, brown with an undercurrent of red to it, the clay of the Pit like a cut that won't stop leaking" (230-31). The hole of *Salvage the Bones* is a crisis heterotopia indicative not of a rural tradition being left behind but rather a section of society. If the U.S. South is a region in transformation, not every part of its assemblage is able to benefit from the change.

Just as Richie is part of the landscape, so are the Pit and its inhabitants. The region's inability to sufficiently progress is brought into sharp focus by its assemblage

with the environment it occupies. The regional stasis critiqued by *Salvage the Bones*, is to a certain extent mirrored in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. However, the later novel does offer at least a glimpse of a brighter future for the region and for the posthumanist subject. Once again it emerges from Richie's assemblage with the ecology, though importantly, it is now the fictional ecology of Bois Sauvage. As I will return to in the following chapter, Richie is not just connected through the landscape with the region's past, but also with its future, where: "people . . . fly and walk and float and run. They are alone. They are together" (241). It is a future of increasing modernity and connectivity. The present-day ecologies of Bois Sauvage are very much a region steeped in stasis, but Ward employs an ecology less anchored in the reality of the present to offer hope for the region and for the posthumanist subject. In all three of the novels discussed, the authors display a region that, rather than simply backward-glancing, exists in connection with both the past and the future. A posthumanist understanding of the ecologies depicted helps to highlight both a region in transformation and the need for such transformation. Through their use of heterotopic holes, and the overlayered ecologies that they facilitate, both Ward and Laymon demonstrate a new understanding of place for the U.S. South, a posthumanist perception of place.

Chapter Three - Fissures

The southern departed refuse to stay buried. Swathes of the cultural landscape have recently been uncovered searching for clues as to why, from Eric Gary Anderson et al.'s *Undead Souths* (2015) to Maria del Pilar Blanco's *Ghost Watching American Modernity* (2012). As such analyses assert, there can be no doubt that the undead have long played a significant role in southern fiction, with Taylor Hagood observing: "subtle metaphorical and cultural incarnations of undeadness have lurked in southern literature from its beginnings" (248). From Addie Bundren's elucidation of her own identity in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) to the ghosts of the Confederate dead that populate Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006), representations of death, and those who refuse it, have continued to litter southern cultural ecologies.

Resurrections of lamented Confederate war heroes and depictions of the restless victims of plantation slavery abound in southern literature, encompassing an acreage of mixed sentiments, from a sowing of "Lost Cause" memorialisation to an uprooting of the idea of the peculiar institution. Whilst each of these forms of revenant are suggestive of a region struggling to move beyond the backward glance of which it is so often accused, the southern dead in fact return for a multitude of reasons. Wade Newhouse notes that, in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992), Randall Kenan's "stories use figures of the monstrous to emphasize the extreme passions and prejudices that lie at the edges of community norms" (237). Alternatively, the small-town zombies of Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) serve primarily to reveal a morally decaying Mississippi. Indeed, the southern landscape is so replete with representations of death that Hannah himself remarks: "Christ, there's barely room for the living down here" (*Boomerang/Never Die* 138).

However, I would argue that revenants in contemporary southern fiction perform a more complex role than that of their predecessors. Instead of simply inhabiting a backwater watering hole or speaking from beyond the grave as a confrontation to the present, these returnees are not just seen or heard, they interact directly with the still-living. If, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, heterotopic holes are topographic reflectors of the region's assemblage, then revenants are their character equivalents. They are the embodiment of a posthumanist existence across different temporal layers. It is for this reason that I refer to them in the title as fissures; clefts in the Newtonian understanding of linear time. Rather than solely a representation of a painful legacy, the use of the undead in contemporary literature offers more heterogeneity. The "curiously persistent literary urge to exhume Emmett Till" (Norman 136), still exists, and with continued relevance, as seen in Percival Everett's wonderfully satirical exploration of racism and regional shame *The Trees* (2021). However, as I will show, contemporary revenants also offer alternative understandings of a region in transformation.

Revenants share a connection, both with the land itself and its still-living inhabitants. They are both post-human and posthuman, and as such are able to posit a southern history that can no longer be viewed as simply human-centred. Revenants question the exceptionalism of both the U.S. South as a region and the human who co-inhabits it. By highlighting their connectivity, this chapter will demonstrate that revenants are both reflectors and representations of the posthumanist subject. I will show how theirs is an existence as an "instantiation of connections, linkages, and crossings" (Nayar 796), with the environment, but also with both the past and the future. As such, they indicate a shift in southern authors' perspectives towards a posthumanist perception of place, one that is very different from that of the realism, modernism, and "posts" (-modernism, -colonialism) that come before it.

The title of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, signals her desire to give voice to the marginalised and to victims of racial violence. The novel depicts two revenantial[3] characters, Richie and Given, both of whom interact directly with their still-living counterparts. Although both are revenants, the two characters differ significantly in their delineation throughout the novel. Richie, a 12-year-old boy, appears as an undead returnee from the neo-plantation of Parchman Farm prison where he died a brutal death decades earlier. Given, the deceased high school senior brother of the novel's co-protagonist Leonie, appears initially as an apparent narcotic hallucination, before his realisation as a true revenant at the novel's denouement. However, despite their differences, both characters demonstrate a coexistence consistent with that of the posthumanist subject.

Richie, in particular, shares a symbiotic relationship with both the environment that he is significantly connected to and the history that has shaped it. He is, in part, a manifestation of his environment. Rather than simply returning from the past in another character's presence, Richie emerges from his southern ecology: "In the beginning, I woke in a stand of young pine trees on a cloudy, half-lit day. I could not remember how I came to be crouching in the pine needles, soft and sharp as boar's hair under my legs" (134). He emerges physically from death as a part of the environment. In doing so, he foregrounds the ecology rather than reoccupying it. As such, it is not only his role as a post-human that is important, but also his role as a posthumanist subject in coexistence with the world around him. Richie needs his connection to the landscape in order to feel safe. He "burrowed in tight. Needing to be held by the dark hand of the earth. To be blind to the men above" (136). His subjectivity is dependent upon his environment.

[3] Although this is not a generally accepted adjectival form of revenant, it has been coined by William Gay in his own southern fiction (in both *Provinces of Night* (2000) and *Twilight* (2006)). As Gay was himself a writer of Grit Lit. it seemed reasonable to co-opt the word in a thesis that, at least in part, examines the ecologies of the rough south.

Indeed, Richie's symbiosis is not only with the land itself, but also with the history that shaped it. His connection to the real-life surroundings of Parchman Farm, and the history of that locale, are also significant to his role in the novel. Karen Barad states that "[h]auntings are not immaterial. They are an ineliminable feature of existing material conditions" ("No Small Matter" G107), noting that the past leaves material traces of itself that form part of the assemblage. In his investigation of Ward's haunted places, Marco Petrelli observes:

> [T]he presence of ghosts, immaterial but factual harbingers of the past, signals a stronger rupture in temporality (and in spatiality, for time and space are indissolubly connected in a chronotopic dimension) than the one usually associated with a gothic-dynastic plot, in which the past's ability to destroy the present is usually figurative. (283)

In Ward's construction of space and time, the past continues to physically exist in the present. The significance of Parchman's fields lies in the social conditions that shaped the environment in conjunction with the environment itself. Richie, as a revenant, is both a material trace of Parchman's past and a feature of its present conditions and so embodies the social construction of the field's materiality. The past and present are formative agents in each other's continuance. Richie's Parchman "was a working farm right off . . . the sergeant come from a long line of overseers" (22). The land itself is still what it long has been, a plantation. When Jojo first encounters Richie:

> I look out at the fields but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second I see men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One, shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me. (125)

Richie has remained in the fields that confined him in life and become a part of them. Appearing to work alongside their current occupants, he is, as demonstrated in the

previous chapter, in assemblage with the ecology that surrounds him. Parchman Farm, through its association with overseers, is connected with the plantation history of the region and Richie exists through his own history alongside that of Mississippi. Jojo's grandfather River, himself a former resident of Parchman, recalls: "You see them open fields we worked in, the way you could look right through that barbed wire . . . the way they cut them trees flat so that land is empty and open to the ends of the earth" (22). The physical landscape has not changed over time and neither have its inhabitants. Richie, in his symbiosis with both the ecology and its history represents a coexistence of the plantation history of the region, his own depression-era history, and the present day.

Through such historical symbiosis, Richie shares a connection with Louis Thanksgiving, the principal revenant of Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011), a novel similarly rooted in the soil – or in this case swamps – of the author's own southern ecology. Louis, a depression-era dredgeman, similarly re-emerges in the same Florida swamps in which he died whilst part of a crew tasked to "dredge a canal clear across the swamp to the Gulf Coast for the Model Land Company" (108). These are the same swamps in which an Army corps had planted "thousands of melaleuca trees in the 1940's as part of their Drainage Project, back when the government thought it was possible to turn our tree islands into a pleated yellowland of crops" (76). They instead only manage to create "an impermeable monoculture" (76), one that continues to this day. As with Richie, the revenant Louis does not simply return from the past, he emerges as part of his environment and in doing so foregrounds both the landscape and its history, in this case a history of irreversible impact. Rather than the social history of the region, his presence serves to highlight the detrimental effect of human intervention on the southern landscape. Louis's inextricability from his environment, as with Richie, calls attention to the non-exceptionality of the posthumanist subject in contemporary southern fiction. It calls attention to their inherent connectivity with their ecology. New

Southern Studies is attempting to navigate the transformation of the region but viewed through the lens of posthumanism the multi-faceted nature of this transformation comes into focus. Contemporary fiction is demonstrating that the history of the U.S. South is more than simply a human history, it is also an environmental one.

In addition to their connection with both the environment and the history that shaped it, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s revenants share a symbiosis with the still-living characters that surround them. Both Richie and Given are portrayed in an intimate existence of connectivity with their still-living counterparts. It is a connection that puts them in contrast with their undead predecessors, who largely performed more of a distanced metaphorical role. The coexistence between the past and the present is marked by the reaction of the still-living to encountering the undead amongst them. Blanco suggests the need to "think of ghosts and haunting not simply as useful metaphors for enduring and difficult memories of things past, but as commentaries on how subjects conceive present and evolving spaces" (6). In *Sing*, there is no attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the past, or remove them from the landscape, indicative of how the past operates in a contemporary context. The evolving spaces of the posthumanist subject are ones of coexistence with their history. Richie, rather than being exorcised from the present, is searching for a way to "cross the waters. Be home" (281). He is searching for the assemblage future whose overlayering I discussed in Chapter Two. Despite "pulling all the weight of history behind him" (265), he is looking to be at peace with that history in the present and future. By depicting a still-living who show no desire to dispel him, Ward suggests a present that itself understands the need to embrace its past even if it cannot immediately provide the peace that Richie seeks. Ward's is a southern space in transformation, and it is a transformation that is far from complete. In keeping with this, towards the end of the novel Given, who has spent the majority of the story inhabiting the margins, is invited by Leonie to "[e]nter. Dance with us" (269). He instead chooses

to leave and provide a service to the living by guiding Philomène from life. In doing so, he demonstrates the symbiotic nature of *Sing*'s revenants. Given brings relief rather than pain to the still-living. The past is not entirely embraced in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, but neither is it denied or dismissed. Instead, it is layered over the present and sits in coexistence with it.

Rather than serving as metaphors for enduring and difficult memories of things past, it is what revenants demonstrate about the still-living that is interesting. They are no longer representations of what Michael Kreyling calls: "the southern habit of preferring 'the past' to the varied circumstances of day-to-day history" (170). Instead, they serve to highlight aspects of the posthumanist subject, particularly the anxiety of a lack of security in their own identity that assemblage existence brings. In his exploration of the novel as a genre, Georg Lukács describes its form as "an expression of . . . transcendental homelessness" (185), by which he means that in the novel's creation of determinable yet unconfined space, the totality of the epic world is lost. For Lukács, it is the representation of a reality in a world abandoned by God. His metaphysical association notwithstanding, I would propose that the contemporary revenant, and by extension the posthumanist subject, also bear all the markers of transcendental homelessness. They are likewise unmoored from any notion of determinable totality, with a reliance on connectivity that makes an understanding of the liberal humanist subject as individual untenable. The right to autonomy and freedom central to N. Katherine Hayles's definition is no longer applicable. As already seen, revenants are an instantiation of connections with all elements of the assemblage they exist within. Their connection is with everything around them rather than simply history. They are, in fact, both representations and reflectors of the posthumanist subject attempting to understand its place in its own surroundings.

A sense of the isolation of the "individual" in the present, is one of the major themes of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Both Jojo and Leonie are, in contrasting ways, isolated from the totality of a family unit. Also, both Richie and Given's status as posthumanist subjects characterise such feelings of isolation. They represent the loneliness of a subject for whom "the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem" (Lukács 186). While unmoored temporally from the world they have returned to, they are similarly isolated from one another spatially. Although visible to certain still-living characters in the same physical location, they appear unaware of each other's presence. On the journey home from Parchman, Leonie sees Given after swallowing a small baggie of methamphetamine in order to avoid arrest: "I shudder, close my eyes, open them, and Phantom Given is sitting next to Jojo on the ground, reaching out as if he could touch him" (165). Richie is also present, with Jojo able to see him "sitting on the floor of the car, squeezed between Kayla's car seat and the front, facing me. He don't say nothing, just got his arms over his knees, his mouth on his wrists" (169). Both revenants are present at the same event, but there is no suggestion that they are aware of each other's presence. Unable to fully interact with the still-living, there is similarly no commune between the returnees, no solidarity of the mutually disenfranchised. They are effectively alone in their individual existence. They are isolated despite their state of coexistence.

This sense of isolation can also be seen in Richie's inability to control his own subjectivity. It can be seen in his lack of agency. When "reborn" in the stand of pine trees, Richie, seemingly unable to cross the boundary of the stand himself, is offered the chance to leave by a white snake, a symbol of the afterlife in Voodoo culture. He is offered the chance to fly: "Up and away . . . And around . . . There are things you need to see" (134). Although initially managing to fly, Richie ultimately finds himself unable to leave: "I dropped from my flight, the memory pulling me to earth" (136). Instead, he

seeks solace in the southern ecology: “then I fell, dove into the dirt, and it parted like a wave. I burrowed in tight. Needing to be held by the dark hand of the earth” (136), where he remains until he sees in Jojo a chance to understand his own story. Only through the present can he fully comprehend history. This lack of agency is in contrast to Richie’s vision of his own future, already noted in the previous chapter, the freedom and integration he is searching for: “There are people: tiny and distinct. They fly and walk and float and run. They are alone. They are together” (241). Richie’s inability to fly freely, the very thing he aspires to, is representative of his lack of agency. In addition to this, after Philomène dies, Richie finds himself unable to enter the house. Although Jojo can see him outside, Richie reveals: “I can’t. Come inside. I tried. Yesterday. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole” (281). He is unsignified, without agency. There must be a connection in order for him to functionally coexist within the assemblage. Richie lacks the ability to control his own destiny. His sense of isolation is induced by the necessity of his coexistence.

Consequently, it is an integration into this connected state that Richie seeks. In keeping with the lack of an emotional attachment to place discussed in the previous chapter, the revenants’ understanding of home is that of shared space rather than a geographical location. Richie points out that “[h]ome ain’t always about a place. The house I grew up in is gone. Ain’t nothing but a field and some woods, but even if the house was still there, it ain’t about that” (181). For Richie, home is a space inhabited by many people rather than a patch of land saturated with a southern sense of place. Indeed, “home” is a term he uses many times throughout the novel. He originally appears to Jojo because “[i]t’s how I get home” (182). He further explains: “Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats like your heart” (182-83). Once again, he elucidates his symbiosis with the land itself. Home for Richie represents

connectivity, both with the living and with the southern ecology. For Richie, the U.S. South is "the song and I'm going to be part of the song" (183). Despite being a revenant, Richie is not solely defined by his connection to the past or the inherited trauma associated with it. Rather than a backward-glancing South, Richie suggests one that is able to look to the future. The U.S. South may still be the U.S. South in Ward's novel, but it is one that is searching for a different song to sing. It is searching for a song of connectivity and coexistence.

Accordingly, home in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is not the same conception of place presented by Ward's predecessors. Although the spaces they inhabit are necessarily affected by the past that the revenants carry with them, revenants are not only ghosts of the past representing shame in the present. As McKisson notes, "[a]n apt description for the plot's conflict is not rising action but instead suffocating anxiety" (481). Revenants also represent the anxiety of the posthumanist subject about the spaces they inhabit, an anxiety about what now constitutes their place in the world. They demonstrate "all of the ways in which the 'human' of humanism can be radically decentred and shown to be biologically, ecologically and zoologically imbricated in changing forms and practices of understanding" (Callus et al. 109). However, the deconstruction of exceptionalism inevitably leaves a lack of its own, one that the posthumanist subject is searching for a way to fill, or at least to understand. Although Richie clearly bears comparison to Toni Morrison's character Beloved, neither he nor Given are looking for retribution or revenge. They are not even seeking an acknowledgement of misdeeds enacted upon them. Rather, they are looking for release, a release Richie articulates as wanting to "become something else. Maybe, I could. Become. The song" (281). Richie once again evokes his desire to be heard, and although the world inhabited in *Sing* is grounded in the milieu of Bois Sauvage, his search for home, his U.S. South, lies outside of this space. His search begins: "Across the face of the water" (241). Richie's non-

exceptionalist posthumanist space is a wider one, a space more connected with a world beyond the traditional borders of the U.S. South, both physically and culturally. His is a reimagining of the region.

Such posthumanist anxiety also manifests itself in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in the characters' association with darkness. It is an association that brings us back to the revenants' symbiosis with the still-living. Richie and Jojo share a connection that goes beyond their embodiment as young, black boys from the U.S. South. Both characters display a connection to darkness, and through that to invisibility. On the aforementioned car journey, Jojo notes of Richie: "Where the sun should hit the boy's face and make it glow, it only seems to make it turn a deeper brown" (180). More than this, "[t]his is a brown that skims black" (181). Likewise, when watching Jojo, Leonie describes: "Even when he leans into the window of the car and Michael turns on the overhead light, there is still a black film over his face" (197-98). Richie and Jojo are connected through their refusal of light. Blanco proposes that, in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the use of shadows:

> symbolizes residual personhood: the trace of an individual's humanity on which the rest of the world may overwrite a narrative of stifling generalizations of negative existence. The shadow in *Invisible Man* becomes the only part of a man that the world is willing to see . . . the form's negative is transformed into the individual's only usable shape. (158-59)

Effectively, the shadow is the canvas on which the rest of the world can impose its own negativity, and as I demonstrate in Chapter Five, invisibility is also one of the key themes of Laymon's *Long Division.*

In Ellison's novel, the anxiety of "residual personhood" is connected to race and racial othering, and this is undoubtedly also true of both *Long Division* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Additionally, in Ward's text the term is useful in explaining the anxiety

of the posthumanist subject unsure of their place in the world. Rather than a shadow, their very corporeality reflects their anxiety. Shorn of the certainty of exceptionalism that surrounds and entitles the liberal humanist subject, they are haunted by their own sense of residual personhood, an anxiety around no longer being complete. Jojo's agency is not simply an enaction in the still-living world, it occurs through a larger connection to the past. Consequently, Richie's appearance as a revenant in the present, serves to question our ability to exist as individuals free from connection with the world around us.

The anxiety of residual personhood is further expressed by both Richie and Given's lack of physical embodiment. Richie is able to occupy spaces he should not: "Even though he's skinny, arms and legs racket-thin, he should be too big to fit in the space he done folded himself into" (169). Given, called Given-not-Given to emphasise his residuality by his sister Leonie, "never breathed at all. He wore a black shirt, and it was a still, mosquito-ridden pool" (34). His corporeal lack is detailed by an image of the natural world, illustrating his assemblage existence. In addition, Leonie is unable to touch him:

> His left hand was still on the table. I could not reach out to it, even though everything in me wanted to do so, to feel his skin, his flesh, his dry, hard hands . . . My stomach turned like an animal in its burrow, again and again, seeking comfort and warmth before sleep. (37)

Given's lack of physical embodiment, his residual personhood, becomes a source of anxiety for the still-living, once again isolated despite their state of coexistence.

Moreover, like Richie who is searching for the means to tell his own story, Given has a lack of voice when he appears to Leonie: "He tried to talk to me but I couldn't hear him, and he just got more and more frustrated" (51). As previously noted, revenants are both representations and reflectors of the posthumanist subject, and here

Given is a representation. His own anxiety is unmistakable. His story is not his own to tell. In addition to this, Given requires Jojo's help to fully return and affect the still-living: "He raises a hand to Given, and it is as if Jojo has unlocked and opened a gate, because Given pushes through whatever held him" (268). Given, provides a service to the still-living, but he requires their cooperation in order to complete his responsibility and guide his mother away. Despite the history of the region and the personal history of the revenants, the symbiotic relationships are driven not by racial compulsions, but by human ones. Revenants in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* have a complicated relationship with their still-living counterparts. Rather than metaphors for regional self-recrimination, they share a connection with the present. As such, Ward's revenants do not portray Guinn's desire to order the present by recovering the past (136), but instead demonstrate the complexities of the present's ongoing condition of coexistence.

The revenants of Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*, similarly have a more complex role than their predecessors. As with their counterparts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, they interact directly with the still-living and, in doing so, highlight the inescapable nature of connectivity. Rather than the cultural representations of death so debated in southern fiction, the majority of major characters in *Long Division* are true revenants in the literal sense. They are returnees from a different time, still-living themselves in the present of one of the novel's overlayered ecologies. As such, Laymon's revenants are able to experience the past, present, and future in a way that Ward's returnees are not. In *Ghost Watching American Modernity*, Blanco seeks to characterise "ghosts as representations . . . [of] a 'now' moment that is happening in a different location (near or far) at the same time" (7). Although her elucidation refers to a cultural simultaneity between temporally consistent urban and rural landscapes, her concept of distanced 'now' moments can be expanded through an examination of temporally overlayered ecologies. The characters in *Long Division* experience connected 'now' moments in which the distance of the

geographical location is measured in years rather than miles. Baize, who has disappeared in the novel's original framing timeline, returns in the timeline of 1985 City Coldson, the City of the novel within a novel. This City has, along with Shalayah Crump, similarly disappeared in Baize's own 2013 timeline, and is therefore also a returnee/revenant to her, albeit a younger version of himself than Baize could ever previously have encountered. Evan Altshuler is a returnee from a distant, and more racially charged, past. Even City's grandfather, who has disappeared in the 1985 timeline, reappears in Evan's 1964 timeline. Although not undead characters in the traditional sense, they are all still revenants, 'now' moments in a literary subversion of Benedict Anderson's "homogeneous, empty time." As such, they are also indicative of a shift towards a new perspective of place.

Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, the characters' ability to traverse temporal layers is rooted in the topography of the Melahatchie landscape, they do not share a symbiotic relationship with the environment in the manner of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Likewise, due to the shifting sands nature of their existence, their connection with the living is also very different. Rather than examples of Barad's "ineliminable features" who can communicate with the still-living, *Long Division*'s revenants coexist and interact on an intimate footing. They inhabit the ecology as still-living participants of a different temporality layered-over the current one, and the line is blurred between the past, the present, and the future. The distance associated with previous iterations of revenants is reduced further in this novel. In contrast to Richie's vision of a future he aspires to, *Long Division*'s revenants explicitly connect the past, present, and future. Baize, City, Shalayah, and Evan are all able to coexist in the same space: "The room was silent, except for the music that came from Baize's computer and her constant coughing. Evan and Shalaya Crump stood in the middle of the room touching fingertips while Baize and I managed to tie the hands of the bigger Klansman" (233). In doing so,

they exemplify the posthumanist subject's existence across multitudinous temporal layers. The affect, the ability to influence, of either history or the future is unlimited.

Indeed, their cohabitation of the southern landscape also represents a contrast to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Barad contends "[l]oss is not absence but a marked presence, or rather a marking that troubles the divide between absence and presence" ("No Small Matter" G106), and *Long Division*'s revenants' literal presence as functioning inhabitants of the landscape is a divergence from the "residual personhood" of *Sing*. The returnees are a tangible presence in the lives of the still-living inhabitants of each of Melahatchie's timelines. They are both willing and able to tell their own story. As with *Sing*, there are no attempts to exorcise the ghosts of the past, even if at times they do have to make damaging choices. In fact, the still-living instead try to guide their historical counterparts, with City warning his grandfather: "I have a message for you. You might need to watch out for the Klan . . . Somebody told us that they were coming to get you" (218). However, the revenants' tangible and enfranchised presence differentiates their own symbiosis with the still-living. The present may try to guide the past in this novel, but the past also tries to guide the future, Evan for instance explains to City and Shalayah that the black-white binary associated with the region is a false one:

> Some of these folks hate anyone who ain't them. If you ain't the right kind of white or you ain't Christian or you ain't Southern or you ain't whatever they want you to be, you might as well be a Negro, especially with that Freedom Summer coming. (236)

There is once again a relationship of symbiosis on display. The region depicted in *Long Division*, is not simply a backward-glancing U.S. South attempting to reconcile its past, but rather one trying to "help time and change in Melahatchie be less painful" (243). It is a U.S. South trying to navigate a path to a better future.

Although, once again, revenants in *Long Division* display a notable contrast to their counterparts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (they are after all still alive in one of the novel's temporal layers), they correspondingly serve to highlight aspects of the posthumanist subject. More explicitly than in *Sing*, here revenants highlight our unavoidable connectivity in a posthumanist assemblage. As Jane Bennett asserts: "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (13). The potentially unseen consequences of such actions are played out directly in City, Shalayah, and Baize's relationship. Shalayah's own actions are in part responsible for Baize's disappearance. Her decision to stay in the past causes future events never to occur, most notably Baize ever being born. Shalayah's actions directly affect the composition of her ecology. Baize observes: "If every page is blank, ain't there a question mark kinda understood to be there anyway? Like that book I was reading, *Long Division*, the last chapter is just blank pages" (245). The chapter has not only not been written because it has not yet happened, but also because it is unknowable and can be written in any number of ways. It will be written by the decisions made and actions taken by the protagonists, decisions and actions that they are never able to predict the outcome of. Baize is here verbalising an aspect of the posthumanist condition that she observes in the blank pages of *Long Division*. She is verbalising both the impossibility of tracing cause and effect and the knowledge of its impossibility.

Indeed, I suggest that both the written and blank pages of *Long Division* demonstrate the unmoored totality of the novel expressed by Lukács's "transcendental homelessness." It is a rootlessness further evidenced in the isolation and anxiety of its posthumanist subjects. Unlike Richie and Given in *Sing*, the revenants in *Long Division* are fully aware of each other. They are both able and determined to interact. However, they share the same inability to control their own destiny, even when afforded the chance to alter events in the past or future. As with the revenants of *Sing*, they similarly

exhibit a lack of determinable agency. Indeed, neither Baize nor 1985 City are realistically able to affect their future in a manner of their own choosing. City, knowing how the future unfolds in Baize's timeline, wants to "close the hole, go home, eat sardines together, dig in the dirt, and never travel again. We could do all the stuff we were supposed to do until 1999" (243). However, "[d]eep down, I knew it couldn't work like that anymore" (244). He understands that human agency alone is not enough to guarantee a particular outcome. Baize once again verbalises this posthuman anxiety when she asks: "But how do we know that'll work if we're not sure if it's the hole that's special or if it's us that's special?" (238). All City can offer in response is: "Look, we got a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right" (238). Theirs is a lack of agency that the revenants are all too aware of, an anxiety City makes explicit when he states: "Anyone who says they really know anything about yesterday or tomorrow is a liar" (241).

In fact, both City and Baize's futures are contingent upon Shalayah, someone with whom they are both intimately connected in their own temporal layers, and Evan, someone with whom they are not. It is a complication of connectivity that once again demonstrates the fragility of existence within an assemblage network. As Susanna Paasonen observes:

> bodies and their capacities are constantly shaped and modified in their encounters with the world and the other bodies inhabiting it. Such encounters may then increase or diminish, affirm or undermine their life forces and potential to act. (283)

Shalayah's desire to change her own path within her assemblage "wasn't supposed to hurt. Not like this. But I can make it worth it" (246). Her choices drastically affect both City and Baize's future, and her assertion that she can make it worthwhile appears fraught with complications. Driven by a desire to know what happened to her parents, Shalayah's motivations are far from selfless. Consequently, City demonstrates an

inability of the posthumanist subject to consciously maintain permanent connections in an assemblage existence. He not only loses Shalayah, through her desire to "really want to change the future" (228), but Baize too. Although there is an ambiguity to the text, with no definitive answer as to who City meets in the hole when he determines to reconnect with Baize and Shalayah, it is clear that his outcomes will never be entirely contingent upon his own choices. There is a fragility to connections in a posthumanist assemblage, a fragility that can result in irreversible changes.

As with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, home in *Long Division* is not a concept of place in the traditional southern manner. Upon entering the Melahatchie Community Center in 2013, the same building he has actively avoided in its incarnation as the Shephard House in his own 1985 timeline, City states: "I guess I should describe the room or something since it felt like home" (185). It could be argued that City's connection to the room is reminiscent of a sense of place that is based upon a special attachment to community, particularly as this room is located in a community centre. However, this is no attachment to where he was born. Blanco proposes that ghosts are "the coexistence of simultaneous communities in those landscapes beyond the reaches of our immediate perception" (74), and I would suggest that her definition is useful to understanding the novel's employment of a community centre. The revenants of *Long Division* are a manifestation of simultaneous communities, temporally rather than geographically. Home, here, is a shared space informed by the past, present, and future. The City of the 2013 framing timeline expresses such an understanding of home: "we started rereading *Long Division* from the beginning, knowing that all we needed to know about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi was in our hands. The sentences had always been there" (267). Rather than solely "how subjects conceive present and evolving spaces" (Blanco 6), the revenants of *Long Division* represent how the past

informs the future and how the future informs the past. The zooming out employed by Laymon here is temporal rather than geographical.

Vincent Haddad asserts that "in *Long Division*, the fissures between reality and fictionality combined with the backwards and forwards movement through diegetic time and space all expose City to a speculation on race, history, and the future" (55). The revenants' existence within this shared space of simultaneous community, suggests that once again they are looking for release rather than revenge. It is a release from repeating the same story of southern history. Although the revenants do exact some sort of justice, forcing Evan's brother into the hole to punish him for his role in the burning down of the Freedom School, they know that revenge will not bring them peace. They understand that "we're gonna remember suffering whether he suffers or not" (239), and it is a remembrance that finds concrete form when City himself travels from 1964 to 2013. The Freedom School, that was a community centre in an alternative iteration of the 2013 timeline, has now become the "Lerthon Coldson Civil Rights Museum" (255). It is a physical remembrance of suffering dedicated to City's grandfather. Seeing it, City understands the need for personal change: "my hands had done things I'd never imagined wanting them to do" (260). In *Long Division*, history is active and capable of affect. Southern history, rather than a sometime source of either celebration or shame exists in an active assemblage with the present and the future.

I contend that the shift in perspective towards a posthumanist perception of place, demonstrated by both Ward and Laymon, also represents a further shift in the literary depiction of socially constructed space and time. In his insightful exploration of the changing representations of space and time in realism, modernism, and postcolonialism, from 2004, Philip Weinstein asserts: "As *social* indicates, space and time are never encountered immediately, as brutely physical conditions of nature. Rather, cultures *design* the space and time their subjects experience, proposing

normative pathways through them" (356). Weinstein, whose own focus is on postcolonialism, suggests that space and time are socially constructed, and that such constructions alter dramatically from realism to modernism, and then again in postcolonial interpretations.

However, as demonstrated through the heterotopias of Chapter Two, I propose that such constructions have shifted again, albeit less dramatically than in modernism, in the relational spaces of contemporary southern fiction. Weinstein argues that the Newtonian linearity of realism finds a paralysing arrest in modernism, and that the subject, "the Lockean individual entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . . goes well in realism, but produces disaster in modernism" (356). Using Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) as an example, Weinstein then argues that postcolonialism goes "beyond the arrest and alienation of modernism, drawing on non-Western tropes of folkloric wisdom" (374). In postcolonialism, "death is a 'chapter' in the human drama, not the end of the book" (366). Whilst in many ways, revenants in contemporary southern fiction are aligned with a non-Western understanding of death, they also demonstrate a further subtle shift away from Weinstein's interpretation of a postcolonialism that offers "[n]o existential crises, no epistemological quandary (no what happened? we know exactly what happened), no vertigo within time and space: plenty of solitude, but no alienation" (363). Rather than a complete break from postcolonialism, the revenants of a posthumanist interpretation are informed by it. They are a part of the chapters of life rather than the end of the book. Once again, the past and present are in assemblage with each other. Social constructions of the U.S. South offered by contemporary authors display a new relation of coexistence, one in which the normative pathways through time and space identified by Weinstein have become overgrown and outgrown.

In keeping with Weinstein's argument, the revenants examined clearly represent a break from the mimesis of realism, in which: "'the mutual actions of . . . bodies upon each other' drives its plot" (360). Posthumanism's lack of attributable cause and effect, makes a recognition of such a representational logic unsustainable. In addition, Weinstein observes:

> 'History is what hurts,' Fredric Jameson has written (102); the form of that hurting in modernism is arrest, a paralyzing moment in which the culturally furnished subject becomes unfurnished, caught up in orientations suddenly revealed as incoherent. (356)

He suggests that the pathways to understanding identity are abruptly blocked by the incomprehensibility of the present. Yet, revenants demonstrate that, in a posthumanist understanding, whilst history may still hurt, it can no longer be considered an arrest. In fact, nor is it truly history. As previously examined, in a posthumanist perception of place, history remains in play in an emotionally affective sense. As already seen, in *Long Division* history plays an interactive role, one which is far from an arrest. Timothy Morton proposes: "it might be best to see history as a nested series of catastrophes that are still playing out rather than as a sequence of events based on a conception of time as a succession of atomic instants" (69). Although he is referring to environmental catastrophes, Morton's imagery serves as a perfect explication for *Long Division*'s temporal overlayering.

Comparatively, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, history acts, in part, as a pathway through the pain of the present. Given is able to guide Philomène away from her suffering, whilst Richie offers River a pathway to catharsis. He allows him a chance at least to purge the hurt of the last fifty years. It is a chance to finally wash his hands of the blood that:

> . . . ain't never come out. Hold my hands up to my face, I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it when the warden and sergeant came up on us, the dogs yipping and licking blood from they muzzles . . . smelled it over the sour smell of the bayou and the salt smell of the sea, smelled it years later when I climbed into bed with Philomène. (256)

History acts as a pathway that ultimately offers a different outcome for the new generation. Richie may never be able to achieve his goal, but Kayla, Jojo's younger sister, can:

> Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand . . . Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. (284)

Kayla is the song of the south; she represents the possibility of having a voice that the title alludes to.

In his interpretation of the depiction of time and space in postcolonialism, Weinstein asserts that "the afterlife is but an ever-present dimension of the present one" (374). He observes that the boundary between life and death is depicted as permeable rather than permanent. Although this is also true of both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Long Division*, I would suggest that the contemporary depiction of revenants, observable in Ward and Laymon's novels, represents an alternative construction of space and time. In some ways, the representational form employed by García Márquez that takes realism as a base before teasing it and twisting it to create a recognisable yet defamiliarising version of the present is discernible in both Bois Sauvage and Melahatchie. However, according to Weinstein: "To be, for the Buendias, is to move securely within time, space, and identity" (363). Whilst the revenants in Ward and Laymon do move securely within time and space, identity is more problematic. As Weinstein notes, there are no

existential crises in Macondo. Each of its characters are fully aware of who they are, and, crucially, the characters are allowed to be who they are. There is no shadow of "residual personhood" for them; the posthumanist anxiety that haunts the visitations of both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Long Division*, is entirely absent.

According to Weinstein, with regards to García Márquez's characters: "Their being at ease in their setting allows them to perform, in full, what is in them to perform – figuring for us what we might perform if he were wholly present within culturally coherent space and time" (364). But, for the contemporary revenants, there is no sense of being at ease in their setting. Richie physically "leans into the window and blurs at the edges" (131), before becoming conversely "sharp at the edges, but there's too much of him, so all I can think when I look at him is *Something's wrong*" (169). On encountering a police officer, his first reaction is: "They going to chain you" (169). The posthumanist anxiety and markers of transcendental homelessness noted throughout this chapter place contemporary revenants in an alternative construction of space and time to their predecessors. They share a symbiotic relationship with the present/future, an inextricable connectivity with the world around them and the history that has helped to form the present, but it is not one that provides either an ease in their surroundings or a security in their identity.

Additionally, Weinstein observes, "black folklore quietly harbors a refusal of Newtonian givens, an interest in textualising the non-Western world's ways of understanding life outside the teleological register of subjects mapping and mastering objects in lawful space and time" (370-71). Whilst it is true that, as will be further investigated in the following chapter, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in particular employs elements of folklore in its treatment of its revenants, they again represent a subtle shift in perspective from a postcolonial depiction of space and time. Weinstein argues that in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Death is here a dimension of ineffaceable identity, not

– as the Enlightenment/scientific tradition has insisted for 400 years – its permanent extinction" (366). However, once again, I would suggest that the key to understanding Ward and Laymon's revenants is to view them as a marker of inseparable rather than ineffaceable identity. It is their connectivity to the present and future that defines them. The social construction of their space and time is contingent upon their connectivity and coexistence.

Although the contemporary revenants of Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon have differing manifestations from one another, they share important commonalities. They each interact directly with the still-living, creating an assemblage of coexistence across temporal layers. Theirs, is a symbiotic coexistence consistent with the posthumanist subject. In doing so, they serve as both representations and reflectors of the posthumanist subject, highlighting the isolation and anxiety dissonantly inherent in an existence of connectivity, and demonstrating their own form of transcendental homelessness. Revenants' connectivity to their future represents a shift in the depiction of socially constructed time and space. Rather than what was and what will be, the posthumanist subject represented by contemporary revenants depict time and space as what could have been and what could still be.

Chapter Four - Trees

Forests have long played a significant role in the national cultural imaginary of the United States. According to Frederick Jackson Turner (2017), English colonisation brought with it a farming culture which required a clearing of the natural habitat that impeded its progress (51-53). Through their importance to the frontier ethos examined by Turner, forests have become part of the symbolism of a national drive for westward expansion. However, the early nineteenth-century emergence of Transcendentalism brought with it a different perspective on the American landscape. According to Henry David Thoreau: "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" (454). Wilderness had become a site for possible self-realisation. In *Imagining the Forest* (2011), John Knott suggests that over time two competing metaphors emerged in the way this natural environment was described, the forest as a wilderness standing in the way of expansion and therefore progress, and the forest as a temple that ought to be revered rather than subjugated (8). Regardless of how authors chose to employ representations of the forest, it was largely used as a trope.

However, in keeping with the erstwhile exceptionality of the region, southern literature has cultivated its own symbolism surrounding the forest. In part explained by Michael Bennett's assertion that black culture "has a different relationship with pastoral space and wilderness than the ideal kinship that most nature writers . . . assume or seek" (195), trees, even in recent memory, are as likely to evoke images of lynch-law and the kind of regional stagnation discussed in Chapter Two, as they are sites of progress or spiritual growth. Yet, the employment of such space has inevitably changed. In southern literature an alternative and evolving dichotomy emerged, one centring around largely

economic factors. The previously competing metaphors of the wilderness and temple were conflated to position the forest in opposition to the southern slave economy. Forests still appear as wilderness in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) or Martin Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859), as the protagonist of each narrative attempts to escape his plantation servitude. However, this wilderness is a landscape to be survived – often in a broader quest for survival – rather than one to be tamed. By the Southern Renascence fiction of William Faulkner and his literary successors such as Flannery O'Connor, forests had become sites of consumption and symbols of human mastery over nature, through depictions of the commercialisation of timber and the prevalence of hunting. These depictions, as with so many tropes of the renascence, continued to hold relevance in postsouthern literature, in for example the forest-set duck hunt that opens Richard Ford's *A Piece of My Heart* (1976). Southern literature had developed its own competing metaphors for the forest.

The landscape of the U.S. South has once again evolved. The region has seen a huge reforestation effort[4] and forests feature anew as natural landscapes that can provide more than just a source for economic exploitation. Frontier understandings of our relationship with nature, in which "[g]rab was the watchword and earth spread her legs" (Warren 12), are no longer congruous with an increased understanding of assemblage existence. In this chapter, turning my attention towards the natural features of the region's ecologies, I argue that contemporary authors, rather than continuing to employ the metaphors of the past, instead write back to such symbolism. By examining the trees and woods of Jesmyn Ward's Bois Sauvage, I will first illustrate the ways in which contemporary authors' depictions of their ecologies both compare and contrast with those of their predecessors, before showing how depictions of a wider connectivity, both geographically and temporally demonstrate a lack of exceptionalism in Ward's

[4] For a full discussion of the changing forestation of the Mississippi Delta see Prewitt Jr. (1999).

novels. Building upon the arguments of Chapter Two, I argue that Ward again depicts a space in transformation, one in which there is no requisite road through, just coexistence alongside the woods.

That is not to say that there are not comparisons to be drawn between Jesmyn Ward's depiction of woods in *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and those of historic southern works. Lance Newman proposes that the pinewoods of Douglass's *Narrative* function not only as an obstacle to freedom, but also as "the definitive place of exile" (131). Similarly, the Pit in *Salvage* functions to separate the Batistes from the world around them. It is "the abandoned hammer, the fallen frame, the dark expanse sounding of bug and wood and wind spreading out and away from . . . them like a bride's train" (107). The family are physically and economically marginalised from the rest of their community by the woods, in a pit that realistically they cannot escape.

In addition to this, when the children run from the barn after Skeetah has stolen some worming pellets, using the woods as their escape, the description of the ensuing chase raises uncomfortable connotations of antebellum southern life:

> "Hey!" We hear the man yell again, his voice muffled in the blanket of the woods. Then rifle shots. "Twist!" he calls. "Twist!" The voice dwindles to nothing in the threads. My feet catch, hold, and kick the earth. Skeetah runs next to me in the funny way he's always had, his hands like blades. Every time the dog barks, it's as if his teeth are grazing my neck. My skin is tight with fear. (79)

Reading this passage, it is impossible not to make a connection to slave narrative representations of white men chasing escapees through the forest with dogs. Ward appears to make this connection explicit in Esch's description of her youngest brother, Junior: "I expect him to be crying or screaming, but he isn't. He knows this frantic run

before this ruinous dog" (80). It is a part of their history, and one that they are inextricably connected to.

Further to this, a less obvious connection to renascence fiction occurs in the use of individual trees as recurring symbols of connectivity in the narrative. Glenda B. Weathers notes the use of a pear tree in both Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston as a "fitting symbol of the acquisition of carnal knowledge and sexual experience" (202). In doing so, Weathers propounds a connection between the tree Janie references when documenting her experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and the tree Caddy uses to escape the house and visit her lovers in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Although both the tree and its symbolic purpose are different, *Salvage* similarly uses repeated references to oak trees to suggest stability and connectivity in the natural landscape. Oaks are distinguished from other trees as not able to be moved by Hurricane Camille: "The tops of the pines rub together as the wind comes again, but the oaks do not move . . . they will withstand a storm, if she comes" (46). An oak ultimately becomes the family's saviour when Hurricane Katrina hits: "'The tree!' Skeetah is inching down the roof to a spreading oak tree that touches our house and stretches to MaMa's house. It rises like a jungle gym over the seething water" (231). The oak tree symbolises stability in the landscape of Bois Sauvage. It connects the disparate elements of the man-made landscape together in an assemblage of human and other-than-human environment. The saviour tree is also, notably, the setting for Esch's own sexual secret to be revealed. It is in the branches of the oak tree that Skeetah reveals her pregnancy to their father, connecting it back to the pear trees of renascence fiction. The woods in *Salvage* do then, in some respects, create their own connectivity with the past of southern literature, a past that must also exist in an assemblage with the present.

Further connections between topographic features are observable when, following his death during an attempted escape from the neo-plantation of Parchman

Farm in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Richie, as noted in Chapter Three, returns in a forest glade. There, he encounters a serpent who offers him a vision of the future:

> Do you want to leave? It asked.
>
> I shrugged.
>
> I can take you away, It said. But you have to want it.
>
> Where? I asked. The sound of my voice surprised me.
>
> Up and away, It said. And around.
>
> Why?
>
> There are things you need to see, It said. (134)

This scene is comparable to Douglass's only fictional work *The Heroic Slave* (1853). Lance Newman suggests that Douglass's own portrayal of forests undergoes a shift between *Narrative* and his novel, in line with Knott's competing metaphors. In the obstructive wilderness of *Narrative* in which Newman observes "nature stands as a terrorizing obstacle to refugees from slavery" (129), it is not the progress of civilisation but rather the progress to civilisation which is impeded. Instead, a forest glade becomes a temple in *The Heroic Slave*: "near the edge of a dark pine forest" (5). Here, the protagonist Madison Washington declares his intention to free himself from slavery, and consequently "[t]he future gleamed brightly before him, and his fetters lay broken at his feet. His air was triumphant" (7). His statement further serves as a sermon from his ligneous pulpit leading his accidental congregation, Mr. Listwell, to declare: "From this hour I am an abolitionist . . . resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race" (9). Douglass's forest has become a place of enlightenment where Washington, and to some extent also his observer Listwell, have been reborn. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s Richie, like Washington before him is offered enlightenment and freedom from his bondage, and the woods have become something akin to "a liberated space of authentic spiritual experience" (Newman 135). In addition to this, for River the pine woods of

Bois Sauvage serve as a space of self-determination and freedom. He chooses to live in the woods, where he "built our house himself, narrow in the front and long, close to the road so he could leave the rest of the property wooded" (2). Choosing to surround himself with trees, River is able to assert his independence. The woods here are not a terrifying wilderness, but rather a refuge from the outside world, one which offers its inhabitants a freedom from their past.

However, it is not solely an antebellum landscape that is layered over in the woods of Bois Sauvage, but also a connection to an African culture brought to the region by Middle Passage slave ships. It is a layer expanded both geographically and temporally. And this culture helps to inform an understanding of subjectivity in the novel. Summarising a 1980 study by ethnologist Geneviève Calame-Griaule[5] into the symbolic nature of trees in African oral tradition, Enongene Mirabeau Sone (2017) notes how trees are believed to house the spirits of ancestors as well as those of newborn children. Trees therefore provide a link between the past and the present as well as between heaven and earth, contain resources with mystical qualities that can be used in healing practices, and serve as sites where moral values are taught and passed on to younger generations (19). Similar mythical symbolism is considerable in Ward's novel. Alongside Richie's previously noted connection to the woods, and his existence in the woods rather than the house when he travels to Bois Sauvage, his status as a revenant provides a link to the African mythology of ancestry. His final appearance in the novel, his ultimate fate, is: "laying, curled into the roots of a great live oak, looking half-dead and half-sleep, and all ghost" (280). This seemingly ordinary tree bears the spirits of a multitude of other southern ancestors and:

[5] Calame-Griaule's text is written in French and due to being unable to locate a suitable translated version of the original I have opted to use Sone's summary.

> the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies . . . None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes. (282)

The tree represents a connection to the past, but it is a past of violence, a past of rape, beatings, lynchings, and murder. A past elucidated by Richie as: "So many of us . . . Hitting. The wrong keys. Wandering against. The song" (282). Although never explicitly stated, this African landscape over which Richie's existence is layered is more than a recalling of the horrors of slavery, it is the story of generations of voiceless suffering as a result of such bondage.

Although this particular topographic layer has clear connections to the concerns of a backward-facing southern studies, this is not solely a representation of southern guilt. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the overlayering is also indicative of the move away from the "nativist navel-gazing" (Smith and Cohn 13), mentioned in Chapter One. It is an introduction to a wider reach of connectivity for southern culture. It is an inevitability of connectivity shared by the contemporary eco-criticism of Michael Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, and Scott F. Gilbert amongst others, which no longer excludes sections of society from the "ideal kinship" of Bennett's aforementioned nature writers. The woods and Philomène's existence alongside them, are a link to a wider cultural heritage, one that informs her subjectivity as much, if not more, than her existence as a southerner.

The use of forest resources in healing practices described by Calame-Griaule is still evident through Philomène. Leonie describes how she "would lead me out in the woods around the house for walks, and she'd point out plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt" (102). However, this is more than simply a knowledge of medicinal properties of the forest flora. It is a deep connection to her landscape, one in which:

> When I was twelve, the midwife Marie-Therese came to the house to deliver my youngest sister. She was sitting a moment in the kitchen, directing me to boil water and unpacking her herbs, when she start pointing and asking me what I thought each of the bundles of dried plants did. And I looked at them, and knew, so I told her: This one for helping the afterbirth come, this one for slowing the bleeding, this one for helping the pain, this one for bringing the milk down. It was like someone was humming in my ear, telling me they purpose. (39)

This deep connection to their assemblage ecology is shared by Jojo, who finds it "impossible to not hear the animals, because I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once" (15). He can also connect with manifestations of the past in the form Richie and the multiplicity of revenants he is also able to see in the forest at the conclusion of the novel. Jojo connects both within and across the overlayered ecologies he occupies, indicating once again the heterochronic nature of the posthumanist subject's existence. The cultural landscape exists in the characters' assemblage with the world that they inhabit, their inherent connectivity with the world around them. Jane Bennett, in her examination of things themselves rather than the human experience of things, suggests: "the modern self feels increasingly entangled" (115). Both Jojo and Philomene are explicitly entangled with the other-than-human world they exist alongside, and a cultural heritage that continues to affect in their physical world. It is a world whose boundaries stretch outside of the U.S. South.

Philomène's connection to her landscape also presents itself in her choice of memorial to her murdered son, Given: "A year after Given died, Mama planted a tree for him. *One every anniversary*, she said, pain cracking her voice. *If I live long enough, going to be a forest here*, she said, *a whispering forest. Talking about the wind and pollen and beetle rot*" (50). It is a memorial that over time becomes: "Mama's little

forest, the ten trees she'd planted in an ever-widening spiral on every death day" (51). The little forest is here representative of the African symbolic connection between heaven and earth, but also a connection from the past to the future. The African landscape of Philomène's ancestors reaches into the future of her descendants and the woods of Bois Sauvage create a connection across time.

Importantly, however, Leonie does not share Philomène and Jojo's tangible connection to the land or to the past. Although she sees Given, as Jojo sees Richie, she is unable to communicate with him directly, perceiving him more as a drug-fuelled hallucination than a revenant. Furthermore, despite Philomène's efforts to teach her, Leonie does not share the ability to utilise the woods' natural resources with Jojo dismissing her attempts: "she ain't Mam. She ain't Pop. She ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life, and she don't know" (107). Leigh Anne Duck contends that no race, class, gender, or region can provide individual subjectivity ("Southern Nonidentity" 328), and Leonie's inability to connect would appear to bear this out. Leonie is not Philomène, and her U.S. South is not her mother's U.S. South. There is no unique southern identity on display here, borne from a historical conception. No single landscape can provide a clear subjectivity in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

According to Jon Smith: "In old southern studies . . . the crisis fantasy is about 'forgetting'; we are supposed to be endlessly agitated about the loss of 'memory' and hence 'identity'" (*Finding Purple America* 16). As such 'memory' largely relates to an identifiable connection with the U.S. South itself, a deep involvement with the history of the region, and therefore realistically the memories of the section of society who controlled its cultural influence. In *Sing,* Ward's overlayered ecologies suggest instead a readjustment of our understanding of southern identity to one that is not simply informed by the region. The transformation of the region finds its roots in a transformation of identity. The woods of Bois Sauvage provide an explicit connection

between the old South and the new when Given is murdered in the woods by a white boy, in an incident that, even in the mid-2000s, is rather too conveniently explained away as a hunting accident. The resulting encapsulation of the situation from the responsible party's father, "[y]ou fucking idiot, he'd said. This ain't the old days" (49-50), not only indicates that there can be no suggestion of forgetting history, it also elucidates how such matters can never be seen as simply historical, but instead still haunt the contemporary landscape.

The flora and fauna of Bois Sauvage is more than simply symbolic or sentimental. Ward also depicts the assemblage minutiae of her southern ecology. The killing of a goat leaves "[s]lime and smell everywhere, something musty and sharp like a man who ain't took a bath in some days. The skin peels off like a banana" (5). There is reality rather than romanticism in this depiction of the coexistence with nature. The woods of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* do not just provide a symbolic link between heaven and earth, their connection for both human and other-than-human is more tangible. In fact, the woods represent both a mythical space and a coherent perceptible environment, one in which a present-day U.S. South is looking for ways in which to embrace its future without ignoring the lessons of its past. If, as Smith claims, New Southern Studies is searching for the space where people attempt to navigate the pull of both the past and the future (*Finding Purple America 19*), then I would suggest that the woods of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* provide a representation of this space.

The coexistence of the past, present, and future envisioned in overlayered ecologies finds representation in the assemblage of Mississippi landscapes the novel provides. It is a representation encompassed in one passage of reflection by Jojo during the journey north to Parchman:

> I like the heat. I like the way the highway cuts through the forests, curves over hills heading north, sure and rolling. I like the trees reaching out on both sides,

> the pines thicker and taller up here, spared the stormy beating the ones on the coast get that keeps them spindly and delicate. But that doesn't stop people from cutting them down to protect their houses during storms or to pad their wallets. So much could be happening in those trees. (63)

Although ostensibly simply a child's description of their view from a car window, this passage manages to vocalise much more about the southern landscape. The urban modernity absent from the woods of Bois Sauvage, which appear superficially to exist exclusively in the rural traditions of the old South, is apparent in the form of the highway. And here modernity is layered over the historical ecologies of northern migration, literally cutting through the rural landscape. Additionally, the cost of capitalism, connected to the renascence South through the destruction of forests for timber profits, stands side-by-side with neglect of the environment in Jojo's insightful criticism that their fragility "doesn't stop people from cutting them down." Further to this, the final sentence succinctly elicits a recognition of the impossibility of simple cause and effect, so central to an understanding of coexistence, charged with the appreciation that we can never really know the true consequences of our actions. Jojo may be a thirteen-year-old child, unprepared for the demands of adulthood, but he is the future of the U.S. South, and his perception of his landscape demonstrates not just an understanding of the past, but also his unavoidable coexistence with the environment that he inhabits.

The novel's central road trip to Parchman serves to highlight another critical aspect of the woods' function in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the interesting juxtaposition they create with open space. Leonie and Jojo's journey from Bois Sauvage to Parchman includes numerous references to the southern landscapes that they pass through. Trees tend to serve as a central motif of these landscapes. Initially, the woods of Bois Sauvage form a boundary around the human living spaces: "The woods around us are a great

dark green tangle: oaks reaching low and wide, vines tangled around trunks and drooping from branches, poison sumac and swamp tupelo and cypress and magnolia growing up around us in a circular wall" (251). Before dwindling on the approach to the prison: "Outside the car, the trees thin and change, the trunks shorten and they get fuller and green, the leaves not sharp dark pine but so full, hazy almost. They stand in thin lines between fields" (109). Finally, they become the open landscape of the prison described by River: "just the fields stretching on, the trees too short with not enough leaves, no good shade nowhere, and everything bending low under the weight of the sun" (119). While the trees that River now lives amongst provide him with refuge and the ability to assert his independence, Parchman is open space, both in its lack of trees and its lack of prison boundaries. If open space traditionally represents freedom, and forests are a wilderness that needs to be subjugated in our human need for continual expansion and domination, then *Sing, Unburied, Sing* subverts our established understanding of space.

The open space used in the depiction of Parchman also subverts another southern landscape, the plantation. According to Newman: "slaveholders take advantage of rural isolation to hide the violence of oppression from public view" (130). Yet, in the neo-plantation that is Parchman Farm, the violence not only remains in plain view, it is also made more visible through the openness, with River recalling: "I kept my eyes on the ground. Ignored the sky, all that open space pushing down that made fear gather in my chest, a bloated and croaking toad" (75). The depiction of a region in transformation and the undermining of constancy that are central to my arguments in the opening chapters of this thesis, are once again apparent through Ward's subversion of space in the U.S. South. It is our connection to the environment, not our dominance over it that represents self-determination in the novel. The woods of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* represent a liberated space with a connection to both the past and the future, and the ecologies

depicted are layered over not just the southern ecology they seek to subvert, but also a wider one, an ecology that stretches beyond the confines of the U.S. South and, through the cultural heritage outlined, beyond that of the nation.

Although part of the same fictional landscape of Bois Sauvage, the woods of *Salvage the Bones* demonstrate more of a connection to the landscapes of Southern Renascence fiction than those of the slave narratives associated with Ward's subsequent novel. On first viewing, they appear to suggest a boundary zone around (post)human living space. As with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the woods in *Salvage the Bones* surround the habitations and help to provide an understanding of the human inhabitants: "here in this gap in the woods her father cleared and built on that we now call the Pit" (1). Other parts of the town are more suburban, with Esch describing: "the small Catholic church, the haphazard cemetery Skeetah mowed, the county park with the dirt parking lot, which strives to impose some order, some civility to Bois" (116-17). Whether the Batistes have chosen to surround themselves with the natural landscape or their social status has left them with no option is not made clear, but their existence is rural rather than (sub)urban.

Thadious Davis, in her explanation of her theoretical "southscapes," calls attention to the "natural environment and the social collective that shapes that environment out of its cultural beliefs" (11-12). For Davis, human beings (specifically those she terms "raced human beings"[6] (11)), are impacted by their geography as much as they impact it, and significantly, the Pit, the Batiste home, is not just a clearing in the natural environment, it also creates a throwback to a rural tradition of community. This is a place where everyone gathers, knows each other intimately, and "felt strange when

[6] Although all human beings are "raced," Davis uses the term here to represent how investigations of the U.S. South have tended to delineate African Americans alone by race. She argues that white southerners are usually described as simply southerners yet black southerners are usually described as simply black (32).

they weren't there" (10). However, this is a very localised form of the rural tradition with the woods providing a boundary to a human-made landscape. In fact, the woods in *Salvage the Bones* always exist as a backdrop to human interaction. More so than in *Sing*, they frame the action, such as the dogfight where the "clearing is a wide oval bowl, which must be a dried-up pond that grows wide and deep when it rains; the bottom is matted with dry yellow reeds, and the trees grow in a circle around it" (159). When the woods are read as boundaries, the clearings within are suggestive of a path through the natural landscape, a clear direction to follow. The woods could be argued to have less of a relationship of coexistence and more of a separation from the human elements of the novel.

Notably however, there is no ownership of the woods portrayed here. Ownership of the land, human dominion over nature, has been very important to an historical southern narrative. Human dominion over human in the region, is ultimately based upon an economic need originating in land ownership. The cotton trade fuelled the need for slavery, meaning exceptionalism in every respect loomed large. Further to this, postbellum antagonism, and with it the U.S. South's view of itself as different, did not simply derive from Civil War defeat, but from a sense of injustice at the north's subsequent appropriation of the region's natural resources. Kathryn McKee observes: "White U.S. Southerners both resented these implications of economic and moral inferiority and embraced an implicit sense of difference from the national whole such characterizations lent them" ("Writing Region" 126). Consequently, land ownership, including the ownership of forests, has played a prominent role in southern fiction. While ownership of workable land and the legitimacy it bestows drives the narrative of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), underpins the familial relationships in *The Sound and the Fury*, and signals a reconfiguring of the classes in his Snopes trilogy (1940, 1957, 1959), forests also play an important role in Faulkner's work.

Mikko Saikku states that "Faulkner's portrayal of the human takeover of the bottomland hardwood forest ecosystem, from *Go Down, Moses* in 1942 to *The Reivers* in 1962, furthermore demonstrates his deep and consistent concern about environmental degradation in the Delta" (529). He suggests that such references attest to the growth of the lumber industry in the nineteenth century, during which the U.S. South became the nation's leading lumber producer, albeit with the North plundering the South's resources. As Saikku observes, Faulkner's forest depictions are now often used as an example of his own proto-environmentalism. As Lawrence Buell similarly notes, we do not "do full justice to the place of the natural world in Faulkner's work merely by inventorying landscape items and proving their historical or geographical accuracy" (3). However, I would propose that Faulkner's concerns are not as easily compartmentalised as some critics would like to believe. In fact, his portrayal of the destruction of the forests in *Light in August* (1932), which begins right at the start of the novel, comes from a very specific perspective:

> The brother worked in the mill. All the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. (6)

Light in August's environmental concerns do demonstrate a human effect on nature, but it is from a notably human-centred perspective. The concerns, born from a humanist understanding of the world in-keeping with the period, do recognise the impact of human behaviour. However, the depiction of loss is rooted in the effect it will have on human livelihoods rather than our coexistence with nature.

Similarly, woods feature heavily in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), with protagonist Tarwater raised in the backwoods of Alabama, and

antagonist Rayber representing a rationalism in contrast to Tarwater's spirituality. Sarah Petrides proposes that "portrayal of the landscape . . . can help us focus on the meaning of ecology in the religious novel, how the land mediates between people" (9), and although her point is clearly valid when considering the spiritual preoccupations of O'Connor's work, I believe Rayber's connection to the land can again be viewed from an alternative perspective. Ultimately, he understands "he owned all of this. His trees stood rising above him, majestic and aloof" (185). Rayber's connection is struck not just by the property in the woods, but the woods as property. As with Faulkner, O'Connor depicts an economic rather than symbiotic relationship with the woods. Ownership of the land still holds sway over purely environmental concerns.

Yet, there is no such ownership of the woods apparent in *Salvage the Bones*. The woods stand connected but with a separation from the clearings which are turned into homesteads. Esch describes: "As we walk into the center of Bois Sauvage, away from our Pit, the houses appear gradually hidden behind trees, closer to one another until there are only ragged lots of woods separating them" (116). The woods surround the land that has been inhabited, and the humans live alongside them. This, I would suggest, demonstrates a shift in understanding of our place in the world as posthumanist subjects, a shift towards a place of coexistence rather than dominion. If, as McKee argues, postbellum reunification only served to separate northerners and southerners further ideologically, then the lack of land ownership displayed in *Salvage* demonstrates a shift towards assemblage, one not just for the posthumanist subject but also for the United States. The decreasing dominion of the posthumanist subject reflects the decreasing dominion of the U.S. South over its own fate. A new materialist understanding of posthumanism that considers what follows the untenable exceptionalism of the posthumanist subject, can inform new interpretations of the region. Just as the posthumanist subject is increasingly connected to actants extrinsic to

itself, so too the U.S. South must be interpreted as inextricably connected to its own larger assemblage. As such, its possibility of exceptionality is diminished. The woods here represent a change in the understanding of place and existence within it.

If, as I have previously suggested, the woods appear to represent a boundary zone, then in *Salvage the Bones* these boundaries are resisted by the human inhabitants. The woods may physically provide a boundary to the human living spaces, one with a suggestion of historical southern ecologies, but this is a boundary that the Batistes reject. Rather than signifying the limit of something, they are a site of connectivity, leading to both contemplation and opportunity. Esch finds a beauty in the natural world that enfolds her:

> There are clusters of magnolias that are so tall and green and glossy, they are impossible to climb, and the air around them always smells like peaches. There are oaks so big and old that their arms grow out black and thick as trunks, which rest on the ground. There are ponds that are filled with slime and tall yellow grasses, and at night, frogs turn them teeming, singing a burping chorus (158).

The family also use it to their advantage. Although the connotations of the antebellum South already mentioned loom large in these savage woods, rather than an unknown wilderness to be navigated and survived, it is a space well known and duly utilised to provide cover and help the family to obtain what they need.

In this case, the woods serve to delineate comparable clearings within them. The Batiste children discover that:

> Into the woods to the east of us, about a mile through pine and oaks so big and old their arms have grown to rest in the dirt, there is a pasture full of grazing cows. A wooden and barbed wire fence rims the pasture. In the middle sits a big brown barn, and next to it, a small white house with a high sloped tin roof and small windows. (64)

The simplicity and order of the discovered homestead is placed in juxtaposition with the Batistes's own carcass strewn Pit, leaving Esch: "startled at the way the sky opened up at the field, the way the land looked wrong. There was too much blue" (64). Her four-word summation of the property serves as much as an explanation for her family's own circumstances as of what she is seeing: "White people live there" (64). Having "found the place one day by accident while we were playing an all-day game of chase in the woods" (64), the agrarian landscape is studied by Skeetah, who "stood a moment longer, squinting at the house, his head to one side" (65). The woods form a boundary zone between black Bois and a white Bois suggestive of an agrarian idealised South. However, here the idyllic landscape does not take, it provides. Rather than the rich white landowner exploiting for their own gain, they are themselves exploited when Skeetah breaks into the barn to steal cow-wormer, and a trope of traditional southern literature is subverted. In *Salvage*, the woods are not a site of enlightenment and possible self-realisation in the manner of Thoreau or Douglass, but rather one of self-preservation. This is a U.S. South that clearly still resonates with the inequalities of its past, but it is also one with a suggestion of permeable borders. A U.S. South that at least raises the possibility of coexistence, albeit one of continued insurmountable inequality.

Although the Batistes refuse to accept the boundaries, the woods do, to a certain extent, suggest marginalisation for the family. Not only are they on the outskirts of the more affluent white community, as they "live in the black heart of Bois Sauvage, and he lives out away in the pale arteries" (97), they are, as previously considered, also on the margins of the suburban black community. Rick Crownshaw suggests: "Ward's narrator's description of the borders of Bois Sauvage resonates with the production of exclusion, with an inclusion that produces the wildness of biological life" (165). Here, marginalisation does not preclude coexistence. In a posthumanist sense, being on the margins, on the edges, is not being outside or completely excluded. The Batistes remain

part of a wider assemblage and are connected ultimately by their ecology, an understanding that is in keeping with Davis's suggestion that marginal or liminal space functions as an alternative way of looking at space usually seen as a place of difference (13). They are not different as such, but rather a unique element within an assemblage. Bennett asserts "[a] particular element can be so contingently well placed in an assemblage that its power to alter the direction or function of the whole is unusually great" (42), which raises the important point that not all actants in any assemblage are equal. Different actants will always have different abilities to affect their own surroundings and their own existence. Certain people, regions, elements will always exist in the margins, but this does not exclude them from being members of the whole. They are members with a different ability to affect, and the woods as space inform such an understanding. While Melanie Benson Taylor argues that figures on the margins often serve as uncomfortable indicators of shifts in the accepted social structure (127), a new materialist interpretation of marginality would indicate that its occupants were always components of the structure, just ones whose line of affectivity may be harder to recognise. The woods of Bois Sauvage are more pervasive in *Salvage the Bones* than in *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* They surround everything. In doing so they demonstrate a posthumanist assemblage with the ecology about us. They are layered over an alternative historical ecology to Ward's later novel, but their connectivity with the past is used to represent a new space in the present.

This is, of course, not to deny the societal impact of marginality. Critical materialism allows for a society to be read simultaneously as materially real and socially constructed, and the social reality of marginalisation for the Batistes is, as discussed in the previous chapter, palpable poverty. Maria del Pilar Blanco describes ghost towns as "spaces that exist, but are obscured or abandoned by the movements of modernity, ghost towns manifest the histories of failure that necessarily coexist with the

successes of these movements" (99). The Pit, while not physically abandoned, is in many ways a space in the southern landscape that has been both left behind and obscured by the overlayering of urban modernity. It is itself a space of failure that coexists with the relative successes surrounding it. Such spaces exist within any societal structure. The Batistes' place in their assemblage is not one of exclusion from the whole, but it is certainly one where their power to affect – both the assemblage and their own lives – is severely reduced.

Although the woods of Bois Sauvage are used to write back to national cultural mythology, they also perform the role of landscapes of coexistence within a larger assemblage. There is a strong symbolic, and more than symbolic, connection in both novels between humans and trees. The woods, as we have seen, play an important role in both *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* but they are not described in any great depth. Rather, they seem to exist as omnipresent entities. In *Sing* they exist as a place where someone could "emerge whole out of the green, so we'd have somebody else to talk to" (48), and similarly in *Salvage* they are "the back of the property, the woods" (14). Instead, it is the elements that make them up, the smaller elements of the assemblage, trees, that carry description. Trees are, variously, "a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence" (*Sing* 56) or oaks that "stand apart from the piney clusters: solemn, immovable. Spanish moss hangs from their arms, gray as an old king's beard" (*Salvage* 66). Frederic Jameson asserts that individual subjects and their actions are used to represent the larger context of societal relations (844), but in Ward, the behaviours of individual elements are not just pointers to a representation of a greater whole, they are a coexistence with it. In fact, humans and trees are often compared and even coalesced in the two novels. Big Joseph "lists, an old oak in a bad wind" (*Sing* 204), and the Batistes are "a pile of wet, cold branches, human

debris in the middle of all of the rest of it" (*Salvage* 237), after the hurricane. Perspective requires a subject-object relationship, and the lack of perspective produced by the conflation of the subject and the object makes a new materialist interpretation instructive. Characters are not just observing trees in the novels, they are intimately connected to them. There is nothing uniquely human about this ecology, and therefore nothing uniquely southern. It is a merging of the human and other-than-human that negates regionality.

In his interrogation of the sublime in Pauline Smith's short story "Desolation" (1925), Johan Geertsema claims that the "identification of the protagonists with the landscape serves to reduce the distance between them and it: as part of the landscape they cannot read it, because reading requires distance" (100). This suggestion calls into question the subject-object relationship and interrogates the exceptionality of the human. Ward's landscape is one of connectivity and coexistence which similarly highlights the non-exceptionalism of the posthumanist subject. In the lead-up to Katrina's arrival, the "battery-operated radio told us nothing practical, but the yard did: the trees bending until almost breaking, arcing like fishing line, empty oil drums rattling across the yard, the water running in clear streams, carving canyons" (*Salvage* 217). It is not the expected human inventions that provide knowledge here, but the assemblage of human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter. It is the state of coexistence. Dualisms tend to create exceptionalism: black and white, north and south, human and non-human, the privileging of one thing over another. I would argue that the ecologies of Bois Sauvage contest the narrative of human mastery over nature. Instead, they demonstrate our inseparability from it. They depict a move away from traditional southern oppositions in their portrayal of a more connected humanity. Skin is "dark as the reaching oak trees" (*Salvage* 22), and characters literally emerge from their surroundings "like the darkness under the green gives him his pieces one by one"

(*Salvage* 43). Robert Tally suggests that spaces beyond the self were not important in modernism, and in postmodernism our life was dominated by categories of space (35-40). This brings me back to the relational spaces of contemporary southern literature discussed in Chapter Three. As well as the alternative constructions of space and time already mentioned, the contemporary turn epitomised by the two novels is also representative of an associated conception, that of space and self being inseparable.

The woods of Bois Sauvage prompt an alternative discussion of place, one that is incompatible with their conception in previous literature of the U.S. South. There is no suggestion here of a southern sense of place in which the region affects subjectivity. Baker Jr. and Nelson call for a nuanced inseparability of north and south and Ward's woods do not simply depict inseparability, they negate the possibility of separability by connecting the posthumanist subject inextricably with the world around them. This, therefore, goes beyond an understanding of a national whole. There is neither a southern sense of place nor an American sense of place on display. Instead, it is a posthumanist perception of place, one where connectivity with everything is a fact of existence. Smith and Cohn call for a need to avoid the fetishisation of the nation state and Ward's ecologies represent this. Her ecologies are not a merging of north and south but a more ubiquitous connectivity, even inseparability, one Leonie experiences as:

> The world outside the car is a green, shaky blur, the color of Michael's eyes, of the trees bursting to life in spring. The memory that eased me up out of the dark, the memory of jumping from that cliff, is a buzzing green, but there is none of that inside me. Just some water oak limbs, dry and mossy, burned to ash, smoldering. (*Sing* 194)

Ward not only identifies her protagonist with the landscape, she also writes the two as inseparable. Human and other-than-human are drawn as a part of each other and as such the subject and object become inseparable. If figures on the margins are representations

of social upheaval, then the acceptance of marginality as a resistance to total exclusion makes these representations those of posthuman connectivity. The woods of Bois Sauvage are a shift from exceptionalism to coexistence, one that informs the region as well as its inhabitants.

Chapter Five - Storms

Weather not only shapes the Gulf coastline but also the lives of the region's inhabitants in palpable and often life-changing ways. Just as the Mississippi woodlands provide a natural point of connectivity and therefore comparison between ecologies of the contemporary U.S. South and those of its literary predecessors, so too do the meteorological phenomena of the region. In *Salvage the Bones* and *Long Division* both Ward and Laymon feature the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, a category five tropical cyclone that struck the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, causing an estimated 1800 deaths and $100 billion of property damage. Ward in particular, makes Katrina the axis around which her story revolves. Just as tropical storms, and the human cost they leave behind, must be accepted as a recurring reality of life in the south-eastern United States, they are also inevitably a recurring participant in the literature of the region. Storms feature significantly in the work of William Faulkner, and in that of two southern born authors who are now recognised as central figures of the Harlem Renaissance – between whom there was little literary love lost – Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston.

The depiction by Ward and Laymon of Hurricane Katrina therefore represents a continuity with regional authors of the past, serving as a form of literary overlayering, alongside the ecologic overlayering that occurs within the novels themselves. This allows for another comparison of how the contemporary U.S. South portrays itself against the depictions of its predecessors. In both *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *The Wild Palms [If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem]* (1939), Faulkner places the devastating effects of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 front and centre of the narrative. In doing so, he recounts what was in fact a series of storms from 1926 to 1928 that led to extreme flooding of the region, destroying the lives and livelihoods of its inhabitants, and drawing criticism of both northern environmental practices and the federal response that

followed (Parrish, “As I Lay Dying” 74-77). In his earlier novel, the Bundren’s extended funeral procession for the family matriarch is delayed and almost derailed by a river swollen from the flood waters, while *The Wild Palms* tells the story of a convict forced to help victims of the flood, and the treacherous river journey with a pregnant woman that ensues. Wright’s “Down by the Riverside” (1938) also takes the Great Flood as its axis, to tell the tale of a family’s evacuation from their flooded farm, while Hurston situates the concluding chapters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), amidst the Okeechobee Hurricane that hit the Florida Everglades in 1928 killing thousands of mainly black migrant workers in its agricultural sector.

Storms are themselves an integral part of, and therefore an actant with an ability to affect, the overlayered southern ecologies. It is no surprise then that the impact upon the region of a material natural force with devastating consequences for the lives of its residents and the ecologies they inhabit continues to play an important role in how authors of the U.S. South choose to depict their space. Although at times differing in their manifestation – with the 1927 Great Flood occurring as a result of a prolonged period of extreme weather compared to the Okeechobee and Gulf Coast hurricanes’ more immediate consequences – they continue to be employed in depictions of the region’s transformation. As I will demonstrate, in contemporary fiction the effect of the storm is no longer centred on the human cost alone, but rather is used to portray a more collective understanding of (post)human existence, one inseparable from the past and the future, and in which human agency is seen as limited in the face of other actants in the assemblage.

Post-Katrina literature was largely concerned with the cultural aftermath of the storm. In “Re-shaping the Narrative: Pulling Focus/Pushing Boundaries in Fictional Representations of Hurricane Katrina” (2014), Glenn Jellenik observes: “the dominant fiction and non-fiction narrative that emerged from early accounts and representations

of Katrina tends to center on issues of class, race, and government response (or lack thereof)" (186). Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* tells the story of a Mississippian Gulf Coast family in the lead-up to, and attempted survival of, Hurricane Katrina's landfall in 2005. When described in such reductive terms, it would be easy to assume that the novel focuses solely on the human cost of the storm and its impact on the lives of the protagonists. Discussing the blurring of categories of objects in *Salvage*, Crownshaw contends:

> Ward's novel gives testimony not just to the socialization (or rather racialization) of natural disaster (which could be to the detriment of environmental concerns), but rather articulates the inextricability of the environmental and the social – an ecology of human and inhuman systems. (168)

Whilst it is certainly true that pre-existing failings are made apparent in the novel, apart from the day immediately following the storm, the novel is not an exploration of Katrina's aftermath, the societal and federal failings that ensued, or the costs of our attempts as humans to control nature. Rather, I would suggest, the blurring of categories in the novel represents a posthumanist understanding of southerners' connection to their ecologies, a posthumanist perception of place. It presents an understanding of the fragility and unpredictability of existence within an assemblage, especially when viewed in relation to previous depictions of storms in southern literature.

In "They're Trying to Wash Us Away" (2010), Anthony Dyer Hoefer argues that *The Wild Palms* and "Down by the Riverside" are "archetypal 'man-against-nature' tales" (543), in which the Great Flood depicts "the ideological underpinnings of the human efforts to control and reshape the landscape" (543). Susan Scott Parrish agrees that Faulkner "understood the role humans played in turning naturally occurring floods into catastrophic events" ("Faulkner" 35). The landscape of *As I Lay Dying* is,

according to Parrish, over-farmed and overexposed leaving it vulnerable to the vagaries of the south-eastern weather. Doctor Peabody's description of the Bundren's land during his rather difficult approach to their house is, according to Parrish, of "a nearly tree-less and over-plowed terrain in which the soil has been subjected to ever more dramatic gullying and a vulnerability to extreme weather events" ("As I Lay Dying" 80-81). Faulkner's landscape once again demonstrates the deforestation of the region discussed in the previous chapter, suggesting that the Great Flood must be considered, in part, a result of the commodification of the region's natural resources. In *As I Lay Dying*, the cultural relevance of the Great Flood is exposed not only through its impact on the region's inhabitants, and the socio-economic failings that reveals, but also through the role society plays in its creation. In fact, the northern plundering of southern resources, coupled with the perceived failings of the federal response, led in the postbellum South to a "reading of this flood as a kind of biological reenactment of the War of Northern Aggression" (Parrish, "As I Lay Dying" 77). This continued sense of the region's mistreatment at the hands of the north[7], was a link to the southern memorialisation that New Southern Studies is attempting to get out from under.

In a more transnational take on the region's literature, Martyn Bone discusses Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He observes that, in its depiction of black men being press-ganged into clearing the old and new bodies from the landscape, the novel depicts the "dystopian experience of living and dying Jim Crow during and after the [Okeechobee] hurricane" (*Where the New World Is* 33). Wright's novella similarly, "redefines the categories of race, class, and gender" (Ford III 417), as well as whether the social conditions that make some people more vulnerable to disaster than others can ever be altered. In Faulkner, Wright, and Hurston, storms and the subsequent flooding

[7] Parrish does however acknowledge southern planters' own complicity in turning swampy lowlands into plantations that were then susceptible to flooding.

represent human-centred environmental catastrophes, ones that are inseparable from the now barren concerns of memorialisation.

In keeping with its many allusions to, and connections with *As I Lay Dying*, Ward's *Salvage the Bones* writes back to Faulkner's novel from the perspective of a black southern rural family. The material substance of their homestead, the Pit, is in its own way over-tilled when its original owner, the family's grandfather Papa Joseph, let:

> the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses . . . let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp. (14)

As with Southern Renascence fiction, here the land is to a large extent commodified. However, this is not simply an investigation of the human-centred tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, either in its aftermath or origins. Instead, *Salvage* provides more of a heightened and extended connection with the world around us, highlighting the fragility of our connection to nature. Other-than-human nature is, in this novel, as much an actant in its assemblage as the human elements, and one with a deal of affect. Rather than the spiritual connection with nature that occupied Romanticism and Transcendentalism, this is the physicality of nature writ large, actants whose effects are clear for all to see.

According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in new materialist thinking, the role of the human is being relocated within a natural environment that has an ability of its own to affect (10), transformations that "compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms" (9). The Pit may be over-exploited, but it is not over-exposed to the elements in the manner of the Bundren's farm. Far from being nearly tree-less through

deforestation, it is surrounded by woods. Yet it remains a gaping wound in the forest, exposed to other actants in its assemblage. Early in the story, Esch, describing the Pit when nobody is there, details it as "empty as the fish tank, dry of water and fish, but filled with rocks and fake coral" (10). It is this fish tank that the land becomes when the hurricane hits:

> [A] lake growing in the yard. It moves under the broken trees like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake. Its head disappears under the house where we stand, its tail wider and wider, like it has eaten something greater than itself, and that great tail stretches out behind it into the woods, toward the Pit. (226)

Despite the cover provided by the trees, the creek that feeds the Pit has caused it to flood, and Papa Joseph's actions of years before are now having an unforeseen impact on the lives of his grandchildren.

This unforeseen impact is once again representative of the complexity of causation noted by Coole and Frost. It is a complexity that has implications for the idea of a southern sense of place that has its own roots in notions of constancy. George B. Handley, in his transnational examination of the historical patterns associated with the region notes, quoting Edouard Glissant, "Landscape, then, 'is not saturated with a single History but effervescent with intermingled histories, spread around, rushing to fuse without destroying or reducing each other'" (43). Although Papa Joseph's actions are indicative of intra-regional inequality rather than transnational concerns, the Batistes' history, their connection to the land, is similarly complicated by connectivity. The effect of Papa Joseph's actions, whilst negligible beyond small financial gain in his present, is both tangible and catastrophic for his descendants. Land ownership, one of the foundations of the stability within a Renascence sense of place, eventually brings instability and, at least temporarily, rootlessness to the Batistes. Gupta and Ferguson propose that "[p]hysical location and physical territory, for so long the *only* grid on

which cultural difference could be mapped, need to be replaced by multiple grids that enable us to see that connection and contiguity" (20), and I would argue that in Ward's depiction of Hurricane Katrina, some of those grids must be considered temporal as well as geographical. It is not a southern sense of place on display here, but rather a posthumanist perception of place in which connectivity is inescapable even when detrimental.

In addition to Katrina demonstrating the impracticability of foreseeing cause and effect, the hurricane in *Salvage* highlights the fragility of our coexistence with other-than-human nature. In the rural U.S. South, "[t]he clay has turned to dust for want of rain" (188), yet the "shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there" (15). The rain forming in the Gulf is essential to the agrarian economy, but it can, and in this instance does, also bring destruction. The fragility of coexistence, observed in *Long Division*'s fissures in Chapter Three, extends to more than the posthumanist subjects' interaction with each other. The U.S. South's coexistence, as with that of the posthumanist subject, is delicate and at persistent risk from actants in its wider assemblage. The depiction of Hurricane Katrina demonstrates a turn away from both agrarian idealism and Sarah Petrides's suggestion that "the wooded and tilled countryside is a spiritual stronghold" (13) against the secular world. Rather than the sanctifying of the rural against the spread of urban modernity, *Salvage* depicts the violence of nature and the constant fear of death: "It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into your eyes and bids them shut" (230). This is of course also true of Faulkner, Hurston, and Wright, whose storms similarly bring death and destruction, but here the devastation is not solely societal or indeed human-centred. China, Skeetah's prized fighting dog, is also exposed to the mercy of the storm, eventually disappearing "through the swirling water straight as a water moccasin into

the whipping, fallen woods in the distance" (236). She not only falls victim to the storm but appears to be swallowed by the surrounding woods.

As well as life, Katrina reclaims the man-made elements of the southern ecology. When the children attempt to visit neighbouring St. Catherine after the storm has passed, "the road has disappeared in patches, and it is only the bent bayou grass rimming the sunken asphalt that gives us any idea that we are not driving into the water" (249). The hurricane creates a new terrain, albeit a "smashed landscape" (242), in which the natural and constructed world are merged. It creates a new layer caused not by time or human involvement, but by the environment itself, leaving Esch to observe: "suddenly there is a great split between now and then, and I wonder where the world where that day happened has gone, because we are not in it" (251). Although at times reminiscent of sublimity: "there is only the sound of the wind like a snake big enough to swallow the world sliding against mountains" (219), Katrina remains at all times an actualised rather than removed danger. It is an other-than-human element with a powerful ability to affect, and in doing so it literally transforms the region. In "Reading Hurricane Katrina" (2014), Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik claim that Ward's novel highlights "the need to better comprehend the ways our nation failed to provide for its citizens in their time of need" (9). However, although *Salvage* undoubtedly critiques existing socio-economic inequalities of the region that the governmental response to Katrina made clear, as previously argued, the timeline of the novel conspicuously stops before the lack of response becomes apparent. As such, *Salvage the Bones* is a story about Katrina told from the perspective of a poverty-stricken black family, not a story about the effects of Katrina on that section of society. Christopher Clark notes that "[t]he Batistes have been repressed into the wilderness where their family and home . . . are left to become alienated and unrecognizable" (347), and I

would suggest that one of Katrina's roles in the narrative is to provide a depiction of our existence alongside nature and the fragility of assemblage existence.

One seemingly undeniably human-centred element of the novel, Esch's pregnancy, also raises comparisons with Wright and Faulkner, with both "Down by the Riverside" and *The Wild Palms* featuring pregnant women at the centre of their stories. Hoefer notes that for the protagonists of each, "their efforts are both initiated by attempts to rescue pregnant women nearing childbirth from the flood waters" (539). Like Esch, *As I Lay Dying*'s Dewey Dell is also pregnant and unable to tell anyone. Whilst Faulkner's unnamed pregnant woman in *The Wild Palms* eventually gives birth to a healthy baby boy, Wright's Lulu is not so lucky and both mother and baby die in childbirth, leading Ford III to suggest: "Her presence as a woman in labor shows us how the relief camps put black men in subordinate positions by denying them the power to take care of their families" (418). However, although Ward places a pregnant teenage Esch squarely at *Salvage*'s centre, rather than purely a metaphorical connection to the troubled socio-economic underbelly of the nation, her manifest connection to China, an other-than-human mother, is also significant. Even before Esch is revealed to be pregnant, the two are entwined in the narrative.

Christopher Lloyd observes that in Ward's novel:

> Corporeal processes that distort the boundaries between interiority/exteriority, birth/death, and containment/exposure are presented here across species lines, suggesting the interconnections between humans and animals and the precariousness of ontology. (252)

From the opening chapter, which details China's labour, the human mother-to-be and canine new mother are juxtaposed and bound by references to both Medea and Esch's own Mama. The chapter alternates between sections foregrounding Esch's story and China's birthing process. Mama's last labour is introduced with: "Junior came out

purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower" (2). Esch describes China's delivery similarly: "At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming" (4). In *Salvage*, birth whether human or other-than-human is a part of the same assemblage. For Esch, Medea, inextricably and terribly connected to motherhood, "has magic, could bend the natural to the unnatural" (38). She represents the strength of femaleness. Medea also connects China and Esch, who compares China to Medea after the former has just killed one of her puppies: "China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: Is this what motherhood is?" (130). The assemblage of the contemporary U.S. South is populated with the ghosts of Greek mythology creating another heterochronia. Esch and China's condition is both universal and perennial. Coole and Frost state that "the difference between humans and animals, or even between sentient and non-sentient matter, is a question of degree more than of kind" (21), and this can be seen in the connection between Esch and China, who exist in connectivity within their assemblage. It is an interrelation understood by Skeetah, who notes: "some people understand that between man and dog is a relationship . . . Equal." (29). Human and other-than-human are both influential actants in their assemblage, an association demonstrated by Esch's and China's reaction to motherhood.

It is in the storm itself however, and the fight for survival that ensues, that the difference by degree becomes truly apparent. In their attempt to escape the flood caused by the hurricane, both Daddy and Skeetah abandon their charges to the water. Although this would appear to be an instance of southern literature once again provoking "the uncanny presence of disposable bodies" (Yaeger 67), the throw-away bodies on which Patricia Yaeger suggests the foundation of southern societies are built, this scene represents more than simply black bodies or female bodies as disposable. Although the manner of their respective abandonments differs, with Daddy pushing Esch on finding out that she is pregnant, while Skeetah releases China from his own protective grasp in

order to give her a chance of survival, both release their charges to the demands of the storm. All actants in the assemblage are left to fight for their own survival in the face of another destructive actant. Ultimately, it is Skeetah who is forced into making a choice between his sister and his dog, a choice that his previous actions have suggested would be far from clear:

> China is a white head, spinning away in the relentless water, barking, and Skeetah is looking from her to me, screaming . . . and Skeetah is pushing me through the window, his hand a leash loop wrapped too tightly around my arm, his other hand treading, and he is calling, China, come China, but she is nowhere. (235)

Rather than demonstrating the exceptionality of the human, I would argue that this instead demonstrates elements having to work together for survival within an assemblage. Lloyd notes that in the novel "[n]atural disaster, animal wounds, and human precariousness all conjoin and align – not homogenously, but relatedly" (253), and I would suggest that "relatedly" is the key word when examining *Salvage*. Esch does not survive because she is exceptional, but because another actant is willing to help her. This can be seen as a metaphorical link to the U.S. South, itself no longer exceptional but still distinct as a region, a region that will continue to fight for its own heterogeneity while recognising the need to accept its own internal divisions and a more nuanced view of itself. It is a link to a U.S. South that retains the need for a New Southern Studies.

Although I contend that the United States' socio-economic underbelly is not the central axis of *Salvage* in the manner of Wright or Hurston's texts, Ward's novel does expose some class discrepancies in its dealing with the practicability of evacuation before the storm. Bignall and Braidotti note that "not all humans are equally placed to respond effectively to the social and economic impacts of the inhuman earth-forces of

natural disaster" (3), and this is certainly true of Bois Sauvage's inhabitants. In contrast to the Batistes, the white couple in the raided farmhouse are able not only to leave before the hurricane hits, but also to secure their property against the storm. For the Batistes, "[t]here is always glass showing after we nail the boards, an eye's worth or a hand's worth, no matter how we switch the wooden pieces and shuffle" (187-88). However, at the evacuated farmhouse: "The boards of the house are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids" (208). Similarly, for the Batistes no suggestion of leaving is offered or raised at any point of the narrative. Their only real option is to prepare for the storm and its aftermath. As the weatherwoman asserts on Daddy's crackling television "[p]reparation…key" (136). Ford III, echoing Bignall and Braidotti, contends, "Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that New Orleans was no exception to the principle that liberal societies make some people more vulnerable to natural disaster than others through no fault of their own" (410), and the coalescing of Katrina with the urban U.S. South notwithstanding, there is no doubt that *Salvage*'s underprivileged remain at greater risk than their more affluent neighbours.

It is here, that the novel demonstrates the significance of employing a critical materialist perspective, and the notion that our lives are not exclusively cultural. Daniel Spoth, in his own investigation into the pertinence of the southern sense of place in twentieth-century media, argues: "Addressing disasters in written or visual media requires us to come to terms with rapid and radical alterations of the physical and cultural landscape of a place, and with the human actions, histories, and failures that have preceded it" (146). In *Salvage the Bones,* Ward does provide a commentary on the historical factors that exacerbated the radical breaks Katrina engendered. However, avoidance of criticism for the societal response to the disaster, or even an examination

of the urban response compared to the rural, is important to an understanding of the novel's depiction of ecologies. In fact, the brief examination of the hurricane's aftermath in the final chapter depicts connectivity rather than division. Evacuation may have been possible for some, but there can be no avoidance of the destruction brought by the hurricane. The "same oyster-lined bay that came in and swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine, and vomited it out in pieces" (252). Additionally:

> Narrow streets where dentists' offices were, where restaurants that served catfish and hush puppies were, where veterinarians' offices were, where small dim bookstores and the kinds of antiques stores that I would never dream of walking into for fear of breaking something have been savaged. (252)

The novel demonstrates the impossibility of total escape, and it is an impossibility that connects not only the privileged and underprivileged within American society, but also humans, other-than-humans, and abiotic matter. Throughout the novel, the reader is alerted to constant preparations undertaken to reduce the impact of the storm, and these preparations highlight a connection to, and reliance upon, the materiality surrounding us. From the opening of the novel, Esch's father is preparing: "If one of Daddy's drinking buddies had asked what he's doing tonight, he would've told them he's fixing up for the hurricane" (4). He is building "piles . . . like birds' nests all over the yard for the hurricane" (88). And this is a process that he continues throughout the lead-up to the storm, even after losing a finger in an accident. Randall tells Skeetah: "He wants us to get the house ready for the hurricane" (181), a process that is then reduced to a series of one-line sentences, beginning with "[*c*]*over the windows*" (187).

Although Daddy's ability to adequately prepare is contrasted with that of those living in the farmhouse, it is also conflated with the actions of other-than-humans. Non-domesticated animals can and do leave before the impending storm. They sense it and "[b]efore a hurricane, the animals that can, leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and

everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible" (45). Deep in the woods, Esch notes: "There are no chattering squirrels, no haunted rabbits, no wading turtles in the woods. I don't know where they have gone but there are none here" (206-07). However, as with the human inhabitants of Bois Sauvage, not all other-than-humans are able to evacuate: "the small pause on their branches . . . catch that coming storm air that would smell like salt to them, like salt and clean burning fire, and they prepare like us" (215). The impossibility of escape is not simply cultural, it is a fact of assemblage existence in which some actants have more ability to affect than others. Furthermore, humans and other-than-humans are similarly fused as they await the storm. Daddy, like the animals, can feel the impending storm which "[m]akes my bones hurt" (7), and other-than-humans are seen to be employed in the same constant preparation as is Daddy. Chickens "have made their own plans for the storm; they have packed their eggs away, hidden them well" (198). As with the Batistes, they have used the abiotic matter of human detritus in order to make these preparations, hiding eggs "in the elbows of the dump truck's engine, between the bottom of an old stinking refrigerator and the earth" (199).

Yet, ultimately, all preparations are rendered pointless in the face of Katrina's power. In Bois Sauvage, "every house had faced the hurricane, and every house had lost" (242). The houses, themselves material actants in the local assemblage, have also had their agency reduced by the storm. Their own vitality, their ability to create myriad emotions in their human co-actants is, at least temporarily, gone, along with some measure of the physical benefit they at times provided. Similarly, in the more affluent St Catherine, "all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy, piled in his truck, for gas or chips or bait on our swimming days, are gone" (252-53). In between, "the trees I had known, the oaks in the bend, the stand of pines on the long stretch, magnolia

at the four-way, were all broken, all crumbled" (241-42). Individual agency, whether human, other-than-human, or abiotic matter is limited when other actants have an uncontrollable ability to affect. Here, the novel circles back to mythology and Medea. Esch observes: "In ancient Greece, for all her heroes, for Medea and her mutilated brother and her devastated father, water meant death" (216). However, in *Salvage* the posthumanist subject's inability to control their own destiny is due to the irresistible power of the natural forces they are connected to rather than any transcendental ones.

It is not just through its connection to mythology and Southern Renascence fiction that *Salvage* deploys overlayering. The past, present, and future are overlayered through the manifold storms the Batiste family have endured as well as the hope for the future that they envisage. Hurricane Katrina is far from the first storm the Batistes have lived through. Even the children have grown accustomed to the perilous nature of Gulf Coast existence, with Esch observing: "It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here" (4). Traditionally, there is a sense of storms providing a cleansing of the old to leave space for renewal and regeneration, the most obvious example being the biblical flood described in Genesis. However, in *Salvage*, rather than regeneration there is a sense of co-generation. Previous storms are layered on top of each other to demonstrate familial connectivity, the past and the present connected through their ecologies. Esch describes: "The first hurricane that I remember happened when I was eight . . . Mama let me kneel next to the chair she'd dragged next to the window. Even then, our boards were mismatched, and there were gaps we could peer out of" (217). Hurricane Elaine is layered over the present.

Similarly, Esch recalls:

> During Elaine, Randall and Daddy had slept. Skeetah had sat on the side of Mama, opposite me, and she'd told us about the big storm when she

was little, the legend: Camille. She said Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's roof was ripped off the house. (218)

Camille is layered over both Elaine and Katrina, and generations are similarly connected. During Elaine, Mama's "stomach was big with Junior" (217), and she had "talked back to Elaine. Talked over the storm. Pulled us in the midst of it, kept us safe" (219). Although Esch raises the ongoing pain of loss here, she is connected to her mother through the experience of being pregnant during a hurricane. David Matless, in his reflection on how the past, present, and future meet through questions of inheritance, contends: "Erosion not only marks loss, but may signal recovery, ancient pasts exposed for present resonances" (368). Rather than purely a reflection on the loss of her mother – although this is a loss felt deeply by the whole family throughout the novel – for Esch, the past resonates with the present during the storm. It is not only China with whom Esch exists in assemblage through motherhood but also her own past. The story for the Batistes is one of connectivity across their overlayered ecologies.

The storm does not just demonstrate the past layered over the present, it also layers the future over the present, and here the socio-economic aspect is impossible to ignore. China's puppies, her tangible connection to Esch, are more than just the difference by degree previously discussed. They also represent a hope for a better future. The puppies, as other-than-humans, represent more than simply a commodity in the novel. To Skeetah and the Batistes they are an opportunity. Skeetah understands the value of the dogs, telling Esch when they are becoming sick: "I'm saving them puppies. China's strong and old enough to where the parvo won't kill her . . . They're money" (60). But more than this, he understands their value in terms of changing the Batistes' circumstances. They are not a quick financial fix, one the family desperately needs, but rather a chance at a better future. Explaining his reason for fighting China, Skeetah tells Randall:

> If my dogs live, I can make eight hundred dollars off them. *Eight hundred dollars*. Do you know what we can do with eight hundred dollars? You won't need to beg Daddy for the rest of the money for basketball camp week after week, and you won't have to stress over playing good enough in the summer league to get one of those scholarships for it either. I know you want to go, just like you know Daddy don't have it. (74)

However, just as the overlayered ecologies show the impossibility of physical escape in the past and present, they also indicate the improbability of situational escape in the future. Although, as previously noted, the puppies die one by one in the build up to the storm, it is Katrina that finally ends the life of the remaining puppies: "flying out of the bucket, their eyes open for the first time to slits and, I swear, judging me as they hit" (234), and with it the family's hope of a better future. Their future inability to escape their circumstance is layered on top of their present.

In addition to this, throughout his preparations, Daddy sees opportunities to make money after the storm, opportunities that connect human, other-than-human, and the material world. Daddy, trying to repair his dump truck, states: "I got to get this fixed today. Now. They going to be money to be made after this storm come through by a man with a dump truck" (90). Although these opportunities are largely taken away in the build up to the storm when Daddy loses a finger in an accident, the storm once again ultimately removes all hope, bringing human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter together through its destructive power: "The hurricane laughed. A tree, plucked from its branches, hopped across the yard and landed against Daddy's truck with a crunch, stopped short like it had won a game of hopscotch without stepping out of the lines" (238). The future that Katrina layers over the past and present for the Batistes is once again one of stasis not regeneration. The social conditions within which the Batistes live are created for them but not beneficial to them. As such, these conditions not only affect

their individuality (as part of an assemblage in which they have little power to affect), but also their ability to effect advantageous change. For the Batistes, and the section of southern society they depict, time stands still in a modern, shrinking world.

Although the novel would appear to suggest a future lacking hope for the residents of Bois Sauvage, it does offer some hope for the region through its connection with storms of the past. When connecting Katrina with Camille, Esch observes that desegregation of the public schools happened as a direct result of the earlier storm, as:

> Ms. Dedeaux told us once that the elementary school used to be the black school for the district before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane, when people were too tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the law outlawing segregation. (140)

Although not exactly a cleansing or regeneration, Camille has still brought the possibility of change. Here, the novel once again overlayers Southern Renascence fiction in its description of finding and burying the dead. Whereas, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Down by the Riverside" this becomes "the sociospatial practice of white southern power, the grimly familiar experience of living and dying Jim Crow" (Bone, *Where the New World Is* 39), there is no repetition of this in the Camille passage or in the aftermath of Katrina described in the novel. In fact, the devastation depicted is largely material: "there is nothing here but broken bottles, smashed signs, splintered wood, so much garbage" (254). Clark suggests: "The open-ended conclusion to *Salvage the Bones* renders this new space as clearly marked by its origins, yet open to new possibilities" (356). Although the clean-up itself is absent from the text, the black characters are the victims of and spectators to the devastation, not the conscripted labour of the past. Whilst the 1927 flood came to be described by white southerners against a

Civil War backdrop: "It is not the first time the south has suffered and been penalized for no offence it committed and because of no fault of its own" (*The Commercial Appeal*[8] qtd. in Parrish, "Faulkner" 43), there is no sense here of a mythologising of the region or sentimentality over the cause of its suffering. Just as there is a lack of exceptionality surrounding the human characters on display in *Salvage the Bones*, there is a similar lack of the regional exceptionalism associated with "The South."

Unlike *Salvage the Bones*, which places Hurricane Katrina firmly at the centre of its events, the storm does not directly feature in Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*. However, Katrina is far from absent from the story, existing as a lingering presence from the past that both haunts and shapes the present and the future. Although its employment as a historical event, means that there is more of the cultural significance of the storm evident in *Long Division*, it also helps to form the overlayered ecologies evident in the novel. The Citoyen of 2013 who opens the novel, lives in Jackson, Mississippi, a city less affected physically by Hurricane Katrina due to its distance from the coast. However, City and his fellow black school friend LaVander are aligned with the storm from the opening pages of the novel when:

> LaVander Peeler and I tied at the state contest, the camera showed us walking off stage in slow motion . . . In the backdrop of us walking were old images of folks in New Orleans, knee deep in toxic water. Those pictures shifted to shots of Trayvon Martin in a loose football uniform, then oil off the coast drowning ignorant ducks. Then they finally replayed that footage of James Anderson being run over by those white boys over off Ellis Avenue. The last shots were black-and-whites of dusty-looking teenagers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee holding up picket signs that said 'Freedom Schools Now' and 'Black is not a vice. Nor is segregation a virtue.' (9)

[8] *The Commercial Appeal* was the newspaper of Memphis, Tennessee.

Historic images of the region are layered over the present, and the first of these depicts Hurricane Katrina.

There is no doubt that here the storm is given a racial connotation. The images that it is juxtaposed with position Katrina as a largely black tragedy. Further to this, the boys' race inherently connects them with the hurricane in the eyes of other characters. Despite their physical distance from the full scale of the devastation, they are told at the subsequent national competition: "We've heard so much about you two and your ordeal with Hurricane Katrina" (30). Such racial equating is exacerbated by the description of their fellow competitors, white twins from Louisiana, who: "had 'Katrina's Finest' airbrushed in brown block letters on the back of these tight dirty sweatshirts" (34). The twins wear their experience of the storm as a badge of honour, suggesting that they have not had to suffer the long-term effects of other communities despite their proximity to the storm. Katrina lies like a shadow over the opening pages of the novel, and through its presence, Laymon is more overtly critical of the disparity of its effects than seen in *Salvage*.

However, in the shifting time-scapes of *Long Division*'s narrative, Katrina does not just represent the past layered over the present, it also represents the future layered over and affecting events in both the present and the past. Shalayah, in 1985, is noticeably concerned with future events, directly stating "I'm worried about the future, City" (54). She also asks City: "what if there's this huge flood that kills people? Or if the water in the Gulf turn black?" (54). Although Shalayah has travelled to 2013, she has explicitly avoided any interaction whilst there, "peeking out of those woods" (68) and telling City "don't say a word to anyone" (61). Shalayah instead seems to make a very accurate prediction of future events. Karen Barad in her description of the changing nature of time, asserts that "[t]ime is diffracted, imploded/exploded in on itself: each moment made up of a superposition, a combination, of all moments" ("No

Small Matter" G112). Barad equates this with "a shift in the nature of being" ("No Small Matter" G112). Both Shalayah and City are indicative of such a shift, and the posthumanist subject's experience as an existence across time, through their own assemblage with the past and the future. This is an existence which City inadvertently articulates when he tells Shalayah: "You wonder what the future has to do with you if all these new things are happening" (55). Even knowledge of the future is not enough to permit agency.

One of the features of *Long Division* is that the different years contain almost interchangeable obstacles. In her interview with Kiese Laymon, Meghan Brown suggests that "conflicts in the novel – even though they take place in different years – could have been put in any of the three settings, and they would still have been realistic" (193), and though Katrina can only exist as a known entity in the 2013 Melahatchie, its presence raises similar concerns for the 1985 City as his 2013 counterpart. When Baize is introduced at her spelling bee, her teacher informs the audience: "Baize lost her parents and brother in Katrina eight years ago" (186). In doing so, she effectively defines Baize by the storm, and so by extension also her father, 1985 City, who is there to witness it. Despite being from a time before Hurricane Katrina, 1985 City is as defined by it in the eyes of white adults as his counterpart in 2013.

In his examination of distributed agency and our inability to effect positive change on an already dying planet, Bruno Latour proposes: "For all agents, acting means having their existence, their subsistence, come *from the future to the present*; they act as long as they run the risk of bridging the gap of existence – or else they disappear altogether" (12). Latour contends that traditional scientific views ignore the importance of the consequent, suggesting that it is no more than the result of its predecessor, causing the agency of successive events to disappear. Although he admits his suggestion that "[i]n the real world time flows from the future to the present" (13) is

speculative, it is useful in understanding a posthumanist perception of place which rejects the constancy previously associated with place in the U.S. South. The post-Katrina rural U.S. South is described by 2013 City as "only a bus ride away, but it felt like a time warp. It always felt like it was behind whatever time we were up in Jackson, but after Hurricane Katrina, it's like time went fast in reverse instead of just slowing down" (83). In *Long Division*, the overlayering of the hurricane on the southern landscape demonstrates the future directly affecting the past. Connectivity runs between the distinct but inseparable layers.

Whilst the content of *Long Division* does not match the form, it is certainly informed by it. Notably, despite its overlayered time-scapes, the novel begins and ends in its own present. Although the story, through its intertextual book, is largely told in the past and the alternative future of the timeline this creates, the story does ultimately remain fixed in its original present. In doing so, it subverts both southern studies' refusal to look forwards and American Studies' refusal to look backwards. This is a novel willing to challenge all preconceived ideas about how the region should be viewed. The novel ends – or rather refuses to end – without a closing full stop. The future becomes as much a part of this conception of the region as any alternative conceptions suggested by the narrative.

Long Division also provides a posthumanist twist on the techniques of Southern Renascence fiction. In both *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Faulkner tells one story from four different perspectives. Both novels are effectively a polyphonic recounting of their story. Although in some ways Laymon employs the same technique, a retelling of the story from multiple perspectives, his alternative versions are affected by events in the past and in the future rather than differing points of view. In doing so. they undermine any sense of constancy both within the story and within the region.

Alongside the full stop, ellipses play an important role in the novel. They not only feature in the narrative itself, but are also employed by Laymon at the start, end, and in between chapters. Haddad asserts: "*Long Division*'s non-linearity, emphasized through the recurring symbol of ellipses and its formal celebration of 'backwardness' . . . particularly inflected through the lens of race and sexuality, provides the binaries by which modernity defines 'progress'" (51-52). However, in one of many conversations debating their purpose, Baize asserts: "The ellipsis always knows something more came before it and something more is coming after it" (245). In doing so, she manages to succinctly define its use for what Benedict Anderson might term "a complex gloss on the word 'meanwhile'" (25). More importantly, she also manages to articulate a concept essential to an understanding of both the posthumanist subject and New Southern Studies, that the present exists in assemblage with both the past and the future.

Although the novel's employment of Hurricane Katrina is in many ways more of a social commentary than in Ward's novel, its presence provides some interesting contrasts with *Salvage the Bones*. Not least of these is its representation of the impossibility of escape. Unlike the Batistes, and the other-than-human actants in their assemblage, the City and Shalaya of the 1985 timeline do evacuate their home in rural Mississippi, taking their daughter Baize with them. However, having left, they return to Melahatchie, leaving Baize with her grandparents in Jackson, and are killed by the hurricane. Baize explains: "everyone knew that the storm was coming . . . they dropped me off, and went back because…shit, I don't know why they went back. Never made much sense to me" (172-73), begging the question, why do they return? Although it could obviously be argued that this is no more than a plot device that allows Baize to survive the hurricane while putting City and Shalayah in a place to meet their end, I would suggest that this is too simplistic an explanation. Rather, in placing the possibility and impossibility of escape side-by-side, *Long Division* instead demonstrates the

unfeasibility of genuine human agency – the kind of clearly distinguishable individual agency that Hayles associates with the liberal humanist subject – a complex thread that runs throughout the novel. Assemblages reduce the effectiveness of any actant's intention to directly affect an outcome, with Deborah Bird Rose observing "[o]ther things also do wonderful and clever things; we are not a unique outlier but rather are part of various continua" (G55). Exceptionality, in all its forms, is once again questioned.

As previously noted, when we are first introduced to Shalayah, she is obsessed with changing the future, telling City: "I could love you if you helped me change the future dot-dot-dot in a special way" (21). And, as adults, City and Shalayah have the opportunity to evacuate and therefore physically alter their family's future but are ultimately unable to. They "got swallowed up by the water, I think. Or the wind" (173). The younger City, having met his future in the form of Baize, his daughter, is desperate not to change the past, wanting to "beg Shalayah Crump to save Baize's life and come back to 1985 with me" (243). Shalayah, however, as noted in my discussion of revenants in Chapter Three, appears to have reached an understanding that the only way to truly affect the future is by changing the past, explaining to City:

> I believed Evan when he told me he knew where I was in the future. I believed him when he told me he could tell me who my parents are. I wanted to know what happens to them and me on the other end. I know you hate me for this City, but I really want to change the future. (228)

This directly causes Baize to disappear, a fate Shalayah appears willing to accept. Clearly, the novel demonstrates no straight lines of cause and effect, with each character and even each version of the same character unable to claim any sense of distinguishable agency, any ability to affect in the way that they would want. Yet, only Baize appears ready to both realise and accept this, telling City: "We took care of each

other today, like a father and daughter goon squad are supposed to . . . I knew y'all wouldn't disappear forever" (249). She therefore represents the clearest version of the posthumanist subject in the novel, one who understands that that her ability to affect is not solely her own. Baize acts in keeping with a knowledge of distributed agency. In *Long Division*, the impossibility of escape is not socio-economic but instead connected to assemblage existence. It is an impossibility of directable affect for the individual.

Baize also throws up an interesting contrast to *Salvage* in *Long Division*'s connection to previous southern narratives. While the depiction of the teenage Esch invites comparison to Wright and Faulkner through a representation of motherhood, the teenage Baize is, in effect, the baby who survives and suffers the loss of her parents. Rather than a pregnant teenager she is an orphaned teenager, and as with *Salvage*, hers is less of a connection to the nation's troubled socio-economic underbelly than it is to her habitat. Baize demonstrates the delicate and shifting nature of assemblages through familial relations. In connecting with her parents, she breaks the connection that created her. Hers is not simply an ecology where black men are denied the power to take care of their families in the manner of Wright's "Down by the Riverside," but rather that of a U.S. South in transformation where race is not the sole determinant of fragility. It is a U.S. South where posthumanist existence means that all life is ultimately at the mercy of their various ecologies. Katrina does not just create new physical landscapes for the region, it also creates new familial ones. It is a new U.S. South that is in the process of transformation in multitudinous ways.

Another way in which *Long Division* differs from *Salvage the Bones* in its exploration of Hurricane Katrina is in its explicit depiction as a human-influenced environmental disaster. In the passage previously discussed, in which City and LaVander leave the stage accompanied by a montage of images, one image that stands out from the rest is: "oil off the coast drowning ignorant ducks" (9). This is also a

historic image, but one with more than just racial connotations. At the later "Can You Use That Word In A Sentence" contest, the hurricane is once again associated with "all that oil y'all had to deal with on the coast" (30). The oil in question is the Deepwater Horizon spill, the largest marine oil spill in history, that occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, affecting waters off the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, as well as over one thousand miles of southern coastline.

Unlike *Salvage*, which focuses on the pervading connectivity of assemblages, by instead placing the storm in allusive proximity to an unmistakably human-caused environmental disaster, *Long Division* conflates Katrina with the Deepwater Horizon spill suggesting a human role in such disasters. This clearly represents a more anthropogenic reading of its ecologies than Ward's novel. In "Viscous Porosity" (2008), Nancy Tuana asserts that "[w]e cannot sift through and separate what is 'natural' from what is 'human-induced'" (193). By connecting Katrina with other environmental disasters, *Long Division* is, however obliquely, intimating a human connection in the creation of the disaster. Although this is not a suggestion that mankind directly caused the storm, it is another indication of our inability to predict cause and effect. Tuana's is very much a grouped theory of agency, in the manner of Jane Bennett's distributive agency, in which collectivity produces unforeseen results. In *Long Division*, rather than exceptionality, this is human living with other-than-human nature (and its aftermath), existing alongside and dealing with the outcomes. From a new materialist perspective of assemblages, nothing can be isolated logically from its surroundings. Just as Katrina creates a new physical landscape in *Salvage*, so too Deepwater Horizon creates one in *Long Division*: "When you come out here, the water, it's still crazy black in some places from all that oil" (220). This is a permanently altered ecology overlayered from the past, one that highlights the necessity for the posthumanist subject to be aware of its actions within its assemblage existence.

If the impossibility of logical isolation highlights the impossibility of known cause and effect, then one instance of this already discussed, Baize's eventual disappearance, carries another relation to Hurricane Katrina. Disappearance is both significant and notable throughout the novel. Baize's parents disappear as a result of Katrina, as does her brother: "He disappeared, too" (173). Baize herself disappears at the end of the novel in front of City's eyes: "I turned back toward the hole in the ground. *Long Division* was in the bottom of the hole, but Baize Shephard was gone. Forever. I made my daughter disappear" (249). Talking to his grandmother, Mama Lara, City observes that "people make people disappear" (260), and in doing so gives voice to one of *Long Division*'s main themes. Here, disappearance can be equated to invisibility, specifically black invisibility. Brown asserts: "Hurricane Katrina is figured as an extension of the same historical oppression and invisibility that haunted 1964's Freedom Summer" (182). While never expanding upon this connection, she does allude to the racial invisibility that has haunted the United States from long before Ralph Ellison's voicing of it with the words: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). I would suggest that this connection occurs through disappearance.

The Freedom Summer referenced by Brown, appears largely in the novel in the form of the house in the Melahatchie woods that in 1964 is identified as a Freedom School, a place inherently connected to the combatting of black invisibility. In a note to the teachers, the future students are described as: "all of them will have knowledge far beyond their years. This knowledge is the knowledge of how to survive in a society that is out to destroy you" (214). It is in this Freedom School that another of the novel's disappearances takes place. Both City and Shalayah's grandfathers disappear from the school at the hands of the Klan: "They disappeared 21 years ago in 1964 in this place we called the Shephard house" (51). This site of proposed improvement becomes yet

another site of black invisibility. However, Baize is determined to maintain visibility for the victims of the hurricane. Her songs are about Katrina, "Storm Rhyme" one through ten, in which "Katrina was hummin / and my folks got to runnin. / Ears open for God but she / ain't telling them nothin" (74). Baize embraces the anxiety of the posthumanist subject discussed in Chapter Three and gives it a voice. She is the new U.S. South writing its own story, and it is one that rejects Blanco's "residual personhood" and insists upon visibility for the victims of Katrina.

Although Hurricane Katrina is not a part of the southern landscape, it does form part of the overlayered ecologies of the region, one that is a recurring and interconnected reality for its inhabitants. In *Long Division*, City calls his own story the saddest in Mississippi's history, adding: "it's really hard to have the saddest story in the history of a state like Mississippi" (22). While I would suggest that his is in reality far from the saddest story Mississippi has to offer, it is a heterochronic one reflecting his status as a posthumanist subject. A story that, as with the Batistes of *Salvage the Bones* connects with both the past and the future through the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The depiction of storms discussed in this chapter are significant to an understanding of the posthumanist sensibilities that the novels display. The fragility and unpredictability of existence within an assemblage is clear to see and informative to an acceptance of a posthumanist perception of place. The posthumanist subject's connection with the land in contemporary southern literature is not indicative of identity but rather an inherent component of existence.

Chapter Six - Tilth

Not all novels from the contemporary U.S. South have a contemporary setting. In the following two chapters I will turn my attention to the work of Hillary Jordan and Ron Rash, to examine novels written by contemporary authors that have historical settings. In doing so, I will highlight the similarities and differences that occur between contemporary and historically set novels. With each of the novels once again demonstrating a strong connection to the ground it inhabits, my aim is to determine whether the same posthumanist perceptions are on display in narratives that depict the region before its current sense of transformation. Is the posthumanist subject similarly portrayed by authors when not imagining new souths, or are Renascence sensibilities, true to the textual setting, and therefore the liberal humanist subject, at the fore?

If ownership of the land is not a defining factor in Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon's work, it undeniably is in Hillary Jordan's *Mudbound* (2008) and Ron Rash's *Serena* (2008). In many ways, this represents a throwback to the Southern Renascence sense of the land discussed in Chapter Four, one founded in a historical southern understanding observed by Richard Gray in which "the real test of status in colonial Virginia remained always the extent of land owned" (11). However, the contrasting pockets of southern ecologies on show in these two novels are certainly no rural idylls. As with Ward's novels, the other-than-human nature on display is hostile and made more so by human interference with it. As such, the fragility of coexistence so central to Chapter Five is once again brought to the fore. Whilst both novels do clearly share sensibilities with Renascence fiction, Renascence norms are also subverted throughout the novels. This is, of course, one of the functions of historical fiction as a genre, using the past to critique the present. Both Jordan and Rash use their historical setting and the ecologies they depict to comment on contemporary issues.

The focus on ownership allows *Mudbound* and *Serena* to present an interesting juxtaposition between liberal humanist and posthumanist subjects not really seen in the previous novels discussed. The attempts at dominion demonstrate a clear belief in human exceptionalism for some characters, a belief that "the assertion of humanity's uniqueness is inextricably tied to humans' right to subdue and dominate" (Peterson 29), but not in all characters. Although, as I demonstrate, the posthumanist sensibilities on display in the two novels are less pronounced, there are characters who do display qualities of the posthumanist subject. Within the shared focus on ownership, ownership and dominion are contrasted in *Mudbound* and *Serena*. However, both novels depict the social conditions of their respective regions, and as Melissa Orlie asks: "[C]an we rightly call our thoughts, words, and deeds our own once we acknowledge the degree to which the material conditions of our social and psychic lives are created neither by nor for us?" (116). If social conditions created for us inevitably affect our individuality, then even depictions of desired ownership or attempted human dominion must always be affected by the assemblage they exist within. I will show in this chapter that there is also a wider reach of connectivity on display in Jordan and Rash's novels which undermines the former, supposed constancy of the region. The borders of these southern assemblages are demonstrably more permeable than their predecessors.

Set in the post-Second World War Mississippi Delta, one of the themes of Jordan's *Mudbound* is the lack of transformation of the region, putting it immediately at odds with Ward and Laymon's work. The need for transformation is clearly on display, but the sense of this being a region in transformation is not. Jordan's is a historical tale displaying seemingly historical attitudes. The landscapes depicted are largely the ploughed earth of farmland, with mud and dirt, as the title suggests, dominant tropes in the novel. Mud and ploughed soil are central to the novel's use of overlayering – its placing of ecologies on top of each other to demonstrate their connectivity – and the

primary setting of a Mississippi farm creates inevitable connections with the agrarian South, and the Renascence fiction associated with it.

If, as discussed in Chapter Four, "grab" was the watchword in frontier life and the mythology associated with it, then here it is "ownership." The father figures of each of the novel's two central families, the McAllans and the Jacksons, demonstrate what is described in *Mudbound* as a "landsickness" (229), a desire bordering on obsession for ownership of land in keeping with the Southern Renascence era in which the novel is set. For Henry McAllan, the rural lifestyle and land ownership is in his blood, a fact drilled into him by his grandfather from his deathbed. His is an attitude layered over the historical U.S. South explicated by Gray in which status is defined by land ownership. Henry, an engineer in Memphis, abandons a comfortable urban lifestyle because, as his grandfather tells him: "land's the only thing you can count on to be there tomorrow. It's the only thing that's really yours" (72). Importantly, Henry's landsickness is born from a desire for ownership, not dominion. Contemplating a handful of soil, his grandfather asserts: "'This is *land* I've got. Do you know why? . . . Because it's *mine*,' he said. 'One day this'll be your land, your farm. But in the meantime, to you and every other person who don't own it, it's just dirt" (72). Ownership affords societal status in the manner of colonial Virginia.

Nevertheless, there is also a sense of coexistence in the novel, an understanding of the need for regeneration and therefore the fragility of posthumanist existence in a network of connectivity. As Henry remarks: "Rebuild and replant: that's what farmers do in the Delta" (73). Henry understands the need to look after his land and cultivate rather than just take from it: "The soil was rich and black – Conley had had the sense to rotate his crops" (74). His landsickness is not merely a desire for dominion over the land, or commodification of it in the manner of O'Connor's Rayber seen in Chapter Four. Rather, it is an understanding of the promise that land brings, a promise closer to

the Agrarian ideal of an existence in nature. For Henry, according to his wife Laura: "Becoming a landowner had transformed him, bringing out a childlike eagerness I'd rarely seen in him" (94).

Hap Jackson, a black tenant on Henry's land, has, according to his wife Florence, a landsickness too: "Hap just kept on pushing him and pushing him, that was the landsickness talking is what that was" (229). As with Henry, Hap's landsickness is not a need for dominion over nature. Ownership necessarily equals power, but for Hap it is the power of individual subjectivity. It is a search for self-improvement. As Hap explains to Florence: "With the four of us working fifty acres, and if cotton prices stay above thirty cents a pound, in three four years we'll have enough to buy our own land" (229-30). For Hap, ownership is a chance to get out from under the yoke of share tenancy[9], a situation in which "elite white landowners exercised considerable control over the lives and fortunes of dependent blacks" (Walker 14-15). It is a situation that represents little more than a southern extension of slavery. In their own separate ways, for both Hap and Henry, ownership of land equates to belonging. Theirs is, therefore, not a need for dominion over the land, but rather a connection to the land and the sense of identity ownership provides. It is a belief in a form of subjectivity provided through the ground they inhabit.

In fact, Jordan's novel leaves the reader with the impression that neither the Agrarian ideal, nor the opportunity for self-improvement is realisable for these rural southerners. Rural life, specifically farm life, is difficult in *Mudbound*. In keeping with the novels already examined, there is a fragility to the coexistence depicted, a fragility that here finds root in the distinct division drawn between the urban and the rural. On

[9] Share tenants differed from sharecroppers due to the amount of equipment they owned and as a result paid less of their yield to the landlord. For a full discussion see "Sharecropping and Tenancy" Mertz (2008).

her arrival at the farm, having been unexpectedly forced to live there rather than in the town, Henry's wife Laura, a city girl, is quickly and unceremoniously introduced to the realities of farm life: "That's when I learned there was no electricity or running water in the house" (64). Even the trappings of modernity that do remain available to her are entirely at the mercy of other-than-human nature, the ubiquitous mud of the title: "I intended to drive, but both the car and truck were mired too deeply in mud, so I took my umbrella and set out on foot" (306). Furthermore, the family's coexistence with the urban world is equally fragile: "The world was on the other side of that bridge, the world of light bulbs and paved roads and shirts that stayed white. When the river rose, the world was lost to us and we to it" (11). Laura's idea of a rural idyll is a reflection of the "southern romantic moonlight-and-magnolias myth" (Havard 194), that the Southern Agrarians have often been accused of espousing:

> Like most city people, I'd had a ridiculous, goldenlit idea of the country. I'd pictured rain falling softly upon verdant fields, barefoot boys fishing with thistles dangling from their mouths, women quilting in cozy little log cabins while their men smoked corncob pipes on the porch. (98)

It is a myth of cultural memory that will be quickly and comprehensively shattered by Jordan.

If anything, *Mudbound* is anti-pastoral. There is no sense here of the idealisation of a simple rural environment. Bringing the marginalised into plain view, Jordan places white and black sharecroppers side-by-side, working fields that, regardless of race, they can have no real hope of ever owning: "There were brown fields and unpainted sharecroppers' shacks with dirt yards. Women who might have been any age from thirty to sixty hung laundry from sagging clotheslines while gaggles of dirty barefoot children watched listlessly from the porch" (66). There is dominion on display in *Mudbound*, but it is not human dominion over nature, nor is it solely the historical trauma of racial

dominion. Rather, here it is the economic dominion of landlords over tenants. It is man's dominion over fellow man. When white sharecropper Alma Atwood pleads on her husband's behalf to be allowed to stay on their farm, there is little to no individual agency on display. The Atwood family is at the mercy of the McAllans. There is none of the "right of that self to autonomy and freedom" (85) that N. Katherine Hayles associates with the liberal humanist subject. Human actants coexist in this rural assemblage, but the differences in their ability to affect are made explicitly clear.

Coexistence between societal groups, the complexity of individual interactions within and across groups, and its innate inequality is a central theme of Jordan's novel, and there is less of the individual posthumanist sensibility on display than in the contemporary novels previously discussed. In comparison with Ward and Laymon, there is less of a sense of "[t]he process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have 'me' or any 'human' at the center" (Coole and Frost 212). As with her predecessors in southern literature, Jordan's focus is the interplay of southern society. It is a focus on how different groups interact, and the extent to which they are allowed to interact, with each other.

Inevitably, the nature of this dominion is largely, although not exclusively, racial, with Henry – far from the apogee of racism in the novel – declaring: "Whatever else the colored man may be, he's our brother. A younger brother, to be sure, undisciplined and driven by his appetites, but also kindly and tragic and humble before God" (77). Even Laura admits: "This is not to say that I thought of Florence and her family as equal to me and mine. I called her Florence and she called me Miz McAllan. She and Lilly May didn't use our outhouse, but did their business in the bushes out back" (97). Yet, in many ways the novel makes clear that such notions of dominion are based on social status as well as race: "Landlords can do just about anything they want" (90). Power, as both Henry and Hap are aware is based on land ownership. However,

the novel also acknowledges the fragility of such power-based relations in an assemblage. It is a fragility fittingly expressed through the racist ignorance of its white characters. In this southern society, as with any society, the powerful are more reliant on those they subjugate than they would care to admit. When Orris Stokes, who will later be revealed as a Klan member, declares "[d]amn n– . . . Moving up north, leaving folks with no way to make a crop. Ought to be a law against it" (61), the reliance of the landowners on their tenants is laid bare. The tenant's absence affects where their presence cannot. Theirs is a reciprocal, if inherently unequal relationship. The southern assemblage is fragile, and every actant has some power to affect others even when they lack the power to improve their own position.

Mudbound is formally reminiscent of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, with six different narrators each occupying their own interspersed named sections. Yet, it is through another connection to Faulkner's novel, its characters' experiences on the battlefields of Europe, that Jordan provides *Mudbound*'s most overt examples of overlayering. As with Darl Bundren – the main narrator of *As I Lay Dying* – before them, both Jamie McAllan and Ronsel Jackson have returned to the U.S. South having served overseas in a World War. It is an experience that has had a predictably direct effect on their understanding of the world, experiences depicted through overlayered ecologies.

Although not directly mentioned until the end of *As I Lay Dying*, the war has had an unmistakable impact on Darl's psychological deterioration throughout the novel. Placing the novel in its post-Great War context, John Liman describes *As I Lay Dying* as "perhaps the muddiest book in all literature" (39), suggesting that Faulkner, as with all observers of the human experience of that war, was "himself preoccupied with the muddiness of the Great War" (39). Through the novel's allusion to trenches and the

impossibility of moving through rain-soaked land, the mud of Mississippi is for Darl, at least in part, the mud of France and Belgium.

Similarly, the soil of the European battlefields connects the characters of *Mudbound* across two very different parts of the same world. Although a hero in Europe, Ronsel's perceived position in the U.S. South is used by Jamie's father, Pappy, to assert his own authority over his mother, Florence. Discussing Ronsel's continued absence at the end of the war he suggests: "Guess they still need more ditches dug over there, huh?" (93). In doing so, he explicitly layers the southern landscape over that of Europe, foreshadowing what Ronsel will be expected to do on his return. As a black man in the U.S. South, Ronsel will work the land. In fact, Ronsel uses an agricultural image to explain his own survival of the war when he suggests that, due to the white southern lieutenants he served under, he should have "ended up fertilizing some farmer's field in France or Belgium, along with every other man in my unit" (40). Ronsel may be on the other side of the world, but he anticipates the same marginalisation that he experiences in the U.S. South. Jordan uses the landscape, and Ronsel's seemingly unavoidable attachment to it, to express this. On his return to the Delta, Ronsel again layers the fields of Europe over the southern soil to express his frustration at southern life, acknowledging that, for his father: "The battles he'd fought were the kind nobody cheers you for winning" (143). Rural southern life is directly compared to a war, and it is one that, for the Jacksons at least, is impossible to win.

Jamie McAllan bears even more explicit comparison to Faulkner's Darl Bundren. Like Darl, Jamie has been psychologically affected by the war, returning with PTSD. Unable to escape the trauma he has experienced, he directly connects his recent past and his present, observing: "The din of a Delta thunderstorm hitting a tin roof is about as close as you can get to the sound of battle without actually being in it" (265). The sights and sounds of the battlefield are once again evoked in Jamie's description of

the Mississippi ecology: “The wind tore my hat from my head, and the mud tried to pull my boots off with every step. It was so dark that if it hadn’t been for the occasional bursts of lightning, I wouldn’t have been able to see a thing” (267). As with Ronsel, and Darl before them, Jamie’s understanding of his U.S. South will never be the same again, his own epistemological apparatus indelibly affected. The region is no longer subject to the constancy it once was.

For Jamie, the overlayering is also allegorical. Describing a drunken “accident” involving a cow, Jamie recalls the unspoken agreement amongst his squadron to drop all bombs and not bring any home, eventually releasing them over a park: “We knew from our intelligence briefing that there were SS soldiers there, seeking cover among the civilians. Still, we killed thousands of innocent people along with them” (205). Returning to the cow, he notes: “A few seconds before I hit that cow it turned its head and looked straight at me. It could have moved but it didn’t” (205). He thus associates it with his flying mission. Jamie is unable to escape the horror of his own actions and layers the southern landscape over that of Northern Europe in the expression of his trauma. Although Jordan uses overlayering in *Mudbound*, it is not as suggestive of posthumanist sensibilities, instead appearing more in keeping with previous literature of the U.S. South. However, it does introduce a wider reach of connectivity to the region, one that undermines the constancy and exceptionalism associated with it.

It is not just through its war overlayering that *Mudbound* carries undertones of violence, itself a traditional theme of southern literature. As with both *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, there is a ferocity to the other-than-human nature on display. Ward’s pastoral is never soft or easy in its depiction of everyday rural life. The same hardships are apparent in *Mudbound* and are often depicted through the fragile nature of coexistence. On their arrival in the countryside, the McAllans are told: “When it rains and that river rises, the Conley place can be cut off for days” (65). Their

coexistence with the human world around them is reliant upon the instabilities of the other-than-human world. It is a reliance brought dangerously home when the family's daughters become ill with whooping cough and, in a passage once again suggestive of *As I Lay Dying*, Henry is unable to make it to the town: "I heard the river before I saw it: a roar of pure power. The bridge was two feet underwater" (79). Their assemblage existence is made further apparent when Laura observes:

> Violence is part and parcel of country life. You're forever being assailed by dead things: dead mice, dead rabbits, dead possums, dead birds . . . I learned how to load and fire a shotgun, how to stitch up a bleeding wound, how to reach into the womb of a heaving sow to deliver a breached piglet. My hands did these things but I was never easy in my mind. Life felt perilous, like anything at all might happen. (98)

Laura, and by extension the human world, are connected to the other-than-human world surrounding them. The bodies of other-than-human nature litter this scene, both natural deaths and reference to killing for food, but there is also healing and birth. Humans coexist with other-than-humans even if that coexistence is unequal and unstable. In the above passage – one of the novel's most overt references – the fragility of coexistence is once again made clear.

Although, as demonstrated, *Mudbound* shares sensibilities with the fiction of the time it depicts, there is also a clear subversion of Renascence norms displayed through who is given the power of voice in the novel. Gray contends: "it is a traditionally Southern strategy to place the black on the margins of language, to deny him the dignity of an adequate definition" (146). However, unlike Faulkner's work, where the marginalised, whether by race, gender, or class, are often not given a voice, both black and white, female and male, tenant and landlord are allowed to tell their own story through *Mudbound*'s heteroglossic narration. In fact, the only person who is not is

Pappy, the novel's most prominently racist character, who is only given leave to express his opinions through the voice of others. In *Mudbound*, previously lost voices are given the power of expression. Once again, Ronsel's U.S. South is layered over a world at war. Describing his treatment by locals during training in Texas and Louisiana he highlights national differences: "Our uniforms didn't mean a damn to the local white citizens. Not that I expected them to, but my buddies from up north and out west were thunderstruck by the way we were treated" (41). The U.S. South's true exceptionality as a region of racial intolerance is laid bare to his incredulous colleagues from the rest of the country. In addition, a hint of the future is also overlayered on Ronsel's war-time experiences when he notes: "That's what we called ourselves: the 761st Black Panther Battalion" (46). His connection to an African American division that broke racial boundaries cannot help but make an association in the readers' mind with the civil rights movement. This is a future Ronsel himself envisions in the novel's final section when he suggests that "[s]uch a man . . . Might march behind Dr. King down the streets of Atlanta with his head held high" (324), a prolepsis that functions as a temporal as well as geographical overlayering.

However, this is juxtaposed with a U.S. South that Ronsel remains entirely disconnected from in the present, a U.S. South where he "[w]ent off to fight for my country and came back to find it hadn't changed a bit" (142). It is a disconnection Ronsel feels keenly: "There I was a liberator, a hero. In Mississippi I was just another n– pushing a plow" (152). In his present, Ronsel may not be on the margins of language, but he remains decidedly on the margins of society. There is no southern sense of place for Ronsel in its traditional meaning, there never was for the marginalised but they lacked a voice to express it. It is largely his place in society that gives him subjectivity, something that he discovers on the other side of the world. Significantly, even when he is physically denied a voice, having his tongue cut out by the local Klan,

he is still granted the agency to express himself in the novel's final chapter. In *Mudbound*, the marginalised refuse to be silenced.

One of the clear outcomes of the war as depicted in *Mudbound*, is that it has made the world smaller, itself a decidedly posthumanist sensibility. Karen Barad notes that we are not "simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 828). The assemblages depicted are not just localised but global. As with Ward and Laymon, there is a wider reach of connectivity depicted alongside the rural southern setting. It is a connectivity that does not simply exist within the characters' experiences abroad, it has also been created back in the U.S. South. Jamie regales his family with the tales of his travels:

> He told us about snow-skiing in the Swiss Alps: how the mountains were so tall the tops of them pierced the clouds, and the snow so thick and soft that when you fell it was like sinking into a feather bed. He took us to the sidewalk cafés of Paris, where waiters in crisp white shirts and black aprons served pastries made of a hundred layers, each thinner than a fingernail. (182-83)

In doing so, he brings the possibility of a world outside the U.S. South with him, a possibility that discomforts his brother, Henry who asks: "And that's what you've been doing all these months, instead of coming home?" (183). In addition, actants from other assemblages are also beginning to affect the region. When Hap needs a doctor to alleviate problems caused by the racist Doc Turpin, Doc Pearlman, an Austrian Jewish physician who has fled his homeland in the lead-up to the war, is asked to help. When Hap reflects that "[h]e didn't seem to mind touching me. I wondered if all the white people in his country were like him" (128), the irony of his statement aside, a new attitude can be seen to have been introduced, albeit in a small way, into the U.S. South through a wider reach of connectivity. Just as the mud of France and Belgium has

permeated the Mississippi ecology in the novel's overlayering, so too have actants from a wider assemblage. The borders of the southern assemblage, its perceived constancy, are in fact permeable in *Mudbound*.

In his examination of *Mudbound* as a neo-segregation narrative, Ed Piacentino argues that "[p]arallel relationships between black and white characters reinforce the boundaries in the novel's structure" (272-73). Whilst true, I would suggest that the pairing of characters carries more than a social significance. Ronsel's experiences outside of the U.S. South have changed him. He has been affected by actants in a wider assemblage. This leads him to reject the farm culture that would, as a black man, have been seen as his traditional place in southern society, a hangover from a system that forced slaves into a familiarity with the agricultural land. It is a rejection that puts him at odds with his father, Hap, a juxtaposition that would place Hap as representative of the liberal humanist subject. N. Katherine Hayles argues "owning oneself was a constitutive premise for liberal humanism" (86), and what Hap wants more than anything else is to be free from the burdens of the past. He wants to have to answer to no-one. Hap believes firmly in his own agency, with Florence noting "[o]nce Hap gets a notion a something, he's deaf and blind to everything that don't mesh with it" (230). Ronsel however, has seen life outside of the U.S. South, and consequently he "couldn't a cared less about having his own land" (230). As Florence again observes: "He wasn't like his daddy and his brothers, he knowed farming was no way to raise hisself up in the world" (89). Ronsel, through his years outside of the U.S. South, has seen the truth about the region's exceptionality, or rather lack of it. When Hap questions his leaving, his response is telling: "Wherever I go and however I live . . . I reckon it'll be better than here" (233).

Although Henry and Jamie are brothers rather than father and son, they are similarly juxtaposed in the text, and represent pre- and post-war sensibilities. C.B. Macpherson characterises the liberal humanist subject as follows:

> Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them . . . The human essence is freedom from the wills of others. (qtd. in Hayles 3)

Accordingly, Henry, even more so than Hap, epitomises the liberal humanist subject. He is, according to Jamie, "absolutely certain that whatever he wanted to happen *would* happen" (4). It is a sentiment echoed by Laura when she declares: "How simple things were for Henry! How I wished sometimes that I could join him in his stark, right-angled world, where everything was either right or wrong and there was no doubt which was which" (182). Henry is free from the will of others. Jamie, however, represents a shift. He is unsure of his own exceptionality, with Laura noting as she looks at Henry: "I felt a ripple of envy, which I saw echoed on Jamie's face" (182).

Jamie is also, in a manner reminiscent of Ward's novels, conflated with other-than-human nature when Henry suggests that he needs "a sweet Southern gal to give him children and coax his roots back down into his native soil" (190). As discussed in Chapter Four, Ward draws her characters as inseparable from their ecologies, most notably through a coalescence of humans and trees. Here Jordan uses similar language to describe Jamie's own inherent connectivity. Jamie is connected to the actants around him in a way Henry is not. If Henry is the liberal humanist subject, then Jamie displays posthumanist sensibilities. When placed alongside his brother, Jamie demonstrates "the rightfully limited powers of human agency: the ways in which human action is, or should be, subject to other agencies operating – often reciprocally – in complex networks of existence" (Bignall and Rigney 166). It is a juxtaposition expressed in the novel when Jamie recognises that "[t]he farm was his element, just as the sky had once

been mine" (206). Whereas Henry's connection is to the Mississippi land and his own dominion over it, Jamie's connection is more ethereal with the ecology that surrounds him.

In many ways, Henry's liberal humanist subject is more representative of the nature of American expansionism than it is of southern exceptionalism: "the push for more and better land . . . in search of fertile territories, commercial opportunities, and speculative profits" (Weeks 59-60). In other words, it is representative of his desire to own land and make something of himself through hard work. Unlike Hap, Florence, Ronsel, Laura, or Jamie, Henry is in the mud of the Mississippi Delta because he wants to be. There is certainly no sense of the Southern gentleman here, the gentrified landowner of the plantation South. There is, however, a suggestion of what Leigh Anne Duck refers to as the "narrative of backward-looking white southern identity" (*The Nation's Region* 159), the nostalgic South that venerates the past in the present. Henry may not be seeking to justify The South of the Civil War, but he is searching for an identity rooted firmly in the region. There is a hint of the southern sense of place on view in Henry's character. It is a suggestion that subjectivity might be created through the soil of the region.

Yet, this is not true for all characters in *Mudbound*. According to Houston Baker, Jr.: "The symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests in her classic study Purity and Danger that any society's definition of 'dirt' (danger) is merely an irreplaceable category for the achievement of order: dirt is 'matter out of place'" (*Turning South Again* 46-47). The first words spoken by Laura in the novel are: "When I think of the farm, I think of mud" (11). For Laura, the Mississippi soil is constitutive of the difficulty of farm life. It is omnipresent matter out of place: "Every surface was filthy" (68). Although Baker, Jr. argues that dirt allowed Booker T. Washington to perform the ritual act of sweeping, and in doing so enact his own purification from

blackness, for Laura, a white woman, the mud is: “Sucking at my feet like a greedy newborn on the breast. Marching in boot-shaped patches across the plank floors of the house. There was no defeating it. The mud coated everything. I dreamed in brown” (11). Rather than the fertile site of subjectivity, for Laura, the dirt of *Mudbound* is the impossibility of order that forms part of her assemblage existence.

It is through their contrasting relationship to the Mississippi soil that Jordan juxtaposes the novel’s two mother figures, Laura and Florence. Dirt as matter out of place is exclusively associated with the white characters of *Mudbound*. For Florence it is simply a matter of fact. Laura takes no part in agricultural work, with Henry suggesting she “wouldn’t have lasted a week in the fields, but I thought she’d make a fine farmwife once she got used to the idea” (78). Mud permeates Laura’s space yet, for her, it is simply a hindrance, an unpleasant part of domestic life. Florence, on the other hand, is forced by circumstance to work the fields: “bent over a hoe, chopping out the weeds that threatened the tender cotton plants” (136). Although Laura begins to sense that her subjectivity is connected to the southern soil, her description of “all the life and color in me, seeping out into the dirt at my feet” (241), represents another reversal with the land taking rather than providing.

Ultimately, Laura is able to escape the pervasive mud, moving off the farm to a nearby town. Florence however, like the Batistes of *Salvage the Bones*, is not afforded the same possibility of escape. When Laura asks where she will go, her reply: “Away from here” (308), is likely referring to an escape from the particularity of Mudbound’s fields, not from an agricultural existence. Florence understands the reality of her connection to the land, her observation “I knew she’d take me and Hap someday” (89), highlighting her inherent connectivity with the Mississippi soil. It is a permanent connection that will end with the land reclaiming her. Once again, the southern exceptionalism manifested through sense of place is undermined through a racial

comparison. There is a coexistence with matter observable in *Mudbound*, but not solely as a representation of the posthumanist subject. The novel does undermine the constancy and exceptionalism of the region, through its depiction of ploughed land, but it does so through a more straightforward depiction of racial history. The possibility of transformation on display in Ward and Laymon is not apparent in this ecology. Jordan's U.S. South is one stuck in stasis.

The ecologies depicted in Ron Rash's *Serena* differ considerably from those of Jordan's *Mudbound*. A historical novel with overtones of the Southern Gothic, set during the Great Depression, rather than the ploughed fields and red dirt of the Mississippi Delta, Rash renders the mountains and woodlands of the Southern Appalachians. It is the corner of the U.S. South that Rash himself calls home. In contrast to *Mudbound*, there is an explicit transformation on display in the novel, that of the landscape itself, as Rash examines both the environmental and societal impact of the region's agriculture. This is razed earth rather than ploughed earth, but the depiction of southern woodlands in *Serena* allows me to make a connection with the ecologies of Chapter Four, and the U.S. South's competing metaphors for the forest. This is a landscape both to be survived, by the people employed to clear it and, in contrast to Jordan's novel, the site of attempted total dominion over nature. On the surface it is a depiction more in keeping with the Renascence fiction of Rash's predecessors than that of his contemporaries.

It is not hard to position *Serena* as a novel with environmental concerns. Due to its portrayal of unscrupulous lumber barons, and their ongoing conflict with fictionalised versions of a documented group of advocates who were intent on developing a national park, much previous criticism of the novel has focused on this battle between industrialism and conservation. Joshua Lee contends that the Pemberton Lumber Company: "illustrates the magnanimous impact that humans can wield to the

detriment of nature and, therefore, ultimately themselves" (44). With a title character who displays utter indifference to the destruction she wreaks in "her attempt to bend the North Carolina ecosystem to her will" (J. D. Smith 60), there can be no doubt that environmental concerns are a major theme of the novel. The reader's first introduction to the lumber business gives a glimpse of the scale of the devastation: "the saw mill's five-acre splash pond, its surface hidden by logs bunched and intertwined like kindling" (12). In addition, the chestnut blight, causing its own devastation throughout the region, is considered in entirely economic terms, with the eponymous Serena reasoning: "Good that it takes them years to die completely . . . That gives us all the time we need, but also a reason to prefer mahogany" (13). This is business, and large-scale business at that, demonstrating no thought as to the cost for the other-than-human world.

The Smoky Mountains National Park, which was chartered in 1934, around the time of the novel's historical setting, provides the foil to the Pembertons' plans to raze the region for their own financial gain. The park's future expansion into previously cleared land is foreshown: "it may take forty or fifty years before that forest will grow back. But when it does, it will be part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park" (242). However, it is dismissed as irrelevant by Serena: "Pemberton and I will have logged a whole country by then" (242). The motivation for its inception is also questioned, and in doing so, linked back to the human condition, with Serena suggesting: "altruism is invariably a means to conceal one's personal failures" (136). Not only does the novel explicitly position northern industrialism in opposition to southern conservation, but it also displays human exceptionalism writ large.

There is a hint of the region's long history of environmental exploitation discernible in the overlayering depicted in *Serena*. For example, the iron-ore mining that took place in the colonial Virginia of Jamestown is suggested by the Pemberton's business partner Harris and his search for copper in the mountains. Even an extended

south of Spanish exploitation through precious mineral mining in South America is observable when Harris explains: “Better than gold. Near Franklin they’ve found rubies you measure by the ounce” (236). However, there is no doubt that Rash is more concerned with overlayering the region’s present onto his historical landscape. As John Lang has observed, the destructive practices of the Pemberton Lumber Company in the Appalachian Mountains are more than suggestive of the mountaintop removal mining which blights the region today (85-86). The battle between a lumber industry after whom “[n]o tree unsmoothed the landscape” (Rash *75*), and a conservation group intent on stopping them, must surely be read as an indictment of a regional practice that is damaging both to the local environment and the communities who live there.

If, as previously argued, “ownership” was the watchword in *Mudbound*, then in *Serena* it is “dominion.” Dirt, in this novel, does not equal land through possession in the manner of Henry McAllan’s grandfather. There is no desire to possess the land itself, just to exploit what can be found on or in it for short-term gain. The southern landscape is defined for the Pembertons by what has already been, and what still needs to be capitalised: “you can see where we quit cutting to the east” (14). It is an exploitation that hints at continued expansion, and, in turn, the American exceptionalism of Manifest Destiny. As Serena suggests: “why limit ourselves to just what’s here” (234). Jimmy Dean Smith observes that “we watch the title character wreak havoc like the chestnut blight (15-16), a human incarnation of an invasive species” (60). However, in the portrayal of Serena Pemberton there is no real coexistence evident with the other-than-human world, and no understanding of the need for regeneration shown by Henry McAllan. As with O’Connor’s Rayber, the forests represent the commodification of the land: “Serena and Pemberton looked over the valley and ridges and surveyed what timber remained” (249). Serena sees potential timber rather than the trees before her.

In fact, Serena often stands separate to other-than-human nature in the novel, removed from it even when amongst it: “Serena paused at the ridge crest before her descent. Lingering fog laid a thick mist on the ground and the ridge . . . For a few moments no one spoke. They watched Serena descend into the swirling fog and vanish” (134-35). Even when viewed from a distance, she is drawn as distinct from the other-than-human world surrounding her: “As Pemberton drove out of camp, he saw Serena and the horse ascending Half Acre Ridge” (222). The novel offers no sense of her assemblage, either physically or emotionally. She is purposefully and decidedly separated from it. When surveying the devastation she is leaving behind, she declares: “I’m pleased with what we’ve done here” (352). In doing so, her embodiment of human exceptionalism is complete.

While Serena is drawn as separate from other-than-human nature, her counterpoint in the novel, Rachel Harmon, is often in the thick of it. This has led to examinations of her role as contrast to Serena, with Michael Beilfuss suggesting: “Rachel Harmon functions as a comforting earth mother” (385). However, Rachel, like *Mudbound*’s Laura McAllan, also represents the difficulty of farm life in the rural U.S. South. Whereas the difficulty depicted in *Mudbound* demonstrates the fragility of coexistence, in *Serena* it is largely an economic fragility: “they crossed a pasture whose barbed wire now kept nothing in, empty for the first time in her life” (78). The focus is the difficulty of living off the land during the Great Depression: “They drove another few miles, passing small farms, a good number inhabited only by what creatures sheltered inside the broken windows and sagging roofs, foreclosure notices nailed on doors and porch beams” (119).

This state of affairs is a difficulty blamed explicitly on the north: “Before that stock market busted up north it might have been, but cash money’s rare these days as sang” (80). There may be no rural idyll on display here, but there is a definite

connection to the Southern Agrarian's *I'll Take My Stand*, and its defence of a rural culture threatened by urbanisation and industrialisation. Whereas those wanting to exploit the land are rich and largely foreign to the region – Serena hailing from Colorado and Pemberton from Boston – those wanting to coexist with it, and live from it, the characters native to the region, have found it impossible. Discussing Rachel's mother abandoning her family, Widow Jenkins recalls: "All she told him was that life up here was too hard" (196). The social conditions of the region in *Serena* have been created by the north, and any possibility for survival is reliant upon foreign influence, an influence that does not have the region's best interests at heart. Once more, neither an agrarian ideal, nor the opportunity for self-sustainability is a possibility for these rural southerners.

While the black-white binary often overly associated with the region is clearly on display in *Mudbound*, in *Serena*, it is nowhere to be seen. Instead, the trope of the U.S. South as "Other" holds sway here. Pemberton observes in the region's inhabitants: "a disconcerting *otherness* that was part of these mountains and would always be inexplicable to him" (118). When Harris is challenged by one of the national park's proponents that his interest in the region's land is the business of the North Carolina people, he replies "[w]e are North Carolina business, you dumb shit . . . When people in this state are grubbing up roots in your parks to keep from starving, they'll realize it too and start using those trees of yours for hangings" (166). Harris dismisses the regional concerns as inconsequential without inward investment. The lost voices are those of the local Appalachians, the lost voice of the U.S. South. They remain largely lost throughout, only able to express their pain, not demonstrate any strength or hope for the future. Whereas *Sing, Unburied, Sing* overlayers a future hope of coexistence, and *Salvage the Bones* offers a glimpse of opportunity despite quickly taking it away, in *Serena*, there is nothing on display but a bleak future for the region. Indeed, it is in this

bleak future that the industrial versus environmental duality of the novel will become somewhat muddied.

Although, as previously noted, examinations of the novel have often focused on its environmental concerns, putting them squarely in opposition to industrialisation, the national park project is itself repeatedly associated with the removal of Appalachians from their land and homes, with Harris observing early in the novel that "[t]hey're already starting to run farmers off their land in Tennessee" (28). The park is expressly connected with the concept of eminent domain, the power of the government to take private property and convert it to public use: "'They run my uncle off his place last week,' Dunbar said. 'Said it was eminent domain'" (63). The national park is presented as as much of a threat to the autonomy of the region as northern industrialisation. Here, once again, there is a link to the concerns of *I'll Take My Stand*, the concerns of the effect of a centralised state upon the U.S. South. Serena herself observes: "You've already run two thousand farmers off their land, that's according to your own census. We can't make people work for us and we can't buy their land unless they want to sell it, yet you force them from their livelihood and their homes" (137-38). Similar concerns are apparent throughout Rash's work, especially his poetry collection *Eureka Mill* which, according to Randall Wilhelm captures: "the disjunction, isolation, and anger of Appalachian farmers bereft of their land and turned into clonelike cogs in a capitalist machine" (399). Sometimes suggested by critics as reminiscent of a Greek chorus in the novel, the previously lost voices of the working-class are given some power to speak, but they remain completely removed from any power to help themselves. The people of the Appalachians are portrayed as very much disconnected. They are affected by every element of their wider assemblage, with little power to affect their own existence in a positive way. Rather than connected to their environment, they are effectively displaced by it.

As previously mentioned, violence has been considered a traditional theme of southern literature, with Robert May noting "the supposed proclivity of Dixie's citizenry toward personal and societal violence" (68). It is a theme more obviously on display in *Serena* than in the other four novels discussed. Throughout the novel, Serena Pemberton is associated directly with violence as is apparent form her first appearance in the opening pages, telling Pemberton to "[g]et your knife and settle it now" (8). This continues through to her death in the Coda: "the huge pearl-handled knife planted hilt-deep in her stomach" (371). Violence pervades every aspect of her existence. Her coupling with Pemberton is described as "[a] kind of annihilation" (20), and she finds connection through death: "'We've both killed now,' Serena said urgently. 'What you felt at the depot, I've felt too. We're closer'" (278). It is a violence through which I draw a connection back to *Salvage the Bones* and Esch's descriptions of southern life. Rash associates Serena with Medea when she quotes directly to her husband from the text: "*Myself will grip the sword – yea, though I die*" (18). Although many of the actual events occur away from the narrative setting, Serena's story, like Medea's, is punctuated by a succession of violent deaths for those around her. One of her husband's closest associates, Harris, is dispatched because "[h]e made us vulnerable . . . It's like an infection, Pemberton. If you don't cauterize it, then it spreads" (243). Such violence culminates in Serena's poisoning of her husband, just as Medea murdered the King of Thebes with poisoned gifts before fleeing the country. As the landscape of *Salvage* is populated with the ghosts of Greek mythology, so is *Serena*'s. Although in *Salvage*, Medea is portrayed more sympathetically, as a representation of motherhood and female strength, she is also conflated with the unstoppable force of nature in the form of Hurricane Katrina. In *Serena*, that seemingly unstoppable force is human exceptionalism.

In *Serena*, the eponymous anti-heroine is directly connected to human exceptionalism. She firmly believes that she has complete dominion over the other-than-human world, declaring: "The world is ripe, and we'll pluck it like an apple from a tree" (340). The world is hers for the taking. As previously noted, she also has pride in what she believes she has achieved through her orgy of devastation. It is a pride, or at least a lack of remorse, that she carries to her death: "When the reporter wondered if there was anything she'd done in her life that she now regretted, Mrs. Pemberton said absolutely not" (369). Serena is the embodiment of the liberal humanist subject positioned squarely at the centre of her own world. To the people around her she appears:

> [N]ot looking anywhere but straight ahead. Not needing to, because she didn't have to care if someone stepped in front of her and the horse. She and that gelding would go right over whoever got in their way and not give the least notice they'd trampled someone into the dirt. (132)

Furthermore, the heterochronic nature of existence that I have previously suggested as an integral part of the posthumanist subject, is entirely absent in Serena. She lives exclusively in a linear understanding of time, one in which the past is past: "she and Pemberton needed the past no more than it needed them" (25). It is a feature that also puts her at odds with any understanding of southern exceptionalism, answering an inquiry about her father with: "He's dead now and of no use to any of us" (38). For Serena, the future is something to work towards, not something that already affects her present. Her existence is rooted firmly in the here and now, stating: "This is what we want . . . No past or future, pure enough to live totally in the present" (87). Serena is drawn as a unique individual with agency, but this representation of her is clearly not sympathetic. *Serena*, more so than *Mudbound* is a novel that ultimately is critical of such individualism and the exploitation of other-than-human resources it engenders.

George Pemberton is initially equated directly with Serena and shown to have the same goals and possessive individualism that she displays. He is, according to Serena, "a man unafraid of challenges, which is why I married him" (7). At first, the reader is led to assume in him the same exceptionalism and liberal humanism as his wife. It is a connection that Pemberton himself fights to maintain throughout, telling himself: "Nothing is but what is now" (205). However, Pemberton also displays decidedly posthumanist tendencies from early in the novel, ultimately putting him in juxtaposition with Serena. He demonstrates a differing understanding of time, proposing: "time was no longer brisk measured increments but something more fluid, with its own currents and eddies" (260). He later feels "a sudden sensation he was watching time reverse itself" (339). Time for Pemberton is not strictly linear. It has the potential to be more protean, a fact which affects the determined understanding of the world he wants to adhere to. This, in turn, causes him to display a scepticism about cause and effect, a factor familiar to an understanding of the posthumanist subject examined in the previous chapter, as he contemplates:

> the chain of events that had led to noon trysts, later a gutted man dying on a train depot bench, a child that surely had been born by now. How far back could you trace the links in such a chain, he wondered . . . Was it something you never found the end to? (58)

This is a sensibility that continues to manifest itself in his understanding of the ecology he inhabits. When first showing the company's land to Serena, he describes: "Cove Creek Valley pressed back the mountains, opening a square mile of level land" (13). In contrast, when returning to the same spot later in the novel he "looked down at the vast dark gash they'd made on the land. Pemberton stared at the razed landscape a long time, wanting it to be enough" (261). The unwavering human exceptionalism displayed by Serena is, at the very least, conflicted in Pemberton. He may not coexist with nature in

the manner of the Batistes in *Salvage the Bones*, or of Jojo and Richie in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, but he does develop an understanding of his own ability to negatively affect it. Pemberton may be an unwilling example of the posthumanist subject, but he exemplifies traits of it none-the-less.

The fragility of coexistence is one of the major themes explored in the opening chapters of this thesis. Such coexistence, or "[t]he way things is balanced. Everything in the world has its natural place" (Rash 158-59), is similarly a prominent concern in *Serena*. In particular, the fragility of other-than-human nature in the face of human interference is obvious in this ecology. These, as in the denouement of *Salvage the Bones*, are smashed landscapes. However, they are the product not of human-affected natural disasters, but of direct human interference. The existence depicted here is not an equal or even a co-operative one. As with the disregard for human life shown by Serena, other-than-human nature is equally dismissed as secondary to human desire. Serena envisions Brazilian ecologies with "[v]irgin forests of mahogany and no law but nature's law" (29). With her allusion to Hobbes, she effectively dismisses other-than-human nature as irrelevant against her own desires. In *Salvage the Bones*, I have previously shown that there is a sense of other-than-human nature reclaiming the assemblage ecologies depicted, but not here. In fact, as Lang has noted, the image of "the wasteland" is used extensively throughout *Serena*: "At the valley's center was the camp, surrounded by a wasteland of stumps and branches" (13). Alongside the obvious allusion to T.S. Eliot's poem, here the wasteland is also literal. There is a sense of anger at northern intrusion, in the form of the Boston Lumber Company, into the southern economy, and the plundering of resources.

As with *Mudbound*, war is overlayered onto *Serena*'s ecology, but here it is both the Great War, further connecting the novel to Eliot's poem, and hints of the southern preoccupation with the Civil War. From direct references, such as the mention of

"cloaks whose butternut and blue colors bespoke long-ago divisions in the county" (62), to more weighted ones: "Your people not knowing where you're buried . . . That's a terriblesome thing" (247), the Lost Cause directly raises its head for the first time in the contemporary literature being examined. In *Serena*, societal and environmental devastation are connected through images of "acres of stumps that, from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield" (23), and they are connected with northern invasion. Rash depicts an ecology with parallels to Susan Scott Parrish's "biological reenactment of the War of Northern Aggression" ("As I Lay Dying" 77) mentioned in Chapter Five. When the Great War is similarly layered over the southern ecology, the lack of agency expressed is notable. The razed landscape "[l]ooks like that land over in France once them in charge let us quit fighting" (335). More so than in *Mudbound*, there is a sense of a rural tradition being left behind, along with a section of society, and with it an anger at the region's diminishing dominion over its own fate. In the words of Eliot's poem: "the dead tree gives no shelter" (23).

Such fragility of coexistence has consequences for the human inhabitants of the region as well, and Mary Douglas's dirt as matter out of place is also evident in *Serena*. Rather than the impossibility of order, here, it appears in the form of pollution. It is matter, created by the actions of humans, causing its own devastation by virtue of being situated in the wrong place. It is evident from the Pembertons' first arrival at the camp as "[t]hey drove through a creek clogged with silt" (15). It is a pollution causing damage to the region's other-than-human inhabitants: "an ever-widening wasteland of stumps and slash, brown clogged creeks awash with dead trout" (115). There is an assemblage existence between human and other-than-human portrayed, but the balance expressed by the camp's workers is fragile:

> "Used to be thick with trout too, this here stream. There was many a day you and me took supper from it. Now you'd not catch a knottyhead."

"There was game too," Ross said, "deer and rabbit and coons."

"Squirrels and bear and beaver and bobcats," Henryson added.

"And panthers," Ross said. "I seen one ten year ago on this very creek, but I'll never see ever a one on it again."

Ross paused and lit his cigarette. He took a deep draw and let the smoke slowly wisp from his mouth.

"And I had my part in the doing of it."

"We had to feed our families," Henryson said.

"Yes, we did," Ross agreed. "What I'm wondering is how we'll feed them once all the trees is cut and the jobs leave." (334-35)

The connectivity originates from a position of human exceptionalism. Prior to the devastation the ecology is there to be exploited, the destruction allowing the workers to feed their families as well as make the Pembertons rich. However, it is a connectivity that also serves to highlight the non-exceptionalism of the posthumanist subject and one that these workers have become only too aware of. The exploitation of the region's resources has had unconsidered effects on the other-than-human population of not just trout, but deer, rabbits, bears, and panthers too. Environmental and societal fragility are once again connected, and the consequences are felt keenly by the region's inhabitants. Indeed, through its depiction of pollution the novel once more overlayers the future of mountaintop removal onto its present. *Serena* and her modern-day contemporaries might pursue a complete dominion over other-than-human nature, but Rash is keen to make clear that there are consequences for those caught in the wake.

While *Mudbound* depicts the brutality of nature through the difficulty of pastoral life, in *Serena*, as in *Salvage the Bones*, other-than-human nature fights back with an agency of its own. As Tripthi Pillai and Daniel Cross observe: "While the majority of recent dystopic writings about nature focus on the horror that ensues from human abuse

of the environment, what distinguishes Rash's narrative of a vengeful nature is his refusal to assign to the forests operational passivity" (160). The violent potential of other-than-human nature is referenced early in the novel in Rash's description of the cut branches left dangling during the logging: "the sharded limbs called widow makers that waited minutes or hours or even days before falling earthward like javelins" (24). It is also linked to the difficulty of the rural existence depicted: "Fingers or toes lost to frostbite were among the season's lesser hazards" (101). Serena is not the only sower of violence in the mountain's forests. Death amongst the workers is common: "A log slipped free of the main cable line and killed a worker, and two days later the skidder's boom swung a fifty-pound metal tong into a man's skull" (183). Although an act of industrial negligence, Rash's placement of other-than-human nature at the centre gives it a sense of revenge, a feeling exacerbated when Rash gives the plundered nature an agency of its own, tree limbs slipping free "only to be caught again a few inches farther down, the sharp end tilting earthward as the limb hung in abeyance a few moments longer, as if deciding" (187). Once again there is a ferocity to the other-than-human nature on display, but unlike *Mudbound*, and the contemporary set novels previously examined, in *Serena* Rash gives the other-than-human nature agency. Everything in the Appalachian assemblage is a deliberate actant. There is a danger associated with damaging any part of the web, and *Serena* makes this very clear.

The sense of the U.S. South as a region in transformation, central to the analysis of *Salvage the Bones*, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and *Long Division*, is less clear in either *Mudbound* or *Serena*. As historical novels they do display Renascence sensibilities, a continuity with the literature of their temporal setting. Nevertheless, posthumanism does not and should not represent a complete break from the liberal humanist subject. Everything "post" has some continuity with what precedes it. As such, I would suggest that one of the notable factors of both *Mudbound* and *Serena* is their juxtapostion of

characters who depict posthumanist subjects and liberal humanist subjects. Characters such as Ronsel, Jamie, and Pemberton demonstrate traits of the posthumanist subject even if the novels themselves are less posthumanist, when examined through their agricultural ecologies, than their contemporary-set counterparts. Although the changing nature of a deep connection to the land is not as obvious, in different ways both Jordan and Rash suggest a need for coexistence rather than dominion. In addition, the fragility of coexistence once again portrayed in both *Mudbound* and *Serena* is suggestive of a posthumanist perception of place.

Chapter Seven - Mud

Following on from the farmed landscapes of Chapter Six, I initially intended to title this chapter "Untouched Landscapes." The focus was – and still is – on the pockets of narrative in which the land less affected by human contact is brought to the fore. However, the very idea of an untouched landscape is of course an impossibility as a posthumanist understanding of the world reveals. As Martin Melosi observes:

> [H]uman modification – as much as the natural heritage – has shaped the sectional and regional South. The exploitation of forests and wildlife, the impact of the agricultural system, the Civil War, urbanization, and industrialization all have had major roles in transforming the South. (8)

No landscapes, and no ecologies, remain truly untouched, either in the novels discussed or the U.S. South itself. As with any assemblage, the southern ecologies depicted in Hillary Jordan's *Mudbound* and Ron Rash's *Serena* are a network of affect, both internally and via their permeable borders. The ecologies form more than simply a background in the novels, they are themselves actants both in the plot and thematically. When examined side-by-side, the differing ecologies rendered highlight one of the problems inherent in discussions of southern literature, the biodiversity of the region. Melosi notes: "The environment, to be sure, has long been seen as one of the factors that made the South different from other parts of the United States" (xvii). Yet, he also describes "the environmental complexity of the regions within the South, from semitropical coastal areas to high mountain peaks, from swampy lowlands to modern cities" (xvii). It is a complexity that is conspicuous in the high mountain peaks and swampy lowlands of the novels discussed in this chapter.

Gaining prominence in the late 1970s as part of a larger environmental movement in North America, bioregionalism is itself an alternative way of delineating

place (Lynch et al. 2). As such, the U.S. South cannot truly be called a single bioregion as defined by Robert L. Thayer:

> A unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms. (qtd. in Lynch et al. 3)

Instead, it is made up of a number of different bioregions, highlighting the complexity of the U.S. South as a region, and once again undermining the idea of a southern identity born from and defined by the landscapes inhabited. Rather, the biodiversity of the U.S. South is in keeping with investigations of diverse group identities within the region, by Leigh Anne Duck, Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, amongst others who "seek to understand how multiple group identities within the region have been constructed" (Duck, "Southern Nonidentity" 319). Just as ethnographic diversity has been ignored in conceptions of a southern identity informed by the land inhabited, so too has biodiversity. Smith and Cohn suggest that "till recently both white and black constructions of a 'South' . . . have tended to elide geographical, demographic, and economic differences within the region's borders and similarities across them" (3). I would add bioregional to that list. Certainly, on the face of things, there is little to connect the Mississippian farmers with the Appalachian timbermen, at least in terms of a unique and unified identity.

Bioregionalism is therefore useful in understanding the conception of the U.S. South as an assemblage as I have previously proposed. Tom Lynch et al. assert that:

> By foregrounding natural factors as a way to envision place, bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings – our local bioregion – rather than, or at least

> supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity. (4)

Not only is the U.S. South an assemblage of multiple bioregions, but each bioregion is itself also an assemblage, a "larger community of natural beings." Smaller assemblages have permeable borders and are therefore affected by the larger assemblages that they help to constitute. As Melosi observes: "The Coastal Plain links the South with the Atlantic seaboard; the Appalachians, with the Northeast; and the Lowlands, with the Midwest and Southwest. In no way has the South been geographically isolated from the other regions of the nation" (5). The U.S. South is already an assemblage, which is in turn inseparable from a wider national and global assemblage, one it has always been connected to. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson note: "The distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures is based upon a seemingly unproblematic division of space, on the fact that they occupy 'naturally' discontinuous spaces" (7). However, such a division of space is in reality far from unproblematic. As a result, I contend that what is actually demonstrated in Jordan and Rash's novels, is not a southern sense of place, but rather a bioregional understanding of identity. The reader is shown what it means to be a resident, not of the U.S. South, or even of Mississippi, but of Marietta, Mississippi, or rather Mudbound Farm, Marietta, Mississippi.

As such, there are differing group challenges on display in *Mudbound* and *Serena*. Although the ongoing trauma of racism looms large in *Mudbound*, it is nowhere to be seen in the Appalachian setting of *Serena*, which instead focuses on the continuance of national divisions that can be traced back to the Civil War. The region is both complex and variegated. By placing the novels together, I aim to highlight a conception of the U.S. South as fluid rather than fixed, albeit within the traditional boundaries of the region. Although "the local" is very much in evidence in the novels, the national and global permeate the region's boundaries. The U.S. South of either

novel cannot be fully understood without examining their enmeshment with the world around them. Lynch et al. state:

> We wholly concur that a localized sense of place is incomplete unless augmented by a sense of how that place is integrated into the wider biosphere and the global network of cultures and economies. But we also suggest that a sense of the global is likewise incomplete without an awareness that the globe is an amalgamation of infinitely complex connections among variously scaled and nested places. (9)

The complexity that they emphasise, exemplified by the unfarmed sections of *Mudbound* and *Serena*'s respective bioregions, ably demonstrates the connection I make between posthumanism and new understandings of the U.S. South. Both require an investigation of an assemblage of assemblages, situated within a wider assemblage.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Hillary Jordan's *Mudbound* and Ron Rash's *Serena* are both distinctly of their region – and their own bioregion – yet display a connection with the land that is more ubiquitous than the southern sense of place. Consistent with the arguments of the previous chapter, once again there is less posthumanist sensibility on display in these historically set novels than in their contemporary set counterparts. However, both novels again juxtapose central characters contrasted by their relationships to the unfarmed land around them. Characters in both novels display a connection to the other-than-human world surrounding them, rather than the history of the land they occupy. Taken alongside the bioregionalism depicted, I will show that the idea of a southern identity is once again undermined by depictions of human identity constituted by a larger community both geographically and from within individual bioregions.

In his review of Tom Franklin and Beth Ann Fennelly's *The Tilted World* for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Max Winter proposes that "[n]atural disasters,

cornerstones of world literature since the Bible's great flood, often resemble characters" (Winter). Certainly, this can be seen to be true in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, where Hurricane Katrina hovers with a menacing presence throughout the novel, before finally making its destructive entrance on the eleventh day: "beating itself against the coastline like China at the tin door of the shed when she wants to get out" (219). An extension to this idea, in both *Serena* and *Mudbound*, the unfarmed land, rather than merely background to the action, resembles a character in the manner of Winter's natural disasters. It influences and sets a tone for the other characters. As it is in a posthumanist perception, the ecology of *Serena* is an actant with a huge ability to affect other elements in its assemblage.

In fact, *Serena*'s ecology, in keeping with the complexity of assemblages, and the biodiversity of the U.S. South, resembles two distinct characters, one allied with Rachel Harmon, the other with the Pembertons and their associates. As such, its depiction portrays both connection with and disconnection from the other-than-human world respectively. For all the scenes of destruction and wasteland in the novel, there are also manifold depictions of natural beauty. Rather than the national park, which remains largely off page throughout, it is Rachel's surroundings that encapsulate much of this beauty. Although Rachel has been raised on farmland, her depiction is pastoral rather than agrarian. She demonstrates what American Studies scholar Leo Marx calls "the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment" (5), a desire for a more natural existence than the inexorable advance towards urbanisation offers. Rachel's ecology foregrounds the other-than-human world around her: "Queen Anne's lace still held beaded blossoms of dew. A big yellow and black writing spider hung in its web's center, and Rachel remembered how her father had claimed seeing your initial sewn into the web meant you'd soon die" (40). It is a world full of delicacy, vibrancy, fecundity and heterogeneity, where a path "followed Rudisell Creek down the mountain to where

it entered the Pigeon River, the path narrowed by sprawling poke stalks that drooped under the weight of their purple berries and goldenroot bright as caught sunshine" (42). This is a landscape that Rachel does not just exist alongside of but is inherently connected to: "She was barefoot, something she hadn't realized until that moment, but glad of it, because she could feel the pebbly dust sifted over the packed dirt, feel how it anchored her to the world" (95).

Accordingly, it is this natural world, rather than the history of the region, that fills her thoughts of the past:

> Her father pointed to a large silver-green moth. For a few minutes the chores were put off as the two of them just stood there . . . As the moth fluttered out into the night, her father had lifted his large strong hand and settled it on Rachel's shoulder a moment. (51)

Rachel's ecology remains distinctive of the Appalachian region: "The sun had fallen behind the mountains now, and the cove seemed to settle deeper into the earth, the way an animal might burrow into leaves to make a nest before it slept" (197). This landscape is itself alive, and Rachel's connection to it speaks to more than the southern sense of place. Even as a child, Rachel's understanding of the world is described through ecologies:

> She thought of the map in Miss Stephen's classroom . . . The first state they'd learned was North Carolina, long and narrow like an anvil, everything within its lines green. And that had made sense to Rachel at six, because come winter there were still holly bushes and firs and rhododendron, even in the gray trees bright-green clumps of mistletoe. But when Miss Stephens showed them Tennessee, the red hadn't seemed right. When her father pointed out mountains that were in Tennessee, they'd always been blue. (194)

Hers is a connection to the ecology around her, rather than to the socio-political history of the region. The landscape surrounding Rachel, the one she is in assemblage with, is not the cotton farm or felled timber of southern agriculture, but rather unworked land. It is, employing Marx's terminology, a simple, rural environment, that offers another smaller bioregion within Rash's Appalachian forests. As such, Rachel has a posthumanist perception of her surroundings alongside the emotional and psychological ties that connect her to the Appalachians.

Rachel's pastoral environment shares a connection with Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. There are clearly elements of Flannery O'Connor's much-examined "Christ-haunted" U.S. South on display in *Serena*, and also in *Mudbound*, not least in the array of biblical names such as Rachel, Jacob, Ezra, and Joel. However, the use of forest resources for healing practises examined in Chapter Four, are similarly in evidence in Rash's North Carolina, and serve as a throwback to the mythology of the rural U.S. South. The link to a wider cultural heritage, and the ethnobotanical overlayering seen in *Sing*, are clearly absent from Rash's homogeneous society, but the characters' connection to their surroundings is the same. Rachel, like *Sing*'s Philomène, utilises the forest for its natural resources:

> Rachel found the bloodroot first, under a shaded outcrop where a spring head seeped. She tugged the plants carefully from the ground and placed them in her sack. When she accidentally broke a stem, the red juice used for a tonic stained her fingers. (78)

Likewise, the novel's other autochthonous residents present their employers with: "mason jars filled with spring tonics made of milkweed and sassafras, mandrake and valerian root" (200).

Although not a connection to the African ancestry of *Sing*, there is a similarly deep connection to the local ecology on display. It is one in which the human residents

are encouraged to exist in harmony with the other-than-human world. Rachel's is a landscape where "[y]ou have to tell the bees he died. They'll leave if you don't" (82). Likewise, it is one where "her father once told her never to bother salamanders in a spring because they kept the water pure" (78). The landscape, or rather the ecology Rachel inhabits, is an entirely different bioregion to the one inhabited by Philomène in Bois Sauvage, but the characters who live within it similarly share a connection to it. It is an ecology that is capable of providing for those who inhabit it yet shares a delicate balance with them. As such, Rash presents the less-affected beauty of Rachel's pastoral landscape as having its own identity, diverse from the forests and mountains that exist alongside of it. Her place is distinct within this Appalachian region and her identity is influenced by a community wider than her human one.

Although intimately connected to the wastelands of Rash's novel, the Pembertons also come into contact with their own unloggable and therefore unaffected ecology. It is a landscape that is once again distinctively of the region, in many ways more obviously so than Rachel's. In fact, it is one on which Rash paints a very different character to the nurturing world with which he surrounds Rachel. Seen through the Pembertons' eyes, its dominant trait is its valuelessness. As previously seen in Chapter Six, the exceptionalism associated with the liberal humanist subject is fully displayed in Serena's character. Other-than-human nature, like the humans that coexist alongside it, is something for the couple to simply exploit. When it cannot be dominated, it is irksome and something to be disposed of. Consequently, the beauty of Rachel's world is summarily dismissed by the couple when it stands in the way of profit:

> A month earlier the last dogwood blossoms had wilted and fallen in the passing forests, the understory now the bright green of dogwood leaves and scrub oak, the denser green of mountain laurel and rhododendron. Pemberton suspected

> someday soon there'd be a poison to eradicate such valueless trees and shrubs and make it easier to cut and haul out hardwoods. (231)

The undeveloped rural environment that Rachel is inherently connected to, is one the Pembertons are completely removed from. Instead, the Appalachian landscape becomes forbidding through their focalisation: "The land slanted upward, and thick trunks of oaks and poplars quickly filled in the white expanse behind them" (74). It is an ecology that rather than enveloping the Pembertons, as it does with Rachel, instead seems to close around them: "The trail soon became only a space between trees in the day's last light" (75). In trying to isolate themselves from their assemblage, the ecology in turn isolates them, causing their northern colleague, Wilkie, to exclaim: "At times I feel I've been banished to the moon" (34). As discussed in the previous chapter, other-than-human nature is an actant in *Serena*. There is a palpable danger associated with it: "They soon passed directly under a cliff, spears of ice hanging from the rocks" (68). The other-than-human world appears to stand in opposition to the Pembertons, and "characters' intentionality is dismantled by the Appalachian surround" (Pillai and Cross 151). As with Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, this is not the distanced danger of the sublime, but rather a realised one. There is still a beauty to the Pembertons' landscape, but one Rash once again depicts as menacing.

Moreover, it is not just through the characterisation of ecologies that Rash places Rachel and the Pembertons in variance with one another. Leigh Anne Duck claims: "Even studies focused on regional transformation have often positioned [the U.S. South] in a different framework from national or global change" (*The Nation's Region* 9). Investigations of the region tend to focus on regional distinctiveness – the region as the other. Consistent with this, the unfarmed southern land's first appearance in the novel is one of contrast, set amid the arrival of the Pembertons from Boston:

> [T]he dogwood's white blossoms withered on the ground, the hardwood's branches thickened green. They passed a cabin, in the side yard a woman drawing water from a well. She wore no shoes and the towheaded child beside her wore pants cinched tight by twine. (13)

The rural southern landscape appears, between the train lines and logging camps of industrial expansion, but its unprofitable elements wither while their cultivatable counterparts thicken. The north, and its inhabitants are, from the outset, depicted as urban, urbane, and progressive. The south is contrasted as rural and traditional.

In addition to this, Rachel is largely framed throughout the narrative in juxtaposition with her counterpoint, Serena. Rachel's introductory appearance in the novel is in the midst of a rural idyll:

> Dew darkened the hem of her gingham dress as Rachel Harmon walked out of the yard, the grass cool and slick against her bare feet and ankles. Jacob nestled in the crook of her left arm, in her right hand the tote sack. He'd grown so much in only six weeks. (39)

She is barefoot in the grass, it is sunrise, the dawn of a new day, and the scene is full of other-than-human nature alongside new life in the form of her baby son, Jacob. Everything points towards Rachel's coexistence with the world surrounding her, her connectedness. She is raising her son in the way she herself was raised. It is no coincidence therefore, that this scene immediately follows a description of Serena's own upbringing: "My father brought tutors to the camp. They were all British, Oxford educated" (37). Although there is a sense of connectivity to a wider world here, it is external influence rather than inherent connectivity. Serena's education is an import from the courtyards and buildings of urban Britain rather than a result of inhabiting her own ecologies. Serena is raised by a man who "taught his daughter to shake hands firmly and look men in the eye as well as ride and shoot" (6). Her childhood is one of

distance and discipline. Rachel's connectedness is directly positioned next to Serena's disconnectedness.

Rachel's second appearance is of her hunting, an activity the Pembertons are intimately associated with throughout *Serena*, although their respective hunts take very different forms:

> When Rachel went to the barn to get a cabbage sack for the ginseng, she found, for the third morning in a row, that no eggs warmed under the two bantams . . . Rachel found the cabbage sack and left the barn. She thought about going ahead and getting the fishing pole and searching out a guinea egg. (77).

Rachel's hunt requires an engagement with, and understanding of, the other-than-human world. It is a search rather than a pursuit. She is reading her landscape, searching for food to eat and plants to sell. Beilfuss argues that Rachel uses nature as a commodity: "The ginseng trade is a perfect example of how globalization and transnationalism intersect with a minutely local regionalism" (386). Yet, importantly, there is a sustainability to her actions: "She separated the berries from the ginseng plants and placed them in the broken soil, covered them up and moved on to the next plant" (79). Rachel once again demonstrates a coexistence with her ecologies, and an understanding of the web of actants in her assemblage. As before, Rachel's appearance immediately follows a comparative section featuring the Pembertons, their bear hunting episode: "By late Sunday morning the snow had stopped, and Buchanan and the Pembertons decided to go hunting a mile southwest of camp, a five-acre meadow Galloway had baited for a month" (67). As with all their appearances when surrounded by the southern ecology, there is a manipulation involved, Galloway baiting the land to influence events: "Galloway had brought a tote sack of corn the previous day, and a dozen deer placidly ate the last of it" (69-70). Even their more entitled and exceptionalist understanding of hunting is not allowed to take a natural course, but rather is engineered for their ease.

The Pembertons do not have to track their prey, it is brought to them. Consequently, Rachel's coexistence is again juxtaposed with the Pembertons' desire for dominion and her connection is contrasted with their disconnection. Even when killed, the bear is discarded in pursuit of a more desirable trophy, a mountain lion: "leave it with the deer . . . Carcasses are used out west to draw mountain lions" (74). Just as large parts of the region's flora are dismissed as valueless, so too is its fauna. While Rachel replants berries to ensure a future crop, the Pembertons destroy for their own entertainment.

Rachel's third appearance is one of sickness: "When the sickness came upon them Rachel thought it was something picked up at the camp's church service" (91). It is a sickness contracted through her coexistence with her local community, and one that again positions her in her southern ecology. Having tried remedies native to her ecosystem: "She used the witch hazel as well, hoping at least to clear his lungs" (91), she finds herself once again walking through her rural landscape in search of help: "The road curved closer to the river. Rachel could hear the water rubbing against the bank, smell the fresh soil loosened by recent rain . . . On the right, willows lined the river, their branches leaning low overhead" (93). Rash repeatedly places Rachel in her rural environment, and once again, Rachel's appearance follows immediately as contrast to Serena's.

Although she shows very few signs of weakness throughout the novel, here, as with Rachel, Serena is suffering physically: "they walked out to the stable, Serena's gray eyes set in a heavy-lidded wince against the unaccustomed light. A heavy snow had fallen the day before and Serena slipped, would have fallen if Pemberton had not grabbed her arm and righted her" (88). However, hers is a self-imposed weakness rather than a result of her coexistence. Serena's malady is brought about by her single-mindedness in training an eagle. Once again, it is her determination for dominion over the other-than-human world: "When Pemberton asked about food or quilts, Serena told

him she'd not eat or sleep again until the eagle did" (88). Serena is undoubtedly in awe of the eagle, asserting "[i]t's so beautiful . . . It's no wonder it takes not just the earth but the sky to contain it" (88). Rash positions her relationship with the other-than-human world in stark contrast to that of Rachel. Serena's is an existence of control, a desire to manipulate the other-than-human world and take what she can. Rachel's existence on the other hand has an inevitability to it. Hers is a coexistence, and it is one largely underscored by the juxtaposition of the two contrasting characters, and their framing within the southern ecology.

Although I have previously argued for elements of posthumanism in *Serena*, true to its historical setting, there are clearly still renascence sensibilities on display. In particular, the defence of a rural culture threatened by industrialisation central to *I'll Take My Stand*. There is no doubt that control and dominion in *Serena* are largely associated with the characters foreign to the Appalachian region. Pemberton and Serena are both closely associated with Boston[10]. So too are their associates Buchanan and Wilkie, who, although their roots are never explicitly stated, co-own the Boston Lumber Company. Rash employs northerners as outsiders to his region. As such, northern influence on the U.S. South in the novel is very much in keeping with historical notions of northern aggression, and therefore the memorialisation of the region. After all, it is surely no coincidence that Rash chooses Boston, with its historical significance to both northern colonialism and The Union, for his antagonists' profiles. Such northern influence hints at the inevitable permeability of the region's borders. In fact, a number of the novel's real-life characters, all connected to the national park project, are also from the north. John D. Rockefeller, intimated as the project's financial and political backer, is from New York. Horace Albright, referred to in the novel as Secretary Albright, is from California, but based in Washington, D.C. as the Director of the

[10] Serena is born in Colorado but attends finishing school in Boston and meets Pemberton there.

National Parks Service. And the project's most strident advocate, Horace Kephart, although referred to in the novel as "[t]he Bard of Appalachia" (117), is from St. Louis. Even the purported protection of the region's ecologies carries more than a hint of northern aggression in *Serena*. The protection of the Appalachian landscape via a national park, which, as I have previously noted, Rash is at best conflicted about, is driven in the novel by an external, largely northern influence. It is an influence that "won't be satisfied until the government owns every acre in these mountains" (164).

Whilst the region's borders are notably permeable in *Serena*, from actants outside of the U.S. South, mobility in the novel is both inward and outward. Rachel, the novel's most regionally representative character is forced to leave the south and start a new life in the north. Hers is a reversal of the American fable, the idea of a redemptive journey away from society in the direction of nature (Marx 69). Yet, in some ways, Rachel is also representative of a new U.S. South, describing her cabin after her father's death as "a place where the living held sway more than those dead or gone" (275). Eschewing the backwards look associated with the renascence, she is forced as far from the region as it is possible to get, within the boundaries of the United States. Rachel ultimately alights in Seattle, Washington, an urban environment: "A car horn startled her, and she knew if she lived here the rest of her life she'd never get used to the busyness of town life, how something was always coming and going and whatever that something was always had a noise" (330). It is a place as emotionally removed as it is geographically from her pastoral origins.

Rachel is repeatedly associated throughout the novel with an understanding of identity linked to location, a relationship that could be connected with a southern sense of place. From her defining states by their landscapes on the school map, to her intimate connection to the Appalachian Mountains, Rachel is drawn as a part of her own ecology. She is a part of the mountains: "The mountains and woods quickly reclosed

around her" (49). In turn the mountains are a part of her: "It would have been wrong to take you away from these mountains, because if you're born here they're a part of you. No other place will ever feel right" (197). Indeed, Rachel's final act before fleeing her home is one of solidarity with the North Carolina ecology: "Rachel kneeled beside Jacob. She took the child's hand and pressed it to the dirt . . . 'Don't ever forget what it feels like, Jacob,' she whispered, and let her hand touch the ground as well" (272). However, hers is not a connection to the history of the land. It is not a connection to "the stock characters and themes by which the South has traditionally defined itself in mythic terms" (Guinn 27). Rather than a connection to the cultural differences and societal organisation we inscribe onto maps, as Gupta and Ferguson's earlier observation explains, it is a connection to the ecology itself. Even in the urban surroundings of Seattle, Rachel finds solace in urbanised fragments of the pastoral: "On an earlier trip to the grocery store, she'd found a rhubarb patch across the tracks from Mrs. Sloan's house" (293). It is a discovery that allows her to maintain a hold on her sense of identity: "Next year I'll plant me a garden, she told herself, no matter where we are" (294). It is an identity based on her coexistence and inseparability from the natural world, rather than the particular bioregion that she hails from. Although the posthumanist sensibilities so apparent in Ward and Laymon's novels are less visible in Rash's text, Rachel Harmon does provide evidence of a shift in southern authors' depiction of their transforming ecologies. Her inherent and continued connectivity with the other-than-human world can be read as indicative of a posthumanist perception of place.

The uncultivated landscapes in Jordan's *Mudbound* have less of an obvious presence than in *Serena*. Perhaps the most prominent description of southern ecologies is detailed by Henry McAllan, late in the novel:

> This is the loins of the land. This lush expanse between two rivers, formed fifteen thousand years ago when the glaciers melted, swelling the Mississippi and its tributaries until they overflowed, drowning half the continent. When the waters receded, settling back into their ancient channels, they brought a rich gift of alluvium stolen from the lands they'd covered. Brought it here, to the Delta, and cast it over the river valleys, layer upon sweet black layer. (316)

The mud of the novel's title is explicitly chronicled by Henry as an essential component of the region's fertile soil. Even in descriptions of unfarmed land, Jordan's remains an overtly agrarian landscape. However, perhaps even more so than in *Serena*, the landscape of the Delta hangs over the characters as an anthropomorphised presence. Just as Hurricane Katrina looms malignantly in *Salvage*, so too the Delta becomes an oppressive character in *Mudbound*. It is one that subjugates three of the novel's narrators in particular, Ronsel, Jamie, and Laura, and it is no coincidence that these are the three characters with most connection to the world outside of Mississippi.

For Ronsel, a black man in 1940s Mississippi, the root of such oppression is obvious: "The whippoorwills had started their pleading and the lightning bugs were winking in and out over the purpling fields. The land looked soft and welcoming, but I knew what a lie that was" (148). Nothing about Delta life is welcoming for Ronsel. Having experienced the possibilities of a life outside of the United States, the ecology begins to take on a different look: "The sky looked bluer and the shacks that squatted underneath it looked shabbier. The newly planted fields on either side of me seemed to stretch on and on like a brown ocean" (250). There is a sweeping quality to Ronsel's description, but it is one that manages at the same time to diminish the local landscape. It is an ecology that reduces and confines. There is a hint of sublimity to Ronsel's Delta but the true danger, as with *Serena*'s Appalachians remains actualised. As Jamie points out: "This is no place for you" (253). There is an oppressive sublimity to the Delta

landscape for Jamie also: “I waited in the hole. Around me was mud, stinking and oozing. Overhead a rectangle of darkening gray” (8). For him it is more of a perceived danger, one that connects him to the overlayered landscapes of the war: “It was how I won all those medals for bravery: from being so scared of that vast, hungry blue that I drove straight into the thick of German antiaircraft fire” (8). However, as with Ronsel, the Delta is no place for those who have seen a different world. As Jamie tells Laura, “I need to make a new start. And I sure as hell can’t do it here” (8). In *Mudbound*, the localised bioregion within the Delta does not solely inform the identities of either Ronsel or Jamie. They are affected by a wider assemblage.

Laura, in contrast to Ronsel and Jamie, is from urbanised Memphis, one of the largest cities of the antebellum South. Despite this expanding metropolis, hers is a landscape that she predominantly understands, due to her limited experiences as an unmarried woman from a religious family: “My world was small, and everything in it was known” (15). As a result, she is more aware of the other-than-human world that surrounds her in the Delta, an ecology previously alien to her. In contrast to *Mudbound*’s Rachel, Laura moves from the urban to the rural U.S. South. Nevertheless, she is no more representative of Marx’s redemptive journey of the American fable. Consequently, it is a world that subdues her in a different manner to either Ronsel or Jamie. It oppresses her through its rurality:

> Marietta was a Delta town; its population – a grand total of four hundred and twelve souls, as I later learned – would consist mostly of farmers, wives of farmers and children of farmers, half of whom were probably Negroes and all of whom were undoubtedly Baptists. We would be miles from civilization among bumpkins. (55-56)

The region’s major topographical feature, the Mississippi River is dismissed as “a vast, indifferent presence on our right” (58). The land around it is “flat and mostly

featureless, as farmers will inevitably make it" (66). New to the rural environs of the U.S. South, Laura perceives the ecology in a way the other characters do not. For Laura, the natural landscape of the Delta is "a sea of churned earth stretching from the house to the river, bereft of crops and the furrows they'd been planted in" (319). It is a faceless, if not entirely valueless, terrain, one that negatively affects her subjectivity: "And me, of course, I was part of that dreary landscape too" (242). In almost a reversal of *Serena*'s Rachel, the southern ecology has become a part of her that she cannot escape. She too has become inseparable from the other-than-human world around her, but it is a connection that oppresses rather than invigorates her.

Although the Delta landscape undoubtedly looms with a suffocating air around Laura, she is also identified with the majority of *Mudbound*'s few true descriptions of the unfarmed other-than-human world. It is a world that affords her a different perception of place than the sea of mud she encounters on the farm. Before her move, she describes the introduced nature of her urban landscape: "I took him to Overton Park. The dogwoods were blooming, and as we strolled beneath them the wind blew flurries of white petals down on our heads. It was like a scene out of the movies, with me as the unlikely heroine" (18). It is a description connected to her urban sense of the world. Once in the Delta, the house the McAllans mistakenly believe that they will inhabit is described by Laura through its natural, rather than architectural, qualities:

> There was a large pecan tree in the front yard, and one side of the house was entirely covered in wisteria, like a nubby green cloak. In the spring, when it bloomed, its perfume would carry us down into sleep every night, and in the summer the lawn would be dotted with fallen purple blossoms. (58-59)

In listing its qualities, she notes that it has: "most enticing to me, a fig tree" (56). Laura may not be from the agrarian U.S. South, but her perception of place is still one of coexistence with the other-than-human world that surrounds her. The agrarian southern

landscape undoubtedly takes its toll on Laura, as Florence observes: “Delta’ll take a woman like that and suck all the sap out of her till there ain’t nothing left but bone and grudge, against him that brung her here and the land that holds him and her with him” (88). Yet, even in the utilitarian soil of the farm, Laura, similarly to *Serena*’s Rachel, is able to find solace in unfarmed beauty:

> I spied a clump of small tender plants at the edge. There were several dozen of them, too evenly spaced to be weeds. I knew what they were even before I broke off a sprig and smelled it. All summer long I slept with Henry on sheets scented with lavender. (319-20)

Laura may ultimately become a southern farmer, but her connection with the land extends beyond her bioregion. Her connection, as with Rachel, is with the other-than-human world rather than the region itself, again indicative of a posthumanist perception of place.

In contrast, just as George Pemberton dismisses the non-commodified topography of *Serena* as valueless, Laura’s husband Henry “never had much use for nature in its untouched state. Forests didn’t move him, nor mountains, nor even the sea, but show him a well-tended farm and he was breathless with excitement” (165). For Henry, even the non-agricultural ecology is appraised for what it can provide: “See that river we crossed over? I bet it’s full of catfish and crawdads” (67). Non-agricultural land that cannot provide is dismissed as valueless: “up in Oxford, where the land doesn’t lie flat, but heaves itself up and down like seawater” (72). Although Laura is initially able to find subjectivity in the other-than-human nature of the urban U.S. South, a connection she is able to maintain, despite overwhelming adversity, with the non-agrarian southern landscape, for Henry, the traditional culture based on an agricultural foundation is everything. He is positioned by Jordan, through his

disconnection from unfarmed ecologies, in direct contrast with Laura. Henry is a reflection of the Southern Agrarians' south.

In another connection to *Serena*, Florence's coexistence with the other-than-human world comes to the fore. Just as I connect Rachel's use of forest resources with Philomène's in *Sing*, so too Florence reveals a reliance on the natural healing properties available in her own ecology. Although not specified as the forest resources described by Geneviève Calame-Griaule, she similarly uses plants for their medicinal qualities. When treating the children's whooping cough, she knows the medicinal potential of the local flora and decides, "[w]e'll make em up some horehound tea . . . That tea'll draw the phlegm right on out of there" (84-85), before suggesting "once they get to breathing better we'll make em some chicken broth and put a little ground-up willow bark in it for the fever" (85). Once again, a connection to the African culture brought to the region through slavery is layered over the region's ecology. There is a wider reach of connectivity within this southern culture, even before the overlayering of Europe's battlefields.

As with Philomène, Florence's connection to the other-than-human resources surrounding her carries more of a far-reaching mythology with it than Rachel's. Her connection does not just relate to healing properties, but extends beyond, as exemplified in her attempts to get Jamie to leave: "I just wanted him gone. But he didn't go, not even after I threw salt in his tracks and put a mojo of jimsonweed and gumelastin under his bed" (227). It represents the kind of mythology of the U.S. South seen in the "academic reclamation of Zora Neale Hurston's southern folk aesthetics" (Madhu Dubey qtd. in Bone, *Where the New World Is* 31), her depiction of a U.S. South and black southern culture influenced by transnational connectivity. As a consequence, it creates a strange juxtaposition with the Christ-haunted south, with Laura observing "Florence was highly superstitious and full of well-meaning advice about supernatural

matters . . . the Dark Man had many minions, and you had to be vigilant against them all the time" (96). Jordan uses elements of both white and African American literary traditions in her renascence-era U.S. South, highlighting the always present diversity and complexity of the region. The borders of the U.S. South are, and always have been, clearly permeable.

In fact, as Piacentino observes, "[b]oundaries of various kinds, often imposed, affect all of the novel's principal characters" (272). As previously mentioned in Chapter Six, the influence of the Second World War brings a global connectivity to the borders of the Mississippi Delta, permeating and bringing seeds of change to the region. Additionally, the other-than-human world can be seen to intrude upon the McAllans' living-space, most notably in the omnipresent mud, as matter out of place. In its depiction of human coexistence with the other-than-human world, *Mudbound* demonstrates the porosity of such borders. However, in placing her novel in the renascence setting of the southern plantation bioregion, I would suggest that Jordan has in many ways written a more traditionally southern novel than any of the other authors examined in this thesis. Accordingly, matters of race and gender take centre-stage, with the novel tending to focus on the impermeability of social borders at the time.

In the case of Ronsel Jackson, societal borders are oftentimes allegorised by physical boundaries. There are boundaries Ronsel is socially forbidden to cross in post-war Mississippi yet does. When visiting the local store on arriving in Marietta, he attempts to leave by the front door, only to be told: "You must be confused as to your whereabouts . . . you're in Mississippi now. N– don't use the front door here" (140). Later, he accepts an invitation to sit in the front of Jamie McAllan's truck, an action that even Ronsel's father, Hap, thinks crosses a line: "The look of alarm on his face when he saw his son in the cab of the truck was so exaggerated it was comical" (211). Ronsel continues to attempt to transgress these physical borders in part due to his lived

experiences overseas. He also crosses another physical boundary of the U.S. South during his time in Germany, one that will ultimately seal his fate on his return. After the war ends, his relationship with a white German woman, Resl, leads to them having a son together. Although sagacious enough to understand that miscegenation is not a boundary he should conspicuously challenge in the U.S. South, he is undone by the discovery of a photograph of the mother and child. This border, "this…abomination! A foul pollution of the white race!" (272), is a breach of the southern social order too far, and Ronsel is subjected to a near fatal lynching.

Along with the racial borders of the U.S. South, personal borders in *Mudbound* are also clearly demarcated across gender lines. Henry makes the decisions in the McAllan marriage, and, as Laura notes, she is expected to acquiesce:

> Just like that, my life was overturned . . . This was his territory, as the children and the kitchen and the church were mine, and we were careful not to trespass in each other's territories. When it was absolutely necessary we did it discreetly, on the furthermost borders. (54)

Laura may appear to suggest that she is in charge of her own sections within the marriage, but as with the racial boundaries, Jordan makes clear the unhappiness such inflexible roles bring: "For the children's sakes, and for the sake of my marriage, I hid my feelings, maintaining a desperate cheerfulness" (95). Although, like Ronsel, Laura does at times cross these boundaries, most obviously in her sexual encounter with her brother-in-law Jamie, they remain for the most part impermeable to her. Indeed, Laura is ultimately able to settle within her societal boundaries, concluding at the end of the novel: "[w]hat I need, I have right here" (317). Unlike the permeability of the southern borders demonstrated in the novel, societal borders are seen to remain largely impermeable. Characters may try, and temporarily succeed in crossing such borders, but ultimately, they are forced back into socially accepted boundaries. In *Mudbound,* the

post-war U.S. South remains a region in which some boundaries are not able to be crossed. Jordan's novel demonstrates understandings of place largely consistent with the renascence era she depicts and the ideologies of that time.

Nonetheless, both *Serena* and *Mudbound* conclude with sections of overt overlayering. Matthew Guinn proposes that southern fiction has been characterised by: "The desire to order the present by recovering the past" (136). Certainly, both novels unavoidably follow this path as historical fiction. However, in their final chapters both novels also look forwards. In doing so, they move the action outside of their respective bioregions and also outside of the U.S. South, extending beyond the regional to suggest something more omnipresent. The conclusion of *Serena* is the more straight forward of the two. Designated as a coda and italicised to set it further apart from the main body of the novel, it jumps events forwards forty-five years to Serena Pemberton's life and death in Brazil. In doing so, Rash again connects the U.S. South with the global south through exploitation. Despite its brevity, the coda manages to employ several examples of overlayering in its three pages. Perhaps the least convincing, is its overlayering of the Second World War with its reference to Josef Mengele and his "West German tractor company" (369), a move that John Lang rightly observes feels "forced and superfluous" (95).

More successful, is the layering of the Appalachian landscape over the now present day of 1975. The photograph of Serena and Pemberton, taken in the main body of the novel, reappears: "In the background lay a wasteland of stumps and downed limbs whose limits the frame could not encompass" (369). Its description of a lack of limits, suggests a long term and continuing environmental destruction whose scope is frankly unimaginable. The reference to "limbs" is ambiguous enough to imply a human cost inextricably associated with the other-than-human one. With one description of a photograph, Rash is able to suggest that the environmental cost to his own particular

bioregion is not only ongoing, but connected to a wider cost, both geographically and societally. In addition to this, the coda's final scene, the death of Serena, is layered over the opening act of the novel. Beginning when "a man stepped onto the train platform" (370), referencing the pearl-handled knife carried by Rachel's dad, and culminating in a stabbing, the events of 1975 are effectively layered over those of 1929. However, rather than a mirroring, the scene demonstrates an existence across time. Jacob effectively begins and ends the events of the novel. The same events happen to the same people forty-five years apart. Karen Barad hypothesises a sense of time in which: "Each moment is a multiplicity within a given singularity" ("No Small Matter" G106), and I suggest this is what can be seen playing out in *Serena*'s coda. Events cannot be entirely separated even when occurring years apart. The only thing that has changed is the location. There is no singularity to Rash's U.S. South. Its themes are as ubiquitous as the human themes it encompasses.

The final chapter of *Mudbound*, although not technically a coda, serves a similar function. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jordan chooses to give the physically voiceless Ronsel Jackson the final voice in the novel. It is a voice that expresses hope for a changing U.S. South and a changing United States, but ultimately hints at stasis rather than progress. Equally as short as the concluding section of *Serena*, Jordan manages to portray even more overlayering through Ronsel's internal monologue. The section begins with a long section of overlayering:

> It's daytime, or it's night. I'm in a tank wearing a helmet, in the backseat of a moving car with a burlap sack over my head, in the bed of a wagon with a wet rag on my forehead. I'm surrounded by enemies. The stench of their hate is choking me. I'm choking, I'm begging please sir please, I'm pissing myself, I'm drowning in my own blood. I'm hollering at Sam to fire goddamnit, can't you see they're all around us, but he doesn't hear me. I shove him aside and take his

> position behind the bow gun but when I press the trigger nothing happens, the gun won't fire. I have a terrible thirst. *Water*, I say, *please give me some water*, but Lilly May can't hear me either, my lips are moving but nothing is coming out, nothing. (323)

Jordan layers past moments of terror for Ronsel over one another. The war, his lynching, and its aftermath all become one moment in time. Daytime or night, he feels himself surrounded by enemies. Historical trauma is similarly layered over Ronsel's present, with the recognition that "to make the story come out differently I'd have to overcome so much: birth and education and oppression, fear and deformity and shame, any one of which is enough to defeat a man" (322). Although his present is 1946, there can be little doubt that, in this final chapter, Jordan is explicitly layering such historical trauma over her own present. The challenges Ronsel faces have not changed significantly by 2008.

Indeed, Jordan's subsequent layering of the future Civil Rights movement over the post-war U.S. South carries a further suggestion of regional stasis. Ronsel proposes that he "[m]ight march behind Dr. King down the streets of Atlanta with his head held high. Might even find something like happiness" (324). There is a suggestion of hope layered over his shattered present when, addressing the reader, he proposes: "That's the ending we want, you and me both" (324). However, Ronsel has already acknowledged that his mutilation makes his peers uncomfortable, as "he reminded them of what could still happen to any one of them if they said the wrong thing to the wrong white man" (323). Layering Ronsel's landscape over her own in 2008, I would suggest that ultimately Jordan is refusing the hope that "we want, you and me both." In the overlayered landscapes of *Mudbound*, nothing has truly changed. Trauma can, and still does, happen to anyone.

As with their depiction of agricultural ecologies examined in Chapter Six, the uncultivated landscapes of both Hillary Jordan's *Mudbound* and Ron Rash's *Serena* display predominantly historical sensibilities in-keeping with their position as historical fiction. Once again, there are noticeably less posthumanist sensibilities on display than in the contemporary settings employed by Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon. However, both novels contain characters in whom I would suggest elements of the posthumanist subject are observable. In both the farmed and unfarmed ecologies examined in these two chapters, such sensibilities are clearly demarcated through the juxtaposition of liberal humanist characters with their more entwined counterparts. Although the social boundaries of the characters remain intact – as they should within their historical settings – the regional boundaries are more permeable. Both *Mudbound* and *Serena* display a bioregional understanding of identity that once again undermines the possibility of a regional sense of place.

Chapter Eight - Rust

When Leo Marx published *The Machine in the Garden* in 1964, he set the course of American Studies firmly on the path towards "a distinctively American theory of society" (4). It was a search for nothing less than the identity of the nation itself. According to Marx, this identity had been forged upon the idea of new beginnings that could be found in an as-yet-untouched rural landscape. It was forged upon a pastoral ideal. Yet, as Marx so ably demonstrates, a recurring literary motif in nineteenth-century American texts not only marks the impact of industrialisation on American society, but also represents a pivotal moment in the nation's self-awareness. It is the image of mechanised modernity, most memorably represented by the locomotive that awakens Hawthorne's sleepy hollow, and similarly shatters the peace of Thoreau's Walden Pond. Although his is an attempt to delineate a unified national identity, there were regional differences inherent in the cultural impact of industrialisation. Differences implicit in Marx's own observation that "[o]utside the South the pastoral ideal has little or no practical value as a political weapon against industrialism" (219).

In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx demonstrates how an image of mechanistic modernity first occurred then recurred throughout cultural depictions of a predominantly rural society. It is a symbol that would offer the first signs of what Marx describes in his "Afterword" as "the most important 'event' in American history" (369). He refers of course to industrialisation. For Marx, the machine's repeated incursion into the nineteenth-century American pastoral idyll is a demonstration of the superiority of the present over the past. It is a motif that "[s]ince 1844 . . . has served again and again to order literary experience. It appears everywhere in American writing" (229). The machine, the manifestation of industrialism, is a symbol of improvement, in which the progress is there for everyone to see. It represents: "the cloudy vision of material

happiness that is the ostensible goal of industrial progress in America and – though probably with fewer illusions – throughout Western society" (299). Moreover, it also employs a previously unseen characteristic, a change in the conventional understanding of fixed and separate locations in space. By bringing the urban directly into the rural and, critically, changing it, the motif of the machine itself introduces an early marker of the sense of connectivity so crucial to an understanding of assemblage existence, and therefore to a new understanding of place. In this final chapter, I demonstrate that contemporary southern fiction is displaying a similarly recurring motif, one that I will examine from a decidedly different theoretical focus, and which I will refer to as the rusting machine. It is an image that enables me to illustrate the connection between the contemporary-set and historically-set novels examined throughout the previous seven chapters. It is a connection of connections, highlighting the assemblage existence central to a posthumanist perception of place.

Part Seven of Beth Ann Fennelly's "The Kudzu Chronicles," the poet laureate of Mississippi's poetic sequence to the U.S. South, begins thus:

Odor of sweat, sweet rot, and road kill.

I run past this slope of kudzu

all through the bitchslap of August,

run past the defrocked

and wheelless police car

(kudzu driving,

kudzu shotgun,

kudzu cuffed in back),

run past these buzzards so often

they no longer look up,

tucking black silk napkins

beneath their bald black

necks.

Sweat, rot, and road kill—and yet

the purple scent of kudzu blossoms. (68)

Her use of kudzu, a metaphor for her own migration to the region, not only conveys the invasive nature of the ubiquitous scourge of the southern landscape, but also helps to exemplify the image I refer to as the rusting machine. Rather than a shocking intrusion into the rural landscape, the rusting shell of a symbol of modern society is overshadowed by the other-than-human world it occupies, enervated and forgotten. The potentially peace-shattering siren, that would once have marked its entrance in the manner of the locomotive's whistle, is permanently silenced, as miscellaneous actants from the other-than-human world reclaim and re-purpose its carcass. Marx asserts: "To see a powerful, efficient machine in the landscape is to know the superiority of the present to the past" (192). However, the machine is not the present in Fennelly's imagery. Instead, it is the assemblage of human, other-than-human, and re-purposed machinery that carries significance. I am not suggesting that images of modernity and industrialism no longer exist in contemporary literature. Clearly, they still do. Nevertheless, I do contend that images such as Fennelly's police car – images of assemblage existence that I would suggest have something new to say about the region – now abound in literature of the U.S. South.

If "[t]he pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America since the age of discovery" (Marx 3), then what has correspondingly been used to define the meaning of the U.S. South as a unique region within the national whole? As discussed in the previous chapter, the region's literary topography is as varied as its physical topography. Southern literature has often been characterised as distinctly bioregional, due to its reliance on a rural idealism. From Thomas Jefferson's vision in 1785 of an

idealised Virginia that, as noted by both Marx and Richard Gray, was separate from any notion of the nation, in which "the primary political, economic, and social factor was the yeoman" (Gray 19), southern authors have constructed a much examined and well documented agrarian landscape. According to Albert E. Cowdrey: "[w]ith few and mostly recent exceptions, southern writers have apprehended the landscape as country people do to whom animals, trees, and landforms are not to be named only but encountered" (196). The southern ecology has long been depicted as a working and workable one, an ecology fertile to the perceived independence of agricultural life. As the nation as a whole moved away from agriculture and towards industrialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, isolating the region both culturally and economically, a notion Gray terms "the *idea* of the South" (xii), came to the fore and began to take root in the region's psyche. Consequently, the afore-mentioned agrarianism was now embraced as a representation of dignity in opposition to the machinations of industrialism. In doing so, Gray suggests that the region's understanding of itself relied upon "a long-established tradition of idealised landscapes . . . Hovering over everything is a sense of arrangement, contrivance, artifice" (79). The U.S. South had created a myth of its own.

Melanie Benson Taylor argues for the centrality of literary studies to such a myth:

> Southern literary studies inaugurated not simply a cultural tradition but an ideological one. Compelled largely by the conservative Agrarian writers and scholars who collaborated on the 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* to decry the corrosive materialism of the modern age, the twentieth-century Southern literary "renaissance" was born into (and from) an epoch of dislocation and alienation. (121)

The tradition Benson Taylor refers to, the Agrarian Ideal, is also in many ways the contrivance Gray identifies. Marx argues that the southern ideal should itself more accurately be termed pastoral, as "the noble husbandman . . . is the good shepherd of the old pastoral dressed in American homespun" (127). However, I would suggest his argument that the chief difference between the two "is the relative importance of economic factors implied by each term" (126), is slightly misplaced. The Southern Agrarians' critique of modern society is committed to the individual's role in such a society, as much as it is to the economics of agriculture. It is a defence of a traditional culture, and as such contains its own commitment to rural manners. Both terms convey the idealisation of a simple rural environment, but agrarianism is born from a desire to maintain a traditional way of life rather than the Virgilian idealisation of a prelapsarian world, an "oasis of harmony and joy . . . embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society" (Marx 3). The U.S. South's own rural idealism that, in contrast to the pastoral ideal Marx associates with the national imaginary, flourishing in opposition to the cultural impact of industrialisation, led to: "this belief in the power of environment, this feeling of attachment to landscape, remains the same and inescapable, one of the structuring principles of Southern myth" (Gray 173). It led to the southern sense of place.

Whilst Benson Taylor is certainly right that literary studies helped to create the Agrarian Ideal, literary scholars such as Martyn Bone, Jon Smith, and Deborah Cohn have also been heavily involved in attempts to move away from it as a marker of the region. In turn, they have sought to negate the southern sense of place as an unchallenged marker of identity, through their examinations of concepts such as "postsouthern" and "transnationalism." The terms postsouthern and, by extension, the postsouthern sense of place, were both coined to question the continued legitimacy of their precursors in evolving examinations of the region. Rather than a formulation of

"post" as simply following on or moving on from what has come before, the terms invite us to rethink how the region can and should be viewed. As Martyn Bone, quoting Lewis P. Simpson, observes, they also served to: "denote the emergence of a new and distinctive literary moment in which '[t]he history of the literary mind of the South seeking to become aware of itself' – a central aspect of Southern Renascence writing – no longer appeared to operate" (*The Postsouthern Sense of Place* 42). In addition to this, transnational investigations of the U.S. South have similarly sought to destabilise the sectionalism associated with the region. Re-examinations of the instances and significance of global influences, within and upon the literature of the region, so often read as homogeneous and insular, have led to new understandings of the U.S. South's demonstrable place in a global context. As Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith propose:

> The American South remains the datum, a given whose mythic properties have traditionally exceeded its realities and that consequently impels continued investigation, but the novum, the new places that extend our understanding of the South beyond traditional conceptions of regionalism, demand our special attention. (2)

Literary scholars, often now in multi-disciplinary collaboration with colleagues from other fields of study – from History and American Studies to Ecocriticism, Anthropology, and Economics – are questioning the previously accepted constancy of the region discussed in the introduction. If the U.S. South as a region can no longer be viewed with the determinacy it once was then, correspondingly, any sense of place associated with it becomes, at best, unstable.

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that, rather than a southern – or even postsouthern – sense of place, contemporary literature of the U.S. South is instead beginning to display a posthumanist perception of place. This understanding is more in-

keeping with the region's existence as part of a global network of connectivity. The blurring of the lines between past, present, and future discussed in chapters Two and Three, the changing nature of a deep connection to the land argued for in Chapter Four, and the fragility of such a connection observed in chapters Five and Six, along with the waning of a uniquely observable regional identity discussed in Chapter Seven, all suggest authors who are recording changes in how the region understands itself. Southern authors are writing spaces that are in the process of being transformed, and this is true of the subjects who inhabit these spaces as much as the geographical locations themselves. As the reach of connectivity, both nationally and globally, being explored and demonstrated by scholars increases, so too does the connectivity of the region's inhabitants. It is a connectivity that extends not only to the human world, but also to the other-than-human world and to abiotic matter. Such connectivity is inevitably finding representation in the work of authors of the region.

I am not suggesting that southern authors are consciously populating their worlds with posthumanist subjects, rather that the move occurs as an inevitable consequence of an increased cognisance of our relation to the world around us. As with the postsouthern before it, in which increasing mechanisation of the agricultural process inevitably leads to less importance being placed on the human elements of farming, and therefore to a previously received attachment to the land, it is a conception that interrogates the centrality of humans in the place that they inhabit. It is a conception that interrogates exceptionalism. The posthumanist subject becomes one actant amongst many, a single node in a network of materiality. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost propose: "the human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened" (10). The role of the posthumanist subject is being re-imagined in an environment of coexistence that has an

ability of its own to affect. The posthumanist subject is no longer an individual, or even a community, with an emotional attachment to a specific location, but rather part of a less definable and more diverse assemblage. They are a product of their increasingly global environment. This is a conception that necessarily affects southern regionalism, its own exceptionalism, as much as a sense of place.

By his own admission, Marx's work has been criticised for its reliance upon a literary motif to form generalised assertions about the psyche of the nation:

> Bruce Kuklick, a philosopher and an Americanist, condemned it along with several other books . . . as an example of the inexact scholarship practiced by adherents of what he called the 'Myth and Symbol' school . . . generalizing about American thought and behaviour on the basis of insufficient empirical evidence. (Marx 381)

Indeed, his machine undeniably parallels aspects of the Promethean myth, the fire of the steam train bringing civilisation to the rural American landscape. Additionally, Marx accepts that it would not be possible to make such generalisations today about the behaviour of "Americans," without reference to the multicultural nature of the nation's consciousness. Although perhaps no longer "a distinctively American theory of society" (Marx 4), his work nevertheless remains both perceptive and relevant in its placing of a pastoral harmony disrupted by mechanical efficiency as a marker of the turning point in America's understanding of itself.

Despite Marx's tendency towards generalisation, the motif of the machine is still useful to illustrate a small but notable shift in perspective. After the symbol of the machine in the garden, contemporary southern literature is starting to exhibit a recurring image of its own. Although not an interjection in the manner of Marx's machine, scenes of innate assemblage between human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter, occur throughout the contemporary southern novels examined in this thesis. Often containing

the rusting shells of Marx's modernity, either reclaimed by nature or re-purposed by the posthumanist subject, this rusting matter, as with the Promethean machine before it, is there for everyone to see. However, the former sense of progress, so central to Marx's analysis, is not. A sense of assemblage rather than progress is observable through the image of the rusting machine. I contend that such images of assemblage are themselves representative of a turning point in the U.S. South's understanding of itself.

In a novel titled *Salvage the Bones*, it is perhaps unsurprising that images of the debris and detritus of a consumer culture should abound. As discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis, the Pit, the agrestic centre of the novel is, to a large extent, itself distanced from modernity. It inhabits a rural existence on the margins of the (sub)urban Bois Sauvage. Christopher Clark observes: "Ward's descriptive language evokes a natural yet romanticized and almost mythologized landscape that is at the same time deprived, injured, and hurting" (344). In many ways it is an ecology that invites a symbolic interpretation. Throughout the novel, its name is used to variously suggest a pulpit, the pits of hell, the mining-like nature of its creation, and, perhaps most pertinently, a hole that the characters struggle to escape from. As a verb, the word is also suggestive of the family's societal position, pitted in opposition to the world around them. The landscape of the Pit, has itself been fashioned by a version of Marx's machine, when Papa Joseph's white colleagues: "excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed" (14). However, in the novel's present of 2005, it now contains the carcasses of such machines, an image that, as I will demonstrate, is repeated throughout the novel. In *Salvage*, as with Fennelly's police car, there is no shocking intrusion into the southern landscape. Instead, the rusting machines are an integral part of daily existence and coexistence. The novel may largely depict a rural ecology away from urban life, but the Pit is no modern-day Walden Pond. It is neither pastoral nor truly agrarian. It is a rurality that has been

encroached upon by the surrounding urbanity, one that has absorbed and assimilated the now rusting machine in its garden.

The first appearance of the rusting machine in *Salvage*, bears a strong resemblance to Fennelly's own poetic image:

> Mama taught me how to find eggs; I followed her around the yard. It was never clean. Even when she was alive, it was full of empty cars with their hoods open, the engines stripped, and the bodies sitting there like picked-over animal bones. We only had around ten hens then. Now we have around twenty-five or thirty because we can't find all the eggs; the hens hide them well. (22)

Noise surrounds the scene. Sows squeal, chickens "woke us with flapping and clucking" (20) and hammering provides a rhythmic beat in the background. Puppies are "wheezing and huffing and mewling in squeaks that would be barks" (21). Whereas Marx's machine *is* the noise, the iron horse making the hills echo like thunder or the machinery whizzing in highland factories, here the rusting machine is a silence amid the noise. It is just there. Rather than a shocking intrusion it is a part of a calmness for the novel's narrator, Esch. Searching for eggs hidden amongst the detritus of the Pit allows her some solitude from her crowded world: "I can wander off by myself, move as slow as I want, stare at nothing. Ignore Daddy and Junior. Feel like the quiet and the wind" (22).

In fact, Esch's search for eggs amongst the rusting machines forms part of a pattern observable in Ward's use of the image. Here, it forms the basis for Esch's recollections of her mother, recollections that are both comforting and remind Esch of her mother's role as both teacher and provider: "I imagine Mama walking in front of me, turning to smile or whistle at me to get me to walk faster, her teeth white in the gloom" (22). It is the first of a number of flashbacks throughout the novel, that are in turn framed by the image of a broken, rusting machine stripped of its intended

functionality in the present. However, this is not the same pattern of twentieth-century southern fiction, proposed by Matthew Guinn, in which: "More and more its subject was the past" (xviii). Nor is it proof of the hierarchical structure theorised by Marx, in which the present demonstrates progress over the past. Rather, here the past exists in assemblage with the present. The two sit side-by-side effectively layered over each other. As such, there is a connectivity observable through Ward's text, and through the image of the rusting machine.

Discussing testimonial responses to Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage*, Rick Crownshaw observes:

> Given the dispersal of subjective experience of catastrophe amidst the surrounding landscape or environment (animals, detritus), and the way in which trauma is environmentally mediated, *Salvage the Bones* could be defined as a post-naturalistic novel . . . subjectivity is to be found forever breaking its bounds, oscillating between the world of subjects and objects, environmentally dispersed, or more accurately put, ecologically constituted. (161)

As the novel's devastating denouement in the eye of the storm approaches, the Batistes' own socio-economic stasis is laid bare through the impossibility of evacuation. The family's only real option is to prepare for the storm and its aftermath, and they do so in part by searching the Pit for eggs. Although the flashback is not as explicit in another of the novel's examples of the rusting machine, there is a notable similarity between it and the first example:

> The chickens are sitting in a low tree, on some old fence posts, on an old washing machine, on the dump truck and the bonfire wood of their collapsed chicken coop. They huddle, and it is as if they can't bear to be on the ground, in the blowing dirt. I sit on the steps, Junior beside me, his wet skin to mine,

> Randall on the gas tank with his ball, throwing it up and catching it before the sulky wind can take it away. (196)

The noise of everyday life on the pit once again envelopes the action, a rooster crowing, and "China answers him, barking" (194). Esch's mother, although not here seen in flashback, is in attendance once again, hanging over the scene with a palpable presence: "'We make do with what we got.' Daddy coughs . . . 'your mama –' he says, and stops" (195). However, it is the presence of the rusting machine as an actant in the assemblage, that which "is neither an object nor a subject but an 'intervener'" (Bennett 9), that here carries the significance. The chickens, like Fennelly's kudzu before them, have reclaimed the rusting materiality of the machine. Even their old coop, once a tool in human domestication of the other-than-human world, has been reclaimed in their localised assemblage. Rather than intruding upon the scene, the old washing machine, and their old chicken coop, are just there. The machines, like the image of Mama, are an immanence. They simply exist and operate within the assemblage of human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter, rather than being a marked influence upon it. Marx suggests that a collective image "invariably combines a traditional meaning and a new, specific, local or topical reference" (164). This is certainly true of the rusting machine. Its contemporary appearance as part of the collectivity of an assemblage, takes the southern trope of the past in the present and reworks it.

This particular image of assemblage continues and expands further, while at the same time connecting back to the first appearance of the rusting machine in the novel. Once again, the image is to be found amongst a search for eggs:

> Randall shakes his head and walks around the washing machine, the lawn mower, the old broken RV like he is finding his way through a maze . . . Randall fills Junior's shirt with eggs that they gather from the most difficult places, places that only Junior, with his pin fingers, can reach: in the elbows of the

> dump truck's engine, between the bottom of an old stinking refrigerator and the earth, wedged into the coils of a mattress chewed bare by animals. I search and find nothing. (198-99)

Esch's mother once again appears in flashback, teaching her children how to find eggs: "Look but don't look, she said. They'll find you. You gotta wander and they'll come" (199). However, here the framing of the rusted machine is more explicit. Where Marx's machine was a symbol of modern life intruding upon the rural ideal, here the rusting machine is a symbol of other-than-human nature's ability to reclaim. There is no human dominion over the land on display. There is no human exceptionalism. Once again, other-than-human nature has reclaimed these former markers of modernity, chickens repurposing the machine as protection for their eggs, and animals chewing mattresses bare. The detritus of industrialism blankets the Pit, an immanence in the southern ecology. Crownshaw contends: "Thinking in terms of natural rather than national history widens both the temporal and spatial parameters of historical thought" (169). There is no unspoiled landscape, no rural idyll in *Salvage*, but there is assemblage between human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter. The past is again seen in coexistence with the present and the lack of progress foregrounded. Nothing tangible has changed for the Batiste family, their existence relies upon their subsistence, and the industrial markers that enable Marx to privilege the present over the past, instead serve only to demonstrate stasis.

Ward's final use of the image in *Salvage* again begins with a recollection of Mama: "When we were younger and Mama had to get us up in the morning for school, she would touch us on our backs first" (114). It is a gentle show of affection that stands out in stark contrast to the children's lives since their mother died. Again, this flashback is framed by the rusting machine: "Skeetah hoists [China] up again and again, and it is only when we have rounded the house, circled an old tub, the husk of a car I never

remember seeing run, and jumped the ditch to the ragged asphalt road does he set her down" (115). Although a fleeting image in the novel, the immanence of the machine, its inherent existence within the ecology, is clear to see. Indeed, this is not simply another broken machine, but one that has never worked in the characters' memory. The stasis alluded to by this rusting machine is not industrial progress running out of steam, but a familial stasis for the Batistes since Mama's death. The description of the car as a "husk," connects it back to the landscape, creating the impression of something harvested, used, and discarded. In doing so, it positions abiotic matter as an integral element of the assemblage, while reminding the reader of the rurality of the ecology. Everything here is connected in coexistence. When Esch's brother Junior appears on a bike, it is itself a broken machine: "It is too small even for Junior to ride. When he swerves next to me, I realize it has no seat. This is why he is standing" (116). The present in *Salvage* is, if anything, harder than the past. Machines are not suggestive of progress but stasis, and, for the Batistes at least, the U.S. South has failed to move forward in any meaningful way. If the machine in Marx's garden is a sudden, shocking intruder, then in *Salvage the Bones* it is a part of daily existence. It is something that has been incorporated into an assemblage existence. Children sit on it, chickens hide eggs in it, humans re-purpose it, and nature reclaims it. It is no longer an interjection but instead an immanence. An immanence that reflects a lack of exceptionality for both the posthumanist subject and the region.

The topography of Ward's third novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is more varied than *Salvage*. Although the novel opens in a comparable rural homestead within Bois Sauvage, its central landscape feature is arguably the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman Farm. A road trip through the Mississippi landscape differentiates the 'real' Parchman Farm in the north from the fictional Bois Sauvage on the Gulf Coast, distinguishing the novel's topography from the insularity of the Pit experienced in

Salvage. In *Sing*, diverse spaces form the literary landscape. There is still a rurality to the novel, each uniquely observed space, from the 'savage' woods of Bois Sauvage to the neo-plantation of Parchman, is country. However, due to their separation by a highway, itself an obvious marker of modernity, the relationship of the characters to place is less defined. The "neo-Agrarian notions of the South as exceptionally rooted, rural, and regional: 'intimately attached to the soil'" (Bone, *Where the New World Is* 30), are contested. Although some characters, notably those from the older generation such as River and Big Joseph, appear to have an attachment to their locale, rooted in the history and landscape of the region, the world outside of the U.S. South remains a constant presence throughout the novel. This is a fact most noticeable in Richie's visions of future ecologies: "there are cities, cities that harbor plazas and canals and buildings bearing minarets and hip and gable roofs and crouching beasts and massive skyscrapers that look as if they should collapse" (241). The space of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is more diverse than that of *Salvage the Bones*, and the instances of the rusting machine are similarly spread out amongst these places. Although less prevalent than in *Salvage*, they still form a notable presence throughout the novel, one in which a lack of progress is once again a key factor.

In an alternative questioning of Marx's determined progress, Nicole Dib discusses "that most iconic form of American mobility: the automobile, a form of transport that traditionally symbolizes the promise of freedom expressed as free movement for all" (134). She suggests that Ward employs this particular machine "to critique the immobilization that threatens automobility for black subjects" (135). I propose that the novel's centrepiece, the journey to and from Parchman Farm, allows Ward to critique immobilization in more than one way.

Taking place on the road trip from Bois Sauvage to Parchman Farm, the stasis of the most notable example of the rusting machine in the novel, intrudes upon the

movement of modernity. It appears as an interlude in the journey, off the highway, off the beaten track. In doing so, it turns Marx's symbolism on its head. In contrast to *Salvage*, quietness surrounds this scene, a stillness that is juxtaposed with the motion and commotion of modernity: "When I wake up, it's midmorning, and Leonie done pulled off the highway . . . The buildings thin and the trees thicken until we're at a stop sign and there's nothing but trees" (77-78). This rusting machine was itself once a part of the motion of the highway:

> We round a bend and there is a gap in the trees, and suddenly we are among a little cluster of houses. Some have siding like Mam and Pop's, some have insulation paper and no siding. One is an RV that looks years off the road, with wisteria draping along the top and crawling down the side. It's like the thing has green, living hair. Chickens run in bunches as a dog, a pit bull with gray-blue fur and a gaping maw, chases them. (79)

Once again, other-than-human nature is reclaiming the abiotic matter of human modernity, machinery that is an immanent part of its ecology, bringing it into assemblage with the human and other-than-human world. Although there is nothing to suggest that this particular machine is not still in use by humans – it is described as one of a cluster of houses – it is no longer part of the motion of modernity, and wisteria, in a manner that once again draws comparison to Fennelly's kudzu, is beginning to re-purpose, or more accurately co-purpose it. By reclaiming the now truly inanimate matter of the old RV, despite its continued function as a human home, the wisteria is demonstrating the nature of "heterogeneous assemblages in which agency has no single locus, no mastermind, but is distributed across a swarm of various and variegated vibrant materialities" (Bennett 96). Marx's machine is a symbol of dominion. It is both the present's dominion over the past and man's dominion over nature. Conversely, the rusting machine persistently questions such dominion, in this case through a slow

meandering into other-than-human nature where such nature is reclaiming. Modernity does ultimately intrude upon this scene, but rather than industrial progress, it is in the form of societal decay. This is the rough south of Grit Lit. It is the south of familial dysfunction and meth production: "The man is cooking, moves as easy and sure as a chef, but there is nothing to eat here" (89). There is progress in the manner of changing times, but no improvement or advancement is on display.

Another appearance of the rusted machine occurs in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as in *Salvage*, at the family homestead in Bois Sauvage. Indeed, as with *Salvage*, the scene begins with a reappearance. Although not a flashback in the manner of Esch's mother, Michael, Leonie's partner and Jojo's father is returning from Parchman Farm. He is the past returning to the present. As such, he is similarly placed in contiguity with the rusting machine. The past and the present, through Ward's use of the imagery, are repeatedly placed side-by-side with neither given absolute privilege over the other. In contrast to *Salvage*, this is a very brief, if overt, reference: "Growing up out here in the country taught me things. Taught me that after the first fat flush of life, time eats away at things: it rusts machinery, it matures animals to become hairless and featherless, and it withers plants" (46). Appearing as a character's comment rather than a description of the southern ecology, it carries neither the immanence nor the sense of reclamation associated with the other instances. Nevertheless, this rusting machine is still an element in an assemblage of human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter, all of which are subject to the passing of time. Yet, the past itself is not privileged. This is not Guinn's past as subject of southern literature. Rather, Leonie feels lied to about growing up. There is no progress to be found for her. Correspondingly, although the scene would appear to place the human at its centre, there is in fact a lack of exceptionalism on display. All elements of this particular assemblage, machine, animal, plant, and posthumanist subject are subject to the same inevitable decay. Whilst a lack of physical

intrusion by the machine is once again apparent in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the stasis of the rusting machine intrudes upon conventional notions of modernity. A lack of (post)human progress is coalesced with images of assemblage in which no one element is privileged above another.

The significance of the Mississippi ecology in Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* is no less pronounced than in Ward's novels. However, as previously noted, Laymon's descriptions of the region's topography, focalised through the eyes of the teenage protagonist, City, are less evocative than those of his counterpart. The woods around which much of the action takes place are "green like the Hulk's chest instead of green like a lime" (61), and the hole in the ground that forms the locus of the narrative's heterochronic events is simply "dusty steps that led straight down to red clay" (60). It is therefore in-keeping with the overall tone of City's teenage appraisal of his ecology, that there is often little detail provided in Laymon's description of his rusting machines. Accordingly, the images are less pronounced but no less illuminating.

In a similar manner to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, instances of the rusting machine in *Long Division* are literal interpretations of the forward movement of modernity stalled in the Mississippi dirt. For example, the image of a "broken-down Explorer," surrounded by "four limping rat dogs," standing in dirt "like the dirt at a playground, except it was darker and redder and filled with lots of perfect rocks" (87). However, in contrast to Ward's, these are not terminally non-functional, salvaged machines, but instead battered yet salvageable. Their progress may be temporarily stalled, but it has not yet permanently ceased. There is not a complete lack of progress on display in *Long Division*, but rather a questioning of the manner of progress. As with Ward's imagery, other-than-human nature is beginning to re-purpose these machines, demonstrating an alternative understanding of progress. Whilst searching the local preacher's beat-up old car for pictures of naked women, City describes:

> I was about to raise up when I heard a weird noise coming from the glove compartment. I hadn't looked all the way in the compartment, but I hoped there would be at least ten more naked pictures up in there. All I saw was a map of Melahatchie. I pushed the map to the side to see what else was in there.
>
> Wasps. Big wasps.
>
> I jumped out the window of the passenger side of the car and the wasps stung me all upside the head. (117)

Human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter again come together in an image of assemblage coexistence. In contrast to Marx, it is other-than-human nature that intrudes upon the scene, a nature that the (post)human protagonist is defenceless against. Although there is a commentary here on our lack of dominion over the other-than-human world, I would suggest that the scene more explicitly serves to demonstrate the posthumanist subject as a product of their increasingly global environment. As well as connectivity between diverse elements of his immediate assemblage, City's friend Gunn records the interaction on his mobile phone in order to share it over the World Wide Web. The unavoidable global reach of the posthumanist subject is a constant thread running through Laymon's novel, and as with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, cultural modernity is highlighted if not entirely celebrated. In fact, the machine itself does not represent the present in Laymon's imagery, but rather the assemblage the machine exists within. There is once again a turning point on display in *Long Division*, but it is the questionable evolution of (post)humanity rather than that of the U.S. South as a region. There is little sense of improvement demonstrated here, but instead an indication that not all forward movement should be regarded as progress.

However, not all novels from the contemporary U.S. South employ a coeval setting. So, what happens to both the form and the function of the image in these cases? There are inevitably differences in any employment of the rusting machine image in

contemporary novels given a historical setting. The machines – the markers of mechanised modernity and technological progress – are less likely to have been abandoned, let alone to have had time to sit rusting in the southern soil. This is true of Ron Rash's *Serena*, set in the depression hit 1930s, after the new beginnings of Marx's industrial awakening, but long before the disposable capitalism of Ward and Laymon. Marx's machines are visible in Rash's landscape. Trains, the epitome of the industrial incursion, feature prominently. But so too do assemblage images, and once again they feature human-forged matter rusting and rotting alongside human and other-than-human actants.

As noted previously, the ecology of *Serena* is itself very different to Ward and Laymon's rural Mississippi. Its Appalachian Mountain forests form the topographical centre of the novel rather than an identifiable space within the forests. It is never a quiet landscape, instead serving as a centre for industrialisation from the start of the narrative. *Serena* does not demonstrate the machine's intrusion into the garden, it is already there. Indeed, the novel opens aboard a train arriving from the 'progressive' north. As a result, Rash reverses the current of Marx's imagery, and the southern landscape instead intrudes upon mechanised modernity: "the land increasingly mountainous, less inhabited, the occasional slant of pasture like green felt woven to a rougher fabric" (13). Within the metaphor for industrialisation he creates from his southern Appalachian home, Rash also fashions an unmistakably agrarian enclave. It is a distinct bioregion that serves to elucidate the inevitable effect of industrialisation on the traditional way of life, alongside the wider environmental implications of the region's deforestation. In many ways, therefore, this agrarian enclave serves a similar function to the ecologies presented in *The Machine in the Garden*. Indeed, on the surface it appears to be more of a sleepy hollow or Walden Pond than either Ward's Pit or Laymon's hole in the woods. However, in Rash's critique of the contemporary, Marx's sense of progress is

unmistakably absent, and it is in this pre-industrial atavism that the image of the rusting machine is employed.

As with Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, the rusting machine in *Serena* is surrounded by flashbacks. A sense of loss frames the assemblage image. However, there is also a sense of a natural order to the events. New life, alongside death, envelopes the scene. The circle of life is clear to see. The scene, previously discussed in Chapter Seven, opens with Rachel, barefoot in nature, holding her baby son. As with Esch in Ward's novel, recollections of Rachel's mother are brought to the fore, but here it is her lack rather than her role as teacher and provider that is highlighted: "I told your daddy to marry again so you'd have a momma, but he wouldn't listen" (40). It is a lack compounded by the death of the father who has raised her. It may be a natural order that frames the scene, but there is no pretence that it is idyllic or even easy. The image itself appears in a farmyard barn and is reminiscent of Ward's use of the imagery in *Salvage the Bones*. Rachel:

> [H]eard the chickens in the far back clucking in their nesting boxes and reminded herself to gather the eggs soon as she returned. Her eyes adjusted to the barn's darkness, and objects slowly gained form and solidity – a rusting milk can, the sack of lice powder to dust the chickens with, a rotting wagon wheel. (41)

The image may be lacking the mechanised modernity, as it necessarily must in its historical setting, but instead the machines of the agrarian U.S. South complete the assemblage. A rusting milk can replaces the refrigerators in Ward's images, and a rotting wheel similarly substitutes for the carcasses of old cars, itself a symbol of stalled progress. As with *Salvage*'s Pit, the farm is distanced from modernity by Rash. The agrarian past sits alongside the industrial present. The function of the machine remains the same, as does the function of the assemblage image itself. Marx's privileging of the

present over the past is still questioned and abiotic matter sits alongside human and other-than human in a depiction of posthumanist perception of place.

Rash's second use of the rusting machine does, however, stand in contrast to the first. In fact, at first glance, it would appear to serve largely as a metaphor for the end of a sustainable agrarian existence. This scene is surrounded by more markers of modernity than previously associated with Rachel. Although taking place in the rurality of Rachel's family home, the scene occurs as a stopping point on a journey by car. It is a temporary stop in the forward movement of mechanised modernity. As such, it represents a transition point between Rachel's old world and her new:

> The woodshed's door was open, and a barn swallow swung out of the sky and disappeared into its darkness. A hoe leaned against the shed wall, its blade flecked with rust, beside it a pile of rotting cabbage sacks. Rachel let her gaze cross the pasture, the spring clotted with leaves, the field where only horseweed and dog fennel grew over winter-shucked corn stalks, no more alive than the man who'd planted them. (273)

Here, the deterioration on display is not limited to the 'machine' itself. Not only is the hoe blade rusting and the cabbage sack rotting, but the agrarian landscape itself is being reclaimed by the other-than-human world, as is Rachel's father. Marx suggests that Thoreau "uses technological imagery to represent more than industrialization in the narrow, economic sense. It accompanies a mode of perception, an emergent system of meaning and value – a culture" (247), and I would suggest that Rash uses his imagery in a similar fashion as a mode of perception. The scene represents the disintegration of an old way of life, with Rachel's inexorable march towards modernity. However, it also once again places the human actant in a similarly inevitable assemblage with not just the rusting machine, but all other elements around it. Rash's image, as with Ward and

Laymon, demonstrates its own mode of perception. The emergent system of meaning and value on display here is that of coexistence.

In a contemporary novel set in the immediate aftermath of the industrial revolution, the image of the rusting machine clearly must be different in appearance to those employed in novels set in the present. It is neither mechanised modernity's intrusion into the garden, nor its immanence. Industrial markers are used to indicate change, a shift from one way of life to another, but with the benefit of hindsight afforded by historical fiction, rarely progress. As discussed in Chapter Six, Rash instead uses these industrial markers largely to draw comparison with the environmental impact of mountaintop removal on the present-day Appalachian region. However, the machine, in its pre-industrial form of tools employed by human actants, still appears in images of assemblage existence. Abiotic matter remains an integral part of the assemblage image, and once again it is rusting.

Evoking the tradition of American literature identified by Leo Marx, contemporary fiction of the southern United States is displaying its own recurring image, the rusting machine. It is an image that, rather than being at the heart of the novel, presents itself as an immanence in the southern landscape. Instead of an intrusion, the rusting machine is just there. The progress of Marx's industrial machine is literally decaying in the southern soil. As such, it exhibits one of the staples of southern literature, the past in the present, in a new way. This is not a backward-glancing U.S. South searching for past glories, but instead the past and the present overlayered. However, while the rusting machine suggests a lack of forward progress for the region, I suggest, more importantly, it demonstrates a shift in perspective in the literature of the U.S. South. It is a shift that indicates an alternative understanding of place and our assemblage existence in it. Utilising the image of the rusting machine, contemporary southern literature has begun to demonstrate a posthumanist perception of place.

Through the connective existence demonstrated by the rusting machine image, the posthumanist subject is shown to be one element within a diverse assemblage of elements. It is a coexistence in which the industrial progress demonstrated by Marx is replaced by re-purposing and coexistence. As with Marx's image, I am not proposing that the novels discussed are specifically about this transformation. Instead, as with the nature of assemblages, the images form an actant that informs the elements around them. Where the machine in the garden was used to represent the individual as a component of an industrial society, the rusting machine is used to represent the inevitable loss of separable agency within an assemblage. It is an inevitability that has ramifications for any notion of exceptionality, either in the inhabitants as posthumanist subjects, or in the U.S. South as a region.

Conclusion

Twenty-first century contributions to the field of southern studies and a new materialist conception of posthumanism share a common foundational view. Both agree that ideas of exceptionalism are untenable. As such, they share a cross-methodological connectivity that is demonstrable in a number of ways. New Southern Studies' rejection of regional insularity drives the transnational turn of, amongst others, Martyn Bone's *Where the New World Is* (2018), *Look Away! The US South in New World Studies* (2004) edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, and *South to a New Place* (2002) edited by Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith. Additionally, a recognition of the region's place in a national whole is central to Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region* (2006) and Imani Perry's *South to America* (2022). In examining connectivity across regional and national boundaries, such contributions have blurred the line dividing the past from the present through their questioning of foundational understandings of the U.S. South.

Connectivity and blurring of boundaries are similarly central to recent studies in new materialism, exemplified by Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), *New Materialisms* (2010) edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, and *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017) edited by Anna Tsing et al. New materialism rejects the uniqueness of the posthumanist subject, demonstrating instead their inseparability from the ecologies they exist within. It questions what happens to our understanding of scale when something the size of an atom can, in a fraction of a second, cause incalculable devastation that lasts for generations. In doing so, it equally blurs the line dividing the past from the present and the future. Karen Barad, in her discussion of matter through an understanding of quantum physics, argues: "Entities, space, and time exist only within and through their specific *intra-actions*" ("No Small Matter" G111). Hers is a contention of connectivity that questions the particularity of both place and actant. It

serves to question any conception of exceptionalism, whether that be human or southern.

Discussing our inability as humans to comprehend and therefore confront the unfolding ecological threat, Bruno Latour argues:

> The point of living in the epoch of the Anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity. (15)

This feels like a fitting summation of the reasons behind my own investigation of southern literature. In not wanting to necessarily cover the same ground "represented by using any of the older traits" in the field, I have approached the region from a new starting point. In doing so, I have in no way been trying to negate the importance of historical concerns, such as race, community, memory, or even a sense of the local. Nor have I attempted to negate more recent interpretations of the significance of "external" influences on the U.S. South. Indeed, in the manner of assemblage existence, many of these concerns remain both visible and influential on the new pathways I have explored.

As such, my own academic intervention stands as part of a continuum of work on the concept of place and, connected to this, southern identity. Richard Gray contributed to a definition of the idea of the U.S. South in *Writing the South* (1986), before Barbara Allen Bogart identified a sense of place constructed and maintained in geographically framed conversational pattern in "The Genealogical Landscape of the Southern Sense of Place" (1990). Martyn Bone's modernisation of the region in *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), then replaced a defunct southern sense of place with an urbanised postsouthern sense of place. Through a comparison of contemporary author's depictions of southern ecologies with those of their predecessors, I have been able to demonstrate how a new understanding of place

disseminates throughout contemporary fiction. The U.S. South's view of itself is evolving to an understanding of connectivity that extends beyond regional borders. Southern authors are already depicting this change. The goal in this thesis, as it always should be, has been to rethink rather than reject what has come before. Undoubtedly the most significant aspect of this rethink within the preceding pages is to the tenability of place as an originator of identity.

Indeed, the central thread running through this thesis has been that southern authors are beginning to portray a posthumanist perception of place. In this conception, place becomes an inextricable relationship rather than an emotional attachment that helps to form identity. In depicting a posthumanist perception of place, writers are encouraging new ways of viewing the U.S. South that highlight the region's own non-exceptionalism.

Germinal to the project I have been undertaking here, has been the importance of viewing the U.S. South through a lens of coexistence. Throughout the preceding argument, I have demonstrated how various depictions of what I term overlayered ecologies, in the novels examined, evince a new way of understanding the world we occupy. Such depictions demonstrate how connectivity runs between different temporal, geographical, and socio-economic layers and, in doing so, blurs the lines between the past, present, and future. I contend that the contemporary U.S. South is no longer a backward-glancing one. That is not to say that it does not inevitably continue to deal with its own historical trauma, rather that there is no sense of a utopia to return to in the manner of the Agrarians. History exists in an active assemblage with the present and the future rather than as experiences to return to or hide from. This blurring of the lines between past, present, and future suggests that whether or not southern studies has managed to extricate itself from the refusal to look forwards observed by Jon Smith in *Finding Purple America*, the region's authors are now able to do so. Overlayered

ecologies highlight a key factor in understanding both the posthumanist subject and the contemporary U.S. South – their relationality.

In this way, my approach has marked a departure from previous investigations of the U.S. South. The transnational and intranational investigations outlined above, largely take a socio-economic approach to the region that necessarily place historical concerns of the region at their centre. Rather than connectivity solely through historical or modern economic or cultural factors, the relationality observed in the contemporary fiction examined is an inherent part of assemblage existence. It is a connectivity that removes the human from its core. As such, the constancy that is so crucial to conceptions of place as originator of identity are undermined. Indeed, rather than constancy, I would suggest that there is a focus on transformation – and the need for further transformation – observable in the work of contemporary southern authors, and the multi-faceted nature of that transformation. It is a transformation that must be seen to represent more than just a human history. Although there remains a deep connection to the land on display in these novels, it is an inherent connection *with* the surrounding ecologies rather than dominion *over* them. This is a key component of the shift in concept of place I offer. Connectivity with the land in contemporary southern fiction is not indicative of a regional identity, but rather of posthumanist sensibilities. Again, I do not suggest this as a necessarily conscious decision on the part of southern authors, but rather as a consequence of an increased awareness of our inherent connectivity as posthumanist subjects. The U.S. South that sprouts from the soil of these literary ecologies is one for which connectivity is both inevitable and key. It is a region in which exceptionalism, in all its forms, is eroded. It is a U.S. South in which an understanding of place means an understanding of being part of something rather than separate from it or superior to it. It is a U.S. South that forms part of a wider assemblage

both geographically and temporally. Southern authors continue to record changes in how the region understands itself.

The U.S. South's position as a forgotten space in ecocriticism has started to be addressed by recent contributions such as Michael P. Bibler's insightful "Serpents in the Garden" (2015) and the interdisciplinary investigations found in *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies* (2019), edited by Zackary Vernon. However, the focus of much of this work remains upon the anthropocentric. Investigations of the cultural effects of environmental issues, alongside energy humanities and social justice, are of course essential to understanding the U.S. South in transformation, however one of my goals has been to take a less anthropocentric viewpoint and shift the focus outwards, towards immanence. My contention throughout has been that the posthumanist subject exists within their ecologies as one actant amongst many. Similarly, the U.S. South exists entirely within larger geographical areas – and contains smaller distinct areas within it – rather than existing as exceptional to them. Timothy Clark suggests "scale, forms a pervasive, decisive but almost universally overlooked structural feature of any sort of reading" (73), and scale is very much at the heart of my own investigations.

As explored in Chapter One, the uniformity of posthumanism has become increasingly contested. However, what I have argued for throughout the preceding chapters has been a new understanding of place. It is an interpretation of place that investigates and highlights connection with surrounding ecologies. Although criticisms of posthumanism's propensity to flatten ontologies are entirely valid when examining the effect of power differentials in any social structure, I suggest that interpreting posthumanism's rationality is itself a question of scale. What I have been investigating throughout is a questioning of exceptionalism, one that is apparent in the literature analysed. I would contend that the posthumanist subject's lack of exceptionalism from the ecologies surrounding it does not in itself flatten ontologies. As has been

demonstrated, the posthumanist subject exists within a set of relational spaces. I am in no way trying to negate the complexity of the posthumanist subject or the necessity for examining how it operates within global sociopolitical structures. I simply suggest that there is also value in viewing the subject through a wider lens. Indeed, the posthumanist subject is itself as assemblage both physically and conceptually.

A posthumanist perception of place, as demonstrated in the literature explored here, questions exceptionalism and highlights connectivity. As Bignall and Braidotti observe:

> [I]t should be possible to decry human exceptionalism as the basis for species privilege, while also attending to the specificity of human responsibility and potentiality in conceptualising adequate forms of response to the damages arising significantly from human activity. (4)

I return here to Clark's commentary on the need for different scales. What I have engaged in is an investigation of how the posthumanist subject and the U.S. South as a region interact with their ecologies rather than an examination of individual actants within these assemblages. Understanding the connectivity of the posthumanist subject can be informative to examinations of the U.S. South's connectivity without being reductive to the complexity inherent in each.

Each chapter of this thesis has taken an element of the ecologies depicted in the novels, from the holes of Chapter Two to the rusting machines of Chapter Eight, as an image that exemplifies aspects of the overall argument I have just summarised. At stake in each of these chapters has been a region depicted from within its transformation. What has sprouted and taken root from the soil of this investigation is the lack of a unique southern identity on display in the contemporary literature examined. Although a deep connection to the land of various regional ecologies remains apparent, it is not

indicative of identity but rather of an inescapable coexistence. Contemporary literature portrays a connectivity that repeatedly undermines exceptionalism.

To conclude, I would like to return to a short section from a novel presented in the opening chapter, Taylor Brown's *The River of Kings*, that encapsulates many of the threads running throughout this thesis. Here, the brothers Hunter and Lawton Loggins, on their journey along Georgia's Altamaha River, in Brown's contribution to the extended southern funeral procession, pause to climb an abandoned swing bridge over the river:

> Hunter has reached the top of the ladder now. The last light of day slants through the high limbs, and the old rails run elevated into the woods, a long concrete bridge through the cypress. He expects to find a hard surface under his feet but doesn't. The rail-bed is buried beneath a deep layer of moldering leaves, soft underfoot, and the rest of the bridge is grown over with spidery roots and vines, a gray hulk drawn slowly back into the wild. In the failing light, it runs a straight shot into the distance, offering what seems an old wagon-road suspended amid the trees.
>
> "Jesus." Lawton plants his fists on his hips. "It's like something you'd find in the jungle. Like from the Mayans or something. Don't take long, I guess."
>
> "Nope," says Hunter. "You know they can't even find some of the early forts. They've been swallowed up. For years they thought the first European fort in the New World, Fort Caroline, was down in Florida. Jacksonville. Now they know it wasn't."
>
> "Where was it?"
>
> "Maybe here."
>
> "Spanish?"

"French. People don't realize, if things turned out a little different, we might be speaking French right now."

"Or German or Japanese," said Lawton. (138-39)

The rusting machine, the defining image of posthumanist assemblage in my final chapter, is figuratively present in the form of disused rail tracks, buried underfoot. The movement of modernity that at one point intruded into the southern garden is not simply absent but abandoned and buried. Despite being elevated above the ground, the bridge, and the mechanised modernity it carried, have become a second forest floor, reclaimed by other-than-human nature and "drawn slowly back into the wild." Although "[t]housands of freight cars once thundered across the river here" (135), their forward movement has been assimilated back into the garden into which they were once an incursion. The capitalism of Georgia's own timber industry, with Marx's industrialism merging into Faulkner and O'Connor's Renascence era, is overlayered by the past and the future at the same time. What now appears to Hunter to resemble "an old wagon-road" is, in reality, another assemblage of human, other-than-human, and abiotic matter, as other-than-human nature once again reclaims the former progress of modernity. Human attempts at dominion have again ultimately demonstrated unexceptionality in the long term.

The brothers' cogitation of the scene speaks not only to this lack of human exceptionality – "don't take long I guess" – but also to geographical overlayering. The nation's war history is layered over the region's colonial history, suggestive of both the concrete influence on the region that preoccupies transnationalism, and the fragility and unpredictability encompassed by any assemblage existence. The region's various connections with the world around it could have taken it in any number of different directions from its present position. As such, Brown questions any lingering notion of constancy in the U.S. South. History, one of the main pillars that such constancy is built

upon, is demonstrably mutable in this passage. What once was true, "[n]ow they know it wasn't." The U.S. South itself does not change with this knowledge; it just continues to exist within its set of connections.

Throughout this thesis I draw attention to overlayered ecologies, like the one depicted in the passage above, to demonstrate how contemporary literature is depicting a new way of understanding the world we, as posthumanist subjects, occupy. Overlayered ecologies can be read as a way of visualising the inherent connectivity formative to the posthumanist perception of place authors are beginning to illustrate. The distinct yet inseparable layers that characterise the existence of the posthumanist subject are repeatedly observable in the novels that have formed the foundation of this research. They are a manifestation of the multiple grids theorised by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson which enable us to see connection and contiguity. As such, overlayered ecologies interrogate the very possibility of constancy so important to an erstwhile sense of place. Pippa Marland states that maintaining false distinctions has "restricted our ability adequately to assess our manner of being in the world" (856). Understanding the depictions of ecologies in contemporary literature as overlayered allows for a clearer understanding of why such distinctions are false. In each of the novels examined throughout this thesis, the depicted ecologies contest the narrative of human mastery over nature and *The River of Kings* is no different. Through Hunter and Lawton's observations we can see that neither the human nor the U.S. South is drawn as exceptional in Brown's novel.

Connectivity has been at the heart of my academic intervention, and Anna Tsing et al.'s argument is useful here: "Our continued survival demands that we learn something about how best to live and die within the entanglements we have" (M4). Theirs is, of course, an observation on human entanglements but I would suggest that it has resonance for the U.S. South also. Part of the process of becoming posthuman is to

view the things that formerly grounded us in a new way; to become ungrounded, unmoored from our predetermined realities. The U.S. South continues to exist as an idea even within increasingly less definable boundaries. It too needs to become unmoored from its historical constructs and instead embrace its part in an assemblage. I hope to have demonstrated that, observable in the work of its contemporary authors, that process is well underway.

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